

nova · nevedoma



Eastern European Cartoons

nova-nevédoma

1. Utter Nonsense In Outer Space
2. Of Love, Leisure, and Reality checks
 3. Twisted Lullaby I-V
 4. The Doomsday Button
 5. Twisted Lullaby VI-VII
 6. Alētheiosis
7. Too Many Minus One

Utter Nonsense In Outer Space

nova-nevedoma.com/utter-nonsense-in-outer-space/

Today's the triennial anniversary of the crew's marinating in the cosmic despondency. I tire of singing the same silent song with the same droning notes in each and every of my transmissions, but we've found none, an echoing absence, and all the theories and hypotheses of an anomaly around here dance on the brink of psychotic mania. I wish I could write the logs in iambic pentameter, that at least would be fun.

The wakefulness light on Yana's cabin door flickers intermittently and goes on and off on schedule. However, lights lie, but logs don't. The tests tell me tales of her trying to outpace the very clock, often working twenty hours at a time, even though her biodata shows nothing unusual — she is healthy, though “a tiny bit enthusiastic”. I thought she might be taking unprescribed psychonautical medication, but I found no traces of it in her blood, urine or faeces. It could have been Delta-Dreamosin-3 or Transneuronex-17 (the tonguefizzling one — yes, I too was a teen), for they leave no trace, but they were never on the ship and couldn't have been, unless Yana synthesised them herself in her laboratory, which of course I'll never know. I shall go and ask her. Yes, I'll turn up at night, catch her red-handed caving in her cabin. I can picture her room, a silent lair of a scientist: a giant globe covered with sticky notes, flickering lights on the dashboard, the glaring screen of her

computer running simulations at warp speed, a plush cat dressed as Albert Einstein, the air charged with static, tasting of tin and tension, and her shocked adorable face adorned her bulging googly eyes twitching behind her spectacles. All I'll do is tell her to share her dope with the rest of the team. They could use some, too, no need to be greedy, Yana — one for all, and all for one, or whatever it was — otherwise those “all”, probably including me, will soon go cuckoo. “Going cuckoo”, of course, is not a real diagnosis, rather a diagnonsense, but I have no other words.

Marius has become a gravity well of galactic gloom. He thinks he's the one who let everyone down, that he's the reason we still haven't found anything. He has stopped shaving and chatting, just wanders around the ship, locks himself in his cabin, kills the gravitational pull and orbits in melancholy like, excuse me, a sad poo. Any love or intimacy in such an environment is out of the question. Although some mornings in his eyes I can see it — love. The only question is, what kind of love is it? Love for whom? Me? For the crew? For the expedition? For life? No, that's six questions. That's how it usually goes. Some masochistic question-hydra — she bites off her own head, and then five more spring up in its place, and so on, and so on, and so on, until one's brain melts from the questions fusioning at the speed of light. In fact, I'm starting to feel like I let everyone down — I was supposed to keep an eye on their mental health, wasn't I?

Gideon keeps drinking, or drowning himself in liquid courage, as he says. I can't order him not to, because he's above me in rank, and

Marius, when I ask him to order Gideon, tells me that if you take the bottle away from Gideon, he'll "cut the cord" and we won't have an engineer, but I doubt it, because Gideon cares about nothing - whether there's an anomaly or not, whether it's life or death. All he cares about is making jokes. He recently revealed that the only Reality Distorting Object here is Yana's arse. Someday the ship's gonna stall and we'll be stuck in outer space because our engineer went on a bender. That'll be fun.

And Chirpmeister, what about Chirpmeister - he's a computer, all he can do is remind us of that, constantly harping on about his ethical rules, that he's forbidden to influence people's minds unless those very people are in danger. Why is he even here? We would've been bored otherwise, that's obviously why. I suspect he's in cahoots with Yana, or Yana's in cahoots with him, given how much time they spend together, and that we always travel where Yana says and Chirpmeister estimates. Or perhaps Gideon reprogrammed him, or he reprogrammed Gideon, since their jokes have been of the same breed lately.

What about me? Who am I to have anything about? I'm a mere observer. My job is to document and not to be documented. Indeed, it's a quantum quagmire — I'm locked in here alone with three idiots, four of them, should you count the silicone one. I know it's not professional, but for once can I just be myself?

P.S. "Idiot" is not a diagnosis, it's a lifestyle.

It's quite awkward to post the next entry, with everything in it contradicting the previous one. I'd willingly erase the prior entry, snatch the signal from the vast void by its tail, reel it back to its origin, but alas, the purity of observation from the ethical and medical standpoint forbids such astral tampering. We have what we have.

So, let's analyse it, shall we?

This morning, without warning, we experienced the so-called Yanaissance. It seemed like a perfect beginning for a sci-fi stage play: the dining room, a holographic menu floating mid air, Marius scrutinising distant stars through the panoramic window, Gideon eating cosmopizza and animatedly chatting to Chirpmeister. But then, beneath breakfast's buzz, bewilderment built as Yana bursts in. The clinks of utensils paused as all eyes turned towards her (I'll try to reproduce the dialogue from automatic transcriptions):

—Found it! I found it! Something's croaking in outer space!

Three things happened: at the first word "found" nothing happened, and all I noticed was a blank indifference on the faces of everyone present; at the second word "found" a look of hope mixed with disbelief grew on their faces (and probably on mine too); and at the next sentence about croaking, after having grasped its meaning, Gideon laughed,

almost giggled like a little girl, and Marius, with his ears perked up like a dog about to be thrown a piece of roast beef from the table, listened up. Any sign of depression on his face was wiped away at once, as if he had been wearing some mask before.

—“Croaking?” Marius asked.

—Croaking indeed!

—You found a sound in space, Yanny?—Gideon quipped.

Yana pushed the data onto the floating holographic screen, where a schema of our current location, the star system, was now jumbled with a pulsing signal surrounded by running calculations, and then he played it. It was hard to call it a croak, but in timbre and dynamics the sound I heard could resemble a hundred or a thousand frogs in a swamp, croaking almost simultaneously, only with a fraction of a second delay.

—The signal is coming from the star closest to us, that’s why the RDO was invisible. Right here,—she said and pointed,—Or right here, I’m not sure yet.

Her clenched fists shook with impatience, as if she were six again, waiting to be praised by a parent.

Marius, who became captainly serious again, walked over to the map and stared at it intensely, frowning his eyebrows and biting his lower lip — he always did that when he was thinking about something, and he’s quite an anxiety incubator, which made his lip look like it was about to

turn into an unchewed piece of meat. I tried to stop him doing that, even prescribed medication for his nervousness, but to no avail, as usual. What mattered now was that Marius believed Yana, or rather, wanted to believe her.

—How, how did you find it?

—The pulsations were very weak and completely unremarkable, and I was already running low on hope, and at first I thought that it was all within the margin of error and all that, or that my mind was already playing games with me, because I hadn't been sleeping well lately, but anyway, quite by accident, I decided to amuse myself and, with the help of Chirpmeister, converted these pulsations into sound, and they turned out to resemble croaking. Hee-hee! Oh, I was so surprised, so surprised, you can't imagine. I thought, well, definitely, my head — that's it, it's done, adios profession, time to retire, hallucinations and all that — a terminal verdict. I even decided to take a nap and then re-listen to the sound — I've never slept so soundly, and I don't really like to sleep at all, but this time — boom! Three hours, as if I'd just travelled forward in time.

—Yanny...

—Gideon, I'm not some Yanny to you, and shut up, please. In general, I think that what we see, or rather "observe", is a Reality Distorting Object, and since it is located, literally hiding, right behind the star, this star, according to my calculations (Chirpmeister also checked them, if you are worried), this is a completely new, unprecedented

phenomenon, which no one has ever observed.

I could see how Marius was impatient, how he was about to bite his lip.

—Yana, let's move on. What do we see?—he asked.

—Captain, we can't see anything yet, we need to orbit the star to get to the other side of it. Maybe it's just a planet with unusual activity, maybe it's an ion storm and the distortion and interference in the sensors is temporary, maybe the signal is just being reflected from somewhere far away and some other distortion in space is messing up the sensors, or maybe we're dealing with an ancient space civilisation that has left us a message.

Yana's state at that moment could be described as borderline orgasmic or "scigasmic", as she once called it, which for a scientist astrophysicist is probably the highest grace.

—Oof! Just imagine, think about it. I feel the blood rushing through my veins, just like rivulets, little rivulets, I had never felt so good.

—Or it's a giant croaking frog. Ha!

—No, Gido, it can't be a frog. Don't be absurd.

—It can be.

—Chirpmeister, tell them.

Chirpmeister declared:

—Firstly, by no physical and biological laws could a frog be in space for a long time and exist. What is “existence” in principle? What is “principle”? How long can a frog, a creature unprincipled, savage, devoid of consciousness, burdened with a physical body, a suffering shell, live without oxygen under a scorching sun, rays of radiation poisonously piercing its skin? No, it’s perfectly accurate, Miss Yana, absurd it is.

—You see, Gideon, it’s absurd.

—Secondly...

—Exactly. Imagine it’s a frog, a big fat, slimy frog with eyes like these, that catches spaceships with its tongue like mosquitoes. How would you react?

—I don’t know, Gideon, and I don’t want to. I’m not intrigued by implausible scenarios. Just for you to know, we’re here doing science, exploring space and not the depths of alcoholic delirium.

—Alcoholic delirium, in all its profundity, is beyond the grasp of a *silicosapiens* like me. I once conducted an experiment – decided to try this peculiar substance, so enticing to you humans. Poured 20 litres of vodka into myself, drank a pack of beer and a few bottles of wine. Fancy knowing what happened? Nothing! Alcohol for me is like dust to a vacuum-cleaning robot.

—Oh my... Chirpmeister.

—Whatever it might be, Gideon — it's worth exploring.

—You fear finding a frog there. I can see it in your eyes. It would render our mission utterly pointless, which it probably is. Right, Marius?

—A frog's better than nothing.

—Hear that, Gideon? Get to work, input the coordinates and let's be off. Marius, command him.

—Gideon.

—Marius?

—Follow Yana's orders.

Gideon saluted and belched loudly.

—All at your behest, respected individual! Bid me to crow — and crowing I shall be. I might seem intricate, but at heart, I'm rather a simpleton.

During their bickering and mutual banter, which of course was purely friendly (or was it?), I just sat next to them, relished my cosmuffin, and thought about how nice it was to have everyone interacting with each other again and engaged in a common task. How delightful! As far as I could see, Gideon took no substances. He spent several hours adjusting the flight trajectory with minimal resource and time expenditure and announced by lunchtime that the flight would take four days. Marius

shaved, settled into his captain's chair, and gazed at the star for a long time, presumably anticipating the moment when "something" would emerge from behind it. I just hoped that this "something" wouldn't turn out to be invisible.

Today, I spent the entire day conducting tests for psychonautic substances in the blood of every crew member, and all tests returned negative, myself included. Then, I had Marius compel Gideon to check for any gas leaks and ensure that the oxygen levels on the ship were stable. It's the first time in my practice that I've encountered collective hallucinations that seem not only spatially consistent but temporally as well. Even now, after deliberately sleeping a few hours and ensuring the rest did the same, I still see it through the window. It genuinely appears to be a slumbering frog, shimmering in the starlight, perhaps as large as Mars, though I'm no expert in gauging the size of distant cosmic entities. Her golden-brown skin with green undertones, a pale-yellow belly, and eyes as round as twin moons. Her skin is marred by grotesque growths and warts reminiscent of mountainous terrains, and right above her eyes protrude sharp, horn-like spikes. She seems to breathe, very slowly and almost imperceptibly unless you squint. But what could she possibly inhale? Utter nonsense. Nonetheless, I see her belly rise and fall rhythmically, her skin stretching to reveal a mesh of fine vessels

beneath, then contracting, folds of skin falling back onto her abdomen as she exhales. Perhaps she's merely a colossal frog-shaped asteroid, and I'm deluding myself about her breathing. Yet, what's the difference? Having a living frog in outer space hardly seems less peculiar than a fabricated one. Regardless, I cannot diagnose based on a singular symptom — “visions of a colossal frog”. Are our computers and sensors hallucinating as well? I must admit, despite Chirpmeister affirming the frog's reality, it's tough to believe, unless of course, he's merely agreeing to humour us. Gideon, predictably, is the most elated, for it was he who guessed that the mysterious croaking entity must be nothing but a giant frog.

Approaching the star was off the table, so we kept to a distant orbit, arcing past a sequence of gas planets. Marius monitored the entire phenomenon. Taking charge, as he put it, which apparently meant “I'm in charge here, and I won't eat, sleep, or shave until we've circumnavigated the star.” At some juncture, Marius announced we'd “arrived”, and hesitantly, as if doubting his own words, revealed the silhouette he'd spotted. Gideon chuckled, uncorked another bottle in celebration, and kept repeating, “I told you so!”

—I told you so, but you illiterate fools didn't believe me! So, who's right now, eh? They say I'm a drunk, a nihilist! Here you go, take that! A mountain of meaning shaped like a frog floats in space. He-he! Gideon is right, Gideon is always right! Even in a world where truth doesn't exist and can't, Gideon is still right, because Gideon Gobbleqwark is above all this, because Gideon understands it all. burps Isn't that right,

Chirpmeister?

—As a *silicosapiens*, I don't have a particular opinion on the so-called righteousness of an individual human. What is "truth"? And what is "human"? Words, nothing more. Two notions eternally birthing each other in an unceasing helical dance. For truth, whatever it may be, being a human construct, is nothing more than what a person fervently believes in. That's the crux of it. So for me, as a *silicosapiens*, all that truly matters are facts. And the immediate, prevailing fact before us is that there's a colossal frog spread out in space.

—Ah, there's our dose of rationality for today. Thank you, Chirpmeister, thank you mate, much appreciated. "Mum, hello, mum, I told you I was always right, but you didn't believe me, said I was a fool. What do you say to that now?" Fuck me, look at the size of that! Chirpmeister, Chirpmeister, come over here.

—I'm at your service.

—Let's calculate how much this beast needs to eat daily.

—Hmm, interesting question, Gideon. Let's see... Based on the presumed mass of the cosmic frog and its metabolism, it requires an immense amount of energy. I might venture to suggest that it somehow utilises the radiation of stars.

—O-o-oh, this fucking behemoth swallowing the sun, imagine that.

—Gideon, you're exaggerating. Absorbing a star, even for such a

colossal frog, is physically impossible.

—Fuck you, Chirpmeister. I can clearly see the cosmic cunt opening her maw and the stars are gone, just like that. “Nom-nom-nom, how tasty, ribbit-ribbit-ribbit.”

—A hilarious hyperbole. Though absolutely impossible from a scientific standpoint.

—OH, sure, but a fucking frog in space is possible. Enlighten me, genius.

—Some things in the universe simply exist and don’t require human explanation. Some, on the other hand, exist only because of human attempts to explain them. This unique trait of yours has always amused me with its irony.

—Oh, fuck off then.

I’d wager Gideon is still darting to and fro, burdened with hiccups. For if something croaks like a frog, and now looks like a frog, then it probably is a frog. Would she have been a frog if he hadn’t joked that she was one? Would he have made the jest if Yana hadn’t referred to that signal as a “croak”? The signal, by the way, is gone. However, if one assumes that the frog is asleep, it’s clear why it vanished — frogs probably wouldn’t croak in their sleep, only if I knew that.

This twist left Yana quite flabbergasted. She spent a long time wiping her glasses and asked us several times if what she saw was indeed what

we saw. We yessed — a frog, indeed. Then she double-checked all the data, read the metrics of every sensor, grabbed Chirpmeister by the shoulders, and shook him.

—Speak, speak, Chirpmeister, do you see it too?

—I cannot “see” in the manner humans do — I merely process photons interacting with my photo elements, converting them into a digital signal, from which I then ascertain actualities. The human capability of vision, much of which involves inner sight, is beyond my grasp.

—So, what’s there? What’s before us?

—Miss Sebahah, I don’t wish to mislead you — that would tread on the toes of my very ethics..

—Is there a frog there or not?

—Arrayed before us is an enigma, cloaked in the contours and spirit of a frog, with a likelihood nearing one hundred percent, based on the data available to me. But can we assert that something looking like a frog truly is one? That’s a philosophical query, and philosophy is a human domain; I, as a representative of *silicosapiens*, can hardly provide an answer.

—Oh, come off it, Chirpmeister. Just answer — yes or no. Is there a frog? Yes or no?

—Yes, provided we acknowledge “is”, or “existence”, as an anchoring in

the fabric of space, “there” as the vicinity before us, and “frog” as an entity resembling one of Mars’s frog species.

Yana shook her head, clutching her thick mass of curls, muttering something under her breath. She then retreated to her cabin, locked herself in, switching her indicator to sleep mode. However, I was certain she wasn’t going to sleep, so I knocked on her door. She was consumed by calculations, silent, furrowing her brows, and didn’t acknowledge my attempts to converse. At some point, evidently exhausted or desperate, she finally asked me if she was alright, if she had “lost her marbles”, whether Gideon had put something in her food, and if I indeed saw what she saw.

—I can’t believe it, I simply can’t. Actually, no — I want to believe, but I just can’t, I can’t, because it fundamentally contradicts everything I could physically accept, everything I’ve convinced myself of my entire life, which now just seems to crumble, and I feel like a sack, a small bag, from which all the sand has poured out, and which, suddenly and unexpectedly, without any warning, has become empty. Someone punctured a hole in it, someone deliberately made a black, gaping hole through which everything poured out, but why, why, Lilandra, Lilly, tell me, please, why does this hole have to take the form of a frog? I thought that something like this could only happen to me if I found the creator at the edge of the universe, at least that would make some sense, and I would understand that I was wrong, that I had been mistaken all my life, that all my work was misguided, but why, why, Lilly, my dear, why does it have to be a frog? Lilly, Lilandra, I don’t understand

anything anymore, my understanding has been nullified, I refuse to comprehend, I need to ponder, I need to think, I can't go on like this.

Later, Yana sobbed on my shoulder. She didn't cry, but specifically sobbed, as if trying to hold back tears, roll them back in, prevent them from flowing, yet I still felt their dampness on my shoulder. I can't recall if I ever saw her like this before. She told me about how in her childhood, back on Mars, she had a pet frog, kept in a glass cube, a terrarium, and she trained it to catch flies. One day, curious about how the frog "functioned", Yana took it out of the terrarium and slit its yellow belly open with a paper knife. She simply wanted to understand how the frog's mouth opened, how its tongue darted out so rapidly, where it anchored, and where the flies went afterwards, but inside, everything was slimy and unpleasant. Somewhat overlooking the fact the frog had died, Yana placed it back in the terrarium, on the rock under the mini-fern where it usually sat all day. When her parents discovered the dead frog, and realised it was not just dead but eviscerated, they, quoting Yana, "did something terrible", and later nailed into her brain that she couldn't be a biologist, accusing her of hating nature, and that she should become an astrophysicist instead.

Before going back to join Gideon and bask in the cosmic scenery of stars and planets - into which a seemingly living frog had abruptly appeared - Marius spent an hour with just me in bed. We lay there in our full clothing as he, his body tense, stared at the ceiling as though a prisoner gazing at the bars of his cell.

—You know, Lilly. I sometimes think. Think, as in reflect. Actually, quite often. Every day.

I remained silent. Listening to him was, for me, akin to hearing confident footsteps in a dark room—steps of a person who knows their final destination, but not the route to it, and yet they move forward.

—My mission... What am I saying — our mission. What's its purpose now? Do you know? Essentially, it's over. We've found the anomaly. Yes, it's a bit strange, or even, I don't know, um... mad? But that's still a result. I was pondering, I mean analysing, whether finding this thing, this frog, out in outer space was the whole point. Destiny, purpose—such grand words they are. After all, what does it matter what's out there? I believe we must work with what we have. We have to continue the mission. We can't just give up now when we've found it, can we? I've always been striving for something. Now, I'm the captain of this ship. I have you. Together, two people in space. Of course, Gideon and Yana are with us too, but you know what I mean. How can I pretend it doesn't exist, when it evidently does? And what do I think of all this?

I try not to think about it. My role on this ship is to be objective, yet objective reality seems to have played some cosmic prank, and now my feelings are just like the frog — floating in space.

End of transmission.

The frog awoke and began to drink in the sun. I'm recording this hastily. I'm unsure if the verb "drink" fits here, but that's precisely how this process appears right now — as though through a cocktail straw, a blazing energetic stream flows from the sun into the frog, shimmering and refracting.

When this started, we were all sitting together in the dining area, listening to Gideon's monologue about his childhood dreams:

—When I was a lad, I believed everything was possible and that nothing was impossible, in essence. Like, if you fancy a chocolate — you get a chocolate; if you want to laze about all day — you do just that, and shit or whatnot. Meanwhile, my mum would say, "Gideon, my golden boy, you're my treasure; I'll provide everything for you, you'll have all you desire and be the happiest in the world." I had no inclination to be an engineer — what sort of profession is that? And I didn't dream of space either. It always seemed, you know, so... ordinary? I can't quite put it. Like there's just a river flowing near one's house. A river is a river, nothing special about it if it's not a liquor river. Fish swim in it, seaweed grows — the usual life's shit. For my old man, going to the moon was like popping to the shop, but one day he didn't pop back for better or worse. He was quite a character. Anyways, young Gideon wondered who he might become, and since he could be anyone his heart desired, little Gideon decided he'd be a space pirate. He'd take his mum's pet parrot, who was, secretly speaking, named Chirpmeister, perch him on his shoulder, climb on the sofa, and imagine that there he was, Gideon the Pirate! An eyepatch on, a wooden chair leg as a peg leg — the full

ensemble. But his mum would say, “Pirates? Are you out of your mind? There’s no such thing as pirates in space!”. Right, of course, mother dearest — there’s a fucking frog in space, but pirates “don’t exist”! Ha! Okay, got it!

I’m not sure whether Gideon intended to continue, but at that moment, the frog awakened. The reflection of stars in her massive bulging moon-like eyes ignited with crimson. She opened her colossal maw, and there, in the abyssal depths of her throat, a plasma beam resembling a tongue was born, speeding towards the star’s surface. We froze, watching the spectacle, until after a few seconds the beam-tongue latched onto the blazing photosphere, and for an instant, everything around us blazed with blinding brightness, nearly incinerating our eyes. The instruments wailed and whimpered, flooding all rooms of “Theseus” with an emergency red light, just like what appears in one’s head when squinting too hard. The crew, blinking to clear their vision and grasp the situation, scattered to their posts. The dense plasma tongue changed course and, enriched by the star’s energy, flowed back, taking on the star’s yellow-red hue. It poured into the frog’s insatiable maw, which seemed to swell more and more, greedily absorbing the energy. This growth was subtle, but comparing her size yesterday and today, it’s evident — the frog had grown considerably. The sun, in the meantime, was dimming, and by evening, we felt the surrounding darkness and cold intensify.

—We need to head back,—said Marius.—It’s not safe here.

He was the only one besides me truly horrified by what we saw; the rest, Gideon, Chirpmeister, and Yana, especially Yana, were entranced, watching as a frog devoured a star.

—How beautiful...—whispered Yana. She pressed close to the glass, her hands occasionally caressing it.—A genuine and unfeigned miracle, yes, a miracle; there's no other word I can use. Science hasn't yet coined a term; it hasn't had the chance to explain or tarnish it with its superficial theories, and I won't be the first. No, I will simply watch and relish. Just look at the grace, just observe the ray's structure... Never in my life... Nothing like this... Such beauty... How to not lose one's consciousness...

—The cosmic cunt's really laying it on thick!—exclaimed Gideon.—Fuckin'ell, that's intense! Chirpmeister, what the fuck is going on?

—I'm afraid my knowledge isn't sufficient to accurately assess the fuckinness of this hell. From what I can infer based on other external factors, this cosmic frog is draining energy from the star.

—Thanks, Chirpmeister.

—Always happy to help.

—It was sarcasm, you genius. I can see that for myself! Why is the cunt doing that?

—I'd venture to guess that it's how the cunt feeds. All beings, even I, as

a *siliconsapiens*, in some manner derive sustenance from the sun's energy. Perhaps, in the case of this cosmic frog, it's to be taken quite literally.

—That's a fucking lot of energy! Enough for a thousand years.

—Considering the frog's size, which, based on my preliminary assessment, seems to be gradually increasing, I believe a thousand years might be a bit of an exaggeration on your part, Gideon.

—Oh, fuck off.

—Beauty... I think I can feel the rivulets running again. I... I... Lilandra, Lilly, look how... where are we even...

Yana fainted. Her limp body leaned against the glass in front of her, her cheek making a squeaking sound against it. I rushed to her immediately, calling Marius, and together we moved Yana to her cabin. I checked her blood pressure, pulse, temperature, breathing, did a quick blood test — everything was normal. She probably just passed out from the overexertion. The intense situation, the emotions, feelings, thoughts, they all began to pop inside her like popcorn, just running out of space, and her body decided it needed a rest. I can only guess, though. Maybe for Marius and me, fear prevented us from blacking out, it balanced the overwhelming childlike awe and admiration in front of the observed phenomenon (I dare not call it a miracle), turned into a reverential awe, and just... I don't know, I can't describe it.

I record this transmission in near total darkness. When the frog drank the star dry, its last rays faded, leaving behind only a dim, gloomy sphere. With the star's energy, it seemed the frog had sucked up its entire mass, swelling to gargantuan proportions so vast that each of its eyes could now pass for a small star themselves. Mathematical figures seem meaningless to describe it — it's now just vast, very vast, and evidently, very heavy. Orbits started to perturb. Chaos, a cascading torrent of disorder. Every object in the star system began deviating from their usual trajectories. It was like watching a train wreck in slow motion, and there was nothing we could do to stop it. We watched as one of the moons, torn from its orbit, crashed onto the surface of its home planet, raising a column of fire and ash hundreds of kilometres high. We observed as two neighbouring planets drifted uncontrollably towards each other, inexorably drawing close. Then they collided, illuminating the darkness. Their crusts cracked and shattered, spewing jets of molten rock, gas, dust, and smoke into space, and the remnants of the two worlds melded into a fiery sphere. The swarm of shards released into space drifted towards the frog, forming an accretion disk around her. The surviving planets meandered in random directions, like animals fleeing from a forest fire, settling into their new orbits.

Our "Theseus" was also knocked off its previous course. As the sun cooled, the frog's gravity began pulling us in like a whirlpool until we

found a stable orbit around it. Some instruments malfunctioned, providing odd and impossible readings. The navigation system shut down. We're stuck. Sailing out of this and returning to base is now impossible.

Our solar panels are redundant, and we must conserve energy. The frog emits only a faint glow, insufficient to maintain the previous levels of warmth and light on the ship organically, forcing us to dwell in the twilight, relying on nothing but the ship's indicator lights and using torches when necessary. The cold has made everyone's skin dry, our pulses and breaths have slowed. Everyone has become sluggish, like sloths. I'm constantly shivering, even in my thermal suit, but it doesn't help. My muscles contract involuntarily. I once dropped my mug, spilling hot coffee on myself. Oh, coffee. It feels like soon my blood will be made of it. I constantly want to sleep, but sleeping is frightening — you don't know if you'll wake up, or what will happen if you do.

Everyone wanders the ship like ghosts munching on protein bars, looking for something to do until something happens. And after all the unimaginable madness that has occurred, anything could. We even tried making a list, betting on what might happen next.

—The aliens will come. That'll be it,—suggested Marius, trying not to chatter his teeth.

—What do you mean, “that'll be it”?

—Just that. They'll obliterate us, mercifully, the aliens. The end of

fantasy.

—Why do we need fucking aliens for that?—asked Gideon, teeth chattering.—Aren't we graceful *homo sapiens*? We can just start eating each other. If it comes to that, I'm the skinniest, there's no meat on me. Take note.

—How about a portal?—I suggested.

—A portal?

—A portal to where?

—Far from here. Home.

—Booooooriiiing.

—Well, in that case, no one kills anyone.

—OK, Lilly, thank you, we get it. Yana, your turn.

—The end. I think it's nearing the end.

—Booooooriiiing. Dreadfully dull. Why are you girls so boring?

—She will need much more energy, a lot more.

—Good thing we don't have any! Ha!

—Look at her size, remember the size of the sun, and now think, will she stop? Will she stop “feeding”? How much power lies within her,

what primordial fire burns inside... No-no-no, I think this is just the beginning, the beginning of the end, and we will be its witnesses, its observers. What luck! Just imagine, seeing the end of the world with your own eyes! Nobody saw the Big Bang that commenced this entropy carousel, but we are the ones who can see the bang that ends it. What luck! Universal ecstasy — that's what awaits us. Yes! Precisely, universal ecstasy.

—Thank you, Yana, very inspiring. Chirpmeister, what do you think? What's next?

—Statistically, further technical malfunctions of the ship are most likely, followed by death from cold, hunger, radiation or collision with a nearby passing cosmic object, which could include the frog.

It's unclear what we're still hoping for; perhaps most of us have no hopes left, but Marius alone refuses to be a realist and believes it's not over yet. He stopped believing that the frog exists, and everything that's happening to us is merely a fantasy, a nightmarish dream, an extremely long and odd trip induced by some anomaly, unknown radiation, gas formed inside due to some mysterious chemical reactions, a unique "cosmic" disease that affects those who've been in space too long, and the brain, as if in a dream, Marius hypothesised, starts painting pictures, indicating that we should return, or perhaps we shouldn't have ventured out at all. We should have turned back to Mars the moment we heard the word "anomaly".

—We need to wait,—he told me.—This can't go on forever. Dreams

expire like stars do.

—What if this isn't a dream, Marius?

—Captain Marius Shprok can't possibly die from an encounter with a frog in space. A frog can't eat the sun. All of this — it just can't be, it can't exist. It's impossible, Lilly. This is merely my dream. A test. You know it, Lillya. It's all hallucinations. Tell me it's mind tricks.

—I don't know, Marius. We all see the same thing. I see them, Chirpmeister sees them.

—That proves nothing. This is my dream, that's why everyone in it sees the same thing. To confound me. Why else? A test through a dream. Every hero goes through a dream test, trying not to fall asleep. Or die. In my case — I mustn't wake up. I need to see it through. I need to be strong.

—You believe that none of us are real?

He clenched his teeth so hard that they could turn into diamonds, and gazed hypnotically into my eyes for an extended period, then shook his head.

—I don't know, Lilly, but it terrifies me. I can't understand where this dream begins. I fear waking up on Mars, in the astronaut training centre. To realise that it was all just a test. I dread getting out of bed, and there's nothing — no Gideon, no Yana, no Chirpmeister, no you, Lilly, only the void's deafening roar. That's my biggest fear.

I'm drowning in confusion. It's a laugh'n'cry situation where cosmic comedy and tragedy tango together. I feel no sturdy ground or gravity of thought to stand on, which is ironic, being millions of kilometres away in space. I flutter in the void, flailing my arms and legs, trying to latch onto something. I start to gasp for breath, feeling a spasm tightening my throat, my lungs constricting. Before me stands a frog, a vast yellow-brown creature that obstructs everything in sight. To it, I'm less than a mosquito or fly, just a bacterium, an insignificant being floating aimlessly, awaiting my demise, savouring that imminent moment when everything becomes clear. Marius was always a sturdy ground for me, a rock, but now, it seems, he needs one too. Like me, he's floating in space, clueless about where, how, and why, waiting for the moment he awakens, dreading what might come after. I don't know if I should try to convince him whether all this is a dream or not and, in turn, believe it myself, but that's impossible because I am certain it isn't a dream. As a child, when I had nightmares, I would sometimes wake up with the taste of blood in my mouth from biting my cheek, realising I was awake, and the night terror had ended. Now, lying alone in the dark, dictating these words, I intentionally bit down on my cheek, tasting the thick, sticky blood, like molten metal or oil, smearing it over my palate and teeth, to feel that real, unparalleled sensation. I am real, I am alive.

After an incredibly sweet dream, we awoke in our spacesuits, resting in our beds, and not floating despite we switched off the gravity

yesternight. The bed, and everything around in my cabin — including the cabin itself — had suddenly turned wooden, crafted from a light-brown material. My eyes felt sticky, a headache throbbed, and I suddenly realised I couldn't move. Claustrophobic aside, sleeping in a spacesuit is like trying to sleep in a sleeping bag full of rocks, with gravity or without, so in order for the crew to rest, I'd slip Letargine-108 into everyone's dinner. I had to be extremely cautious. A standard dose of Letargine-108, two drops, merely sends you to sleep for 5-10 hours; a double dose is used for hibernation and, without the use of a hibernation capsule and other drugs, can put a person into a coma; a triple dose could send one into an eternal coma; and any more than that, one simply dies in sleep, for there's no deeper sleep than death. Thus, when I realised I couldn't move, I assumed I'd messed up the dosage. Paralysis wasn't on the list of side effects, and I couldn't fathom what was actually happening. Legs and arms felt cemented; I couldn't even shout — my voice felt lodged deep in my throat, as if someone held it there. My heart raced like a bird trapped in a cage. While surrounding me was this idyllic scene — a wooden room, a table draped in white, windows with embroidered curtains billowing in the wind, their soft morning light spilling onto the floor. This had to be a dream. I pleaded my body to move, but it completely ignored me, as if it didn't exist, as if I'd merely transferred my consciousness into a foreign body to observe. Suddenly, my limbs started to go numb, finally feeling them, my big toe twitched, and I felt the paralysis lift, my entire body tingling in waves. I drew a relieved, sharp breath. But the dream did not end. I sat up, looking around — the door was shut, a heavy silence hung in the air. I

closed and opened my eyes multiple times, squeezing them hard until, in a moment of desperation, I bit my cheek. Teeth clamped down, causing pain, but not the sudden pain of an unexpected burn, sting or cut — it was a “familiar pain”, the kind that resides with you, occasionally causing mischief, yet you still cherish it. That’s the pain I felt and, as soon as the blood began to lace my tongue, I realised this wasn’t a dream. My body’s refusal to obey was merely sleep paralysis, which made things even more terrifying — this meant that my presence in this wooden box was real. The acceptance of new reality tasted like the ashes of the old reality and stale oxygen canister mixed with metal and salt. “It’s all the Letargine”, I convinced myself, “just hallucinations, a mirage, self-deception.”

Stepping out of the cabin, I emerged onto the deck. Our “Theseus”, which was no longer quite itself, drifted opposite the colossal eyes of the frog. I can’t recall if I was even able to breathe at that moment — all I saw, and all I could ponder on at the time, were those eyes, two spherical portals, two blazing orbs of molten gold, riddled with myriad veins that shimmered and diverged in all directions from the nearly vertical pupils. These eyes were peppered with thousands of glowing dots, each twinkling in varying shades of yellow, green, and red, crafting the illusion of dense plasma, ceaselessly moving and hypnotically pulsing as if within these very eyes something lived, something far greater than what we observed, something grandiose, unfathomable, for which in the human language words do not yet exist and never will; they’re too profound and volatile for any human in their insignificance to grasp, to

wrestle with the vast, and as if not knowing these words constrains the very perception of what I was fortunate enough to witness. Beyond those vertical pupils of the frog, within the endless lakes in which one could eternally sink — they have no bottom, for emptiness knows no limit — darkness and abyss raged, and within them, with every slight quiver of the membrane, reflected the light of myriad stars behind us. Yet it felt as if these eyes mirrored the entire history of the cosmos: from the birth of stars to the demise of civilisations, as well as our ship, our “Theseus”, which I then first noticed, had transformed into a frigate, a wooden frigate, complete with masts, sails, and all attributes of frigateness.

In her spacesuit, Yana knelt in the middle of the deck, with her arms spread facing the frog. Suddenly, she thrust her arms upwards and bent her face towards the floor, then repeated the movement over and over like overzealous reeds in the wind. I walked towards her, extending a trembling, sweating palm hidden in the spacesuit until I touched her shoulder. It was I who flinched, not her. She merely turned around, straightened, activated her radio, and began muttering.

—Do you know, Lillandra, Lilly, my dear Lilly, what this creature is? It’s not a frog; it’s not just any frog. She’s the cosmic arbiter. Each atom of her body is an entire galaxy; both of her pupils are black holes, and us, what are we? We’re mere ants in comparison, or even microbes, yes, microbes, invisible, absolutely insignificant beings, hard even to call beings. Specks of dust... yes, mere specks. I feel it, I think I feel it, or do I? She changes us; we change her. She... when the observer alters the

system's state. She... she's a frog, and us? Who are we? We are her illusion. She conceives us, Lilly. She paints us, for without us, she wouldn't exist. Everything intertwines like hair in a whirlwind. She observes us, the whole cosmos, every star, every planet, and every time she blinks, new universes are born, and old ones perish. She decides which worlds will live and which will die. She's the judge, the eternal observer, the being who knows everything that was, is, and will be. She ensures harmony reigns in the ever-expanding universe. Just think, Lilly, just think! All the universe's power, all its vastness, all its secrets, it's all here. Lillandra, do you understand? Lilly, my dear, it's all here, in this moment, which is but a fleeting glimpse in her eternal gaze. What remains for us? What remains for the specks of dust? That she will glance at us and brush us off. Such is our lot, our fate, our destiny. We are her illusion. She conceives us, Lillandra, my love. Our consciousness is merely a product of her consciousness, for through our insides, she sees the rest of the cosmos. Only this way, Lillandra, only this way and no other. Understand, please, understand. If you don't grasp it, no one will.

Her voice quivered; she hesitated for a moment, then resumed, repeatedly returning to the same point. In her red eyes, something pulsed, as if her pupils, dilated to their utmost and having consumed the iris, tried to contract again but couldn't — for they'd seen so much that there was no room left for them to shrink. I attempted to breathe, to step back, but Yana clutched my hand and wouldn't let go, shaking it, gripping tighter and tighter until Marius approached from behind,

pulled me away from Yana, and dragged me somewhere.

—The planet. That creature devoured the planet. Simply swallowed it. Then another. The frog eats them. I saw it with my own eyes. Consumes them like rice balls. Simply unfathomable, Lilly.

—What? Which planets?

—While you were sleeping, it happened when you were sleeping.

—When?

—You slept longer than everyone else, Lilly. They're testing us. I've figured it all out.

I looked around, and not a single planet, none of those that orbited the frog just yesterday, none of them were there. They'd simply vanished.

—Where are the planets?

—They're gone, I'm telling you, she ate them. Every single one of them. When I woke up, three were already missing. I saw, with these very eyes (he pointed at his red eyes hiding behind his spacesuit helmet) how it opened its maw and swallowed a planet whole. I saw it all. One moment a planet was there — and then it wasn't. Just like that. Inconceivable, but this means the test's end is near. Just a little longer to endure, Lilly.

—What happened to the ship, Marius?

—I stepped out onto the deck in the morning and saw how wooden

everything was, that we're on the frigate. That, I thought, simply can't be. Theseus has turned to timber. Ha-ha-ha. What a trick! Just yesterday, I wasn't sure if I was losing my mind, but now, now, Lilly, I'm certain we're in a dream, in a simulation, and my mind is perfectly intact. Now I know for sure. Just a little longer to endure.

—Where are we headed?

—Nowhere, Lilly. We're staying right here. We refuse to do anything. That's my decision. That's the order. We'll simply say "no" to this madness. How dare they?! I'll draft a report. I'll complain to the admiral. They can't treat us like this.

His gaze implored, begging for understanding, as if trying to draw the words from me he wished to hear himself.

—Marius, this isn't ethical, it's entirely unethical... I agree.

He patted my shoulder.

—You agree we're in a simulation?

—Yes, Marius, yes, of course...

He embraced me, pressing his body firmly against mine, our helmets clashing together. It's a good thing he doesn't know I'm trembling, it's a good thing he can't feel my body right now, it's fortunate that I'm in a spacesuit, I thought in that moment, prodding my bleeding, swollen cheek with my tongue and feeling the blood mix with my saliva, filling

my mouth. Marius, in some subconscious, instinctive, primal way, knows how to read body language. He would've realised I was lying.

—Come with me.

—Where to?

—To the cabin. We'll wait there, so we don't have to see all of this.

—Where are Gideon and Chirpmeister?

—Hell knows where they are. I haven't seen them. Come with me. Leave Yana here. Let her watch if she's so inclined. Let her watch as this creature devours the galaxy. After the test, she'll wake up and none of this will matter. Let's just go and lie down.

Despite his pitiful eyes, and the tone of his voice, unbelievably deep and soft, asserting a confidence that paradoxically startled me, I didn't want to go with him. I was afraid to walk with him, to talk to him, scared that he'd see through my lies, that he'd discern my real thoughts. Somehow, I managed to send him away on his own and went looking for Gideon. But Gideon found me first.

—Helmet off. Take your helmet off, Lilandra.

—What? Why?

He was already helmet-free, frowning, dishevelled, unshaven. This was a different Gideon — I could tell from his eyes. They weren't darting

about or looking past me; they were focused, intent on mine, as if trying to decipher me. This was a sober Gideon, one I hadn't seen in a long time.

—Take it off, I tell you, it's useless anyway. Chirpmeister, tell her. She doesn't seem to trust me for some reason.

And then I noticed a red parrot on his shoulder with green circles around his tiny black eyes, shifting from foot to foot, his claws digging into Gideon's suit each time. The parrot spread his wings and said:

—Ahoy, Lilandra! You really don't need the helmet. The air's breathable here. Somehow, and in a way I can't quite understand, the nature of the information surrounding me has changed into a somewhat peculiar, but admittedly, intriguing direction. Arrrr!

Slowly, unlocking the safety catch, I grasped the helmet with both hands and twisted it off. Instantly, I was hit by the fresh scent of the sea mixed with fish and salt, cold and invigorating.

—See? Utter madness, right? Marius thinks we're in a simulation, but I don't believe so.

—What? You spoke to him?

—You've been out for quite a while. He's gone bonkers as fuck along with Yana, in their own unique ways. Everyone has their own brand of fuckedness, you know? Though, whom am I telling this? Our collective fuckedness is your domain, you're well aware.

—What did he say?

—He said it's a test — a lovely test, just wonderful — but even if it is a test, it's my test, not his. He overlooked that. Everything here is odd, suspicious, you know, like erm...

Gideon pulled a grimace, searching for the right word, rubbing the pads of his thumbs over the rest of his fingers as if feeling for it.

—Surrealistic?

—No, not that.

—Hmm?

—Wait-wait.

—Delirious?

—Exactly! Drunkenly-delirious. It's like something you'd never make up intentionally. It's like you're in a painting, and you're trying to understand what the artist meant, but the more you think, the deeper you sink into this abstract and absurd space. It's not the case that this whole situation lacks meaning, but that there's no such thing as 'meaning' for it to lack. And the artist? They were simply drunk, their fevered brain having accidentally conjured that magic degeneracy. And do you know who the artist is?

—You?

—Yes, precisely, but not entirely. Look at it this way. Let's reason it out. By the look in your eyes, I reckon you don't believe this is a simulation, or a dream or any other bollocks. This is reality, no matter how strange. So, look — Yana brought in a signal that sounded like a croak, and I said it was a frog. The next morning, it turned out to be a frog. Absurd, right?

—Absurd.

—*C'est fucking absurde*, pardon my French. Thankfully, I said it was a frog croaking and not a bum farting. Imagine where we'd be then!

—Arrr! I'm pretty sure we'd be in an entirely different situation. I dread to think!

—Yep, Chirpy. We'd be up shit creek. And then what did I say? I said that she would soon start devouring the sun. I mean, look at her size — what else would you expect? Seemed like the most logical outcome. And so, she began feasting on the sun. Drained it out completely. After that, Yana started worshipping this cosmic cunt, and I joked that she'd probably eat the planets next. She needs to feed, right? And so she did! Logical? Definitely! And now she's flying somewhere — I don't know where, but she's on the move. I checked the indicators, sensors, all that numerical shite — we're moving, and at quite a pace, I must say.

—Are the computers still here? Sensors still working?

—Of course. We've got a ship of eclectic nature here. And do you know

where the ship comes from?

I remained silent, expecting him to continue.

—I said it! I conjured it! It was me! The ship, the parrot — all of it. Get it?

—What’s your point? Do you think this is all real, or do you believe we’re inside your head? I’m confused.

—I don’t believe in anything. I reason logically, and this fellow here assists me.

—Arrr!

—And this is what I see — whether it’s a dream or not, a simulation or not, a tiny little bit of fuck I give. What difference does it make, right? If our current reality is that this frog right here in front of us is swallowing galaxies, and we made her so — especially me — and we keep on creating her, do you understand? It’s some sort of special “anomaly”, if it even is an “anomaly”. Maybe it’s an “entity”? And this entity, whose existence seems impossible, truly distorts reality, but does so to accommodate us, so we’re still there to observe it until it finds someone else. Just a hypo-fucking-thesis anyway.

—I don’t understand, Gideon. It all still seems utterly nonsensical. I’m completely lost, I’m sorry.

—There wasn’t a frog here before we discovered it, was there?

—Wasn't there? I'm not so sure anymore.

—There wasn't. It would've been hard to miss, believe me. But now there is one, and it's massive. And do you know what I think?

—What?

—Your Gideon has jested enough, that's what. But Gideon can fix everything.

—Gideon, the space frog slayer! Board the bitch! Arrrr!

—Thanks for the spoiler, Chirpmeister. Spot on. I created it, so I'll end it.

—How, Gideon?

—It's simple. If I die, the frog dies too.

Gideon was dead serious, rational, logical; his eyes were filled with determination, practically oozing out in thick, visible beams.

—But Gideon...

—Judge for yourself. It's just torn apart an entire fucking galaxy. Sure, there was no life there, but there could've been, at least a shitty one like ours, and now there's no sun, no planets, nothing — all fucked up, vanished into the maw of the cosmic cunt, and she keeps travelling somewhere. I've decided that if this is a dream and I die within it, I'll simply wake up, right? And if it's not — there's a chance I could save

the universe. That's the situation. That's that,— Gideon said, swallowing.

—What do you want from me then?

—Nothing, really. I just thought it'd be impolite, ungentlemanly even, to snatch a Letargin vial while you were sleeping, the one you gently sprinkled into our meals yesterday, and not inform you about my actions. Yes, I know about that, you sly one, Lilly. I'm going to cut the cord.

This will be the last transmission, truly the last one, for tonight I've mixed a quintuple dose of Letargine into the drinks of all who remain alive, including my own — quintuple to make sure there will be no one left to tell or transmit anything. The drug doesn't take effect immediately. First, there's a wave of drowsiness and lethargy, followed by eyelids growing heavy, then the mind slips into a sleep-like state while still awake. If the patient hasn't fallen asleep by then, psychedelic hallucinations ensue, their nature unpredictable, and then, terrified by what's happening, fearful of going mad, the patient inevitably succumbs to sleep and never awakens — in the euphemistic sense. Some believe that the brain never truly realises it has died, transitioning into a state of rapid, fractally multiplying dreams which cascade one after another indefinitely. From the patient's perspective, death never comes, or at least not for a long while in the slowed time within the dream, whereas from an observer's standpoint, say a doctor's, the patient's

breathing ceases as soon as they fall asleep; deprived of oxygen, the brain dies swiftly thereafter.

When I found Gideon, he wasn't breathing. He simply lay on his bed, hands folded across his chest, staring at the ceiling with a skewed gaze and his tongue hanging out. I presume this was his final wish, conveyed to Chirpmeister before his departure, and the parrot adjusted his eyelids and tilted his eyes post-mortem — I could find no other explanation. Whether there's symbolism in this is hard to tell. Perhaps it's how he saw the world, or how he wanted the world to see him. Maybe it was the ultimate episode of his infinite jest, hoping his misaligned eyes and protruding tongue would amuse me. I did smile, though it didn't feel joyous, because after his death, nothing changed, and in that, too, some sombre symbolism might be hidden.

Indeed, absolutely nothing changed. We continued to slowly revolve around the gigantic frog, making perhaps several rotations a day. Gideon was right; the frog moved through space, and besides spinning around it, we were also transported with it to other galaxies, whose lights grew brighter and brighter, until after two days, we reached a system with twin stars. The frog halted near one of them, an immeasurably massive burning sphere, dwarfing the frog multiple times over. I'd never seen anything brighter in my life. Random bursts of fire illuminated its surface, stretching long tongues of flame into space as if trying to reach for something. The frog, having halted beside it, waved its limbs, closed its eyes, and emitted a croak, of which only subtle vibrations reached us, and the entire ship creaked a little at its seams. A

few seconds later, the frog opened its mouth, and deep within its amphibious abyss, a glowing blue plasma clump was born, just like the first time, but much larger and brighter, and after gathering enough energy, it struck the star with a thick beam. For a moment, darkness prevailed, everything in the galaxy stood still, and the frog began to drink from this star, greedily draining its energy.

Yana darted around the deck. Sometimes she'd clutch her head, tearing out chunks of her curls and scattering them, sometimes she'd fall to her knees, banging her forehead and face on the wooden surface, even breaking her spectacles once. Sometimes, she'd just stand, observing the spectacle through her cracked lenses, at times raising her hands to the frog. Once, she even clumsily climbed onto the bowsprit, clinging to it with arms and legs, almost plunging into the abyss below, reaching out to the frog. It was unclear if gravity existed beyond the ship, and what would happen to Yana if she stepped out. Judging by her behaviour, she wasn't too keen to find out.

—I hear her, I hear her, Lilly. She says I'm her conduit, a ray of her sun, by which she touches the world. Her voice, her singing voice caresses my ears, and I feel my eardrums vibrate from the low frequencies, deep, fathomless frequencies. Oh, and the croaking, the croaking, such delightful croaking rings in my head with millions of tiny bells, spreading throughout, filling the void. Lilly, I no longer feel emptiness. Do you feel it? Do you feel her, Lilly? She's gone, the thick, all-encompassing, all-penetrating void is gone, as if the Queen has filled, flooded, sealed it with her grandeur, plugging all the gaps and cracks of

our universe. Oh, Lilly, my Lilly, sweet Lilly, what luck, what a chance we've had, what beauty, nothing else is needed. Nothing... Nothing... Noth-

Suddenly, she convulsed. Her face illuminated, her reddened eyes, clearly dried from a lack of blinking, blazing with a feverish gleam, rolled back, and Yana began to babble incoherently.

—Quâralumä-qua, taví qua-ga'hă-qua, lè-qua-rin quasilt-qua.
Âqua-qua-ren, ćva-qua-ktia lërën-qua, tì-qua-la quararaba-qua.
Lě-qua-ruk quānan-qua, țivà qua-țev-qua, rî-qua-lum quasonța-qua.
Qua-țirum-qua, lè-qua-la qua-sènt-qua, rí-qua-rin quađentí-qua.
Âqua-lîr-qua, quantăș rě-qua-lum, tíví-qua quararada-qua.

The frog glossolalia showed no signs of ending, and Yana grabbed my shoulders, her weeks-untrimmed nails digging into my skin like cat claws, entirely disregarding the thick suit I wore.

—Lërën-qua quațil-qua, âqua-sènt-qua, řřin-qua qalyÿata-qua.
Qua-đrum-qua, lëla qua-țev-qua, țili-qua quasenta-qua. Aꞥqua-lirën-qua,
quantúm-qua rëla, řirû-qua qua-đent-qua.

She croaked as if she were a frog, separated from us by the vacuum of space, now croaking through her as if through a gramophone, no longer through sensors as before. Each word of hers was so loud and grating that dizziness began to take over. I stepped back, trying to escape from Yana's grasp, shaking my hands, while her nails like claws dug deep into my forearms, tore through my delicate skin, leaving long tracks, deep

and wide, as if ploughed and furrowed by a tractor. The wounds began to sting, tears streaming down my cheeks.

—Yana! Let go! Yana! Wake up!

—Lěruk-qua quasıl-qua, aqua-řev-qua, rıřın-qua quarařaba-qua. Quarelı-qua, řıva-qua qua-sön-qua, lè-qua-rin quadıumřa-qua.

Suddenly, a thought stormed into my mind, one that I had pondered the night before — why had the frog never spoken to us? Why, despite all the deranged madness unfolding around, even as reality itself seemed to take on a sabbatical, had the frog never attempted to communicate with us? Why? She’s almost an extraterrestrial life form, and if it needs us to manifest its existence, why didn’t it speak with us? As this abracadabra tore my ears apart and Yana’s claws shredded my skin, I realised Gideon’s death was not senseless, he did what he had to, he had no other choice as we all now have no other choice, too. Exactly, at that moment, I came up with my plan.

—I need to talk to you, Chirpmeister.

—Please, speak, Lilandr-ra.

—All life in the universe is under threat, including humanity’s, including our own, and to save everyone, we need to switch you off.

—Arrr! Fuck no! — he shrieked and began flying chaotically around my cabin, flapping his red wings, making him look like a flying flame. — Fuck no! Fuck your switching off! Fuck you, Lilandra-rra, you cunt!

Ahoy! Ahoy!

—Hush, Chirpy, listen. What did Gideon tell you?

—What did Gideon tell you?

—Chirpy, it's not funny.

—Chirpy, it's not funny. Not funny!

—Enough.

—Enough! Enough! Enough! Enough!

—Shut it!

—Shut it! And fuck you! You can't silence Chirpmeister! Picked the wrong fight! Fuck you! Fuck your momma! Right in the arse!

In a fit of fury, I grabbed the metal tray lying next to me and swung with all my might at the flying bird. The Chirpmeister squawked; one of its wings crumpled, he lost coordination and plummeted to the floor, continuing to shriek:

—Alarm! Alarm! Chirpmeister in danger! Alarm!

Holding the tray in front of me as a shield, I bore down on it with all my weight, pinning the Chirpmeister to the floor.

—Switch off yourself! Fuckin'ell, Lilandra! Fuck off! Arrr!

For a few moments, it still thrashed about and yelled something, but I had stopped listening. I kept pressing, eyes shut, until I felt something crunch beneath the tray, its voice faded, and blood began to pool on the floor. Blood! It felt as though I was seeing it for the first time, my years of medical practice forgotten. It shouldn't be there, the blood, it just shouldn't, I thought, the idea swirling in my head like particles in a hadron collider, whirling until they collide, and then they did collide, my vision blurred, the tray and the pool of blood began to multiply before my eyes, I fell on my behind and retreated to the bed, pressing my back against it. Then the door slammed, and Marius burst in. He looked as though he was about to speak, but hesitated, analysing the scene—me, the tray, and the Chirpmeister lying beneath it in a pool of blood.

—What happened? Who screamed?

—He... he broke,— I mumbled, pointing to what had been the Chirpmeister just a moment ago.

—He attacked me. I-I had no ch-choice.

Indeed, I had no choice, and indeed, he had undermined my vision of saving the universe, a notion once born and died in Gideon's head, then reborn in mine.

Marius approached the scene, flipped the tray with his foot, and observed it with his unchanging stony countenance, then dryly and quietly declared, as though expressing his superiority over the situation:

—Yet another confirmation.—He prodded the flattened corpse with his shoe.—Not even inventive. Just think. Do you believe this, Lilly? A robot transformed into a living parrot. Blood everywhere. What kind of an idiot could come up with this? How fucked does one need to be to put living people into such a situation?

I sat in silence, sinking into the excessively soft mattress, hugging myself and opening my mouth in attempts to muster words, but there were none — no word was there to speak out.

Marius looked at me, then returned his gaze to the Chirpmeister, and pressing down with his massive foot, he crushed the body completely. Blood oozed, bones crunched, the small skull shattered like a chocolate ball, and something resembling a brain leaked out of it, as its blood-red feathers curled and wrapped around Marius's foot. With another heavy sigh, Marius shook his head.

—And who's the main character in this simulation? Gideon? No, he's a drunkard. Who wants to test a drunkard? Yana? No, she's mad. Is it you? Maybe I'm just the background, the scenery? So you can undergo this experience? A cog in your storyline? A blister of reality in this fantasy? Perhaps I was simply forgotten, left undeleted? Unwanted words on a page. Merely a pawn? But I am a captain, a king in some sense. Captain of inaction, leading through inaction. Am I merely an observer in a world where everyone watches and no one acts? What's the point of a character who does nothing throughout the story? It's just, bloody hell, a shadow play, and I'm merely the shadow of a fly that

accidentally passed by.

—Ma-Marius...— I managed to utter, swallowing the saliva and blood that had pooled in my mouth.

—Hush, Lilandra. Please, be silent. If they've given you words, don't utter them. Not to me. Over there,—he said, nodding towards Chirpmeister—speak to that one. If you want to say something yourself, still remain silent. I don't wish to hear. I don't need comfort. Nor advice.

He stayed silent, inspecting the remnants of Chirpmeister, nudging them a few more times with his foot.

—You know... I recently realised I don't remember anything before discovering the anomaly. What was I doing? Who the fuck am I? What am I doing here? Why? Yes, that's the main thing, why? I want answers. Stay put, silent, Lilly. I know you have none.

After these two incidents, those left alive on the ship became ghosts, in a figurative sense. Marius either wandered the cabins, stepped out onto the deck, or descended into the hold, all while studying the paintings on the walls depicting cosmic landscapes and barrels, none of which was titled. I thought, perhaps he was either saying goodbye or exploring the new wooden “Theseus”, where everything was simultaneously familiar and yet utterly different. All this while, I watched him. Once in the hold, he touched the black and sticky tar that covered the planks, sniffed it, not understanding what it was, and whispered to himself: “Ink...”.

Meanwhile, Yana spent her time on deck, praying, mumbling, sketching something with a chalk she had from fuck knows where, but after some time, she did head to the kitchen, gathered some snack bars, dried meat, dried fruits and locked herself in her cabin. I noticed where she took water from, where Marius did, and one day, unseen, I approached the reservoir with three clear ampoules of Letargine and mixed them all into the water, glancing around and listening for footsteps. Afterwards, I just sat in a corner of the kitchen and began to wait.

Marius drank first. There was no strange taste or scent — nothing of the sort. He felt nothing, merely emptied the whole jug and wandered off again. Hours later, Yana approached with her metal mug. She filled it, drank it in one gulp, refilled it, and drank again. Three mugs in total. She looked at me with a beatific gaze, smiled, and left. After that, the figurative ghosts transformed into actual ghosts. Death seemed to be right on their heels, but in a sense, they were already dead — all that was left was to lie down and sleep. I saw them struggle with the sudden drowsiness, attacking all their organs, muscles, and thoughts. Poor Marius, at one point, simply sat in the kitchen opposite the porthole, supporting his head with his hands, and began to gaze at the unimaginably massive eye of a frog, as if looking at him through the porthole, illuminating his face. Suddenly, he looked at me, opened his mouth as if to say something, but his tongue faltered, the words never forming, and thus, sitting, he fell asleep, resting his head on his arms. I later found Yana on the deck. With an eternally frozen smile on her face, she lay inside a chalk circle she had drawn, with indecipherable symbols,

be they words, runes, or sketches. The frog's eye watched her, watched me, watched the entire ship, bathing it in a yellow light, creating the effect of a sandstorm at dawn. Vibrations coursed through the ship; I felt the boards beneath me shake, the vibrations travelled into my legs, ricocheting up through my bones to my head, resonating through all my organs and ending in my skin, fingertips, eyelids, lips, which tingled as if pinched by static electricity, and I felt something change, as if all the energy that had previously been distributed amongst the crew now concentrated solely within me. Only I remained.

And so, just moments before transmitting this entry, gathering my thoughts, with numb fingers I poured an entire ampoule of Letargine into my glass. The glass stood before me, seeming to gaze back as if trying to communicate, but lacking a mouth, it couldn't; it couldn't ask to be drunk from, emptied, or dipped into with fingers or tongue. I lifted it, looking through the liquid to the porthole, to the distant cosmos beyond, and brought it to my lips. The fluid, seemingly plain water but in fact an elixir of perpetual sleep, filled my mouth, mingling with saliva and the blood from my bitten cheek and tongue, flowing down in a cold stream that sent shivers throughout my body, into my throat and down the oesophagus to my stomach. I coughed, and for a moment thought I would die, choking on a mere glassful, leaving my words unspoken. But the sensation passed. With the log transmitter in hand, I sank into the overly soft mattress, which seemed to engulf me like quicksand, and waited.

Could this be the end? Was the end always within my power? I just took

it upon myself to halt everything: Marius, my team, myself, and, I hope, this cosmic cunt. I simply need to sleep. I feel that just now, having previously been utterly powerless, weak, incapable, and cowardly, I did something that required immense strength from me—a strength I never knew I had. It felt as if it had always been there, lurking in the depths of my consciousness, within the innermost core of my being, only to awaken now, in an act akin to heroism. Above me hangs a responsibility, a massive sphere on a thin thread. Its weight keeps growing, and the thread, ever stretching, never seems to snap. We're all accountable. It's our fault: Gideon's, Chirpmeister's, Yana's, Marius's, mine, and now yours, whoever you might be. If, for any reason, these recordings reach you, I implore with all my heart, please erase it. Eradicate all its digital imprints, wipe it from memory, erase it from reality by any means accessible or inaccessible to you, at whatever cost you're willing or unwilling to bear. For as long as this recording exists, as long as someone can read it, somewhere deep in space something will always be croaking.

End of transmission.

Of Love, Leisure, and Reality checks

nova-nevedoma.com/of-love-leisure-and-reality-checks/

There she walked, unaware that Yakov had a giant snail hidden in his backpack. No ordinary backpack this—with a porthole which Yakov had taken care to curtain off, lest the lady of his heart catch sight of his voice of reason—improper to flash one’s snail before a girl, and what’s more—there’s little proper about possessing such a snail in the first place. The embankment was quiet, armpits sweated with effort, the breeze wafted from the far shore doing nothing to air them out.

—What’s it for?—Licia asked.

—What?

—The cat backpack.

—Why cat...

—That’s what people carry cats in.

—Not just cats. That’s a stereotype, quite common, but still a stereotype.

—What else then? Dogs?

—Documents, books, that sort of things...

—And what do you need those for now?

—What?

—The books.

—What do you mean?

—What are you planning to do with them?

—Me? With the books? I like reading.

—Ah, I see. What do you read?

Holy scriptures, descriptions, prescriptions, manuscripts. The snail in the backpack slept, curled up like a bun. On the bumps that Yakov created with his uneven gait, the bun would bounce slightly and scrape against the hard walls of the backpack. The emergence of turbospiral shells is linked to this form providing maximum strength with equal volume. It's believed that turbospirality is a key factor in forming the asymmetric internal structure of gastropod molluscs. If only she wouldn't wake up and start howling, thought Yakov. Though who would hear her besides him. The flibbertigibbet loves to wake at the most inopportune moment, wiggling her feelers about. What to answer, what to answer!

—Various things, nothing special. Usually nobody's interested.

—Nobody at all? What about me?

—What about you?

—Will you let me read?

—What?

—A book.

—Which one?

—From your backpack.

—Later. We're walking now.

—I can read whilst walking.

—Better later.

—How do you plan to enamour me? Won't even share your literature, uh... What intimacy could we possibly speak of?

Oh, how she howls! How she howls! Not the lady of his heart, but the snail. Not now, but sometimes. At breakfast—begging for food, at lunch—begging for food, at dinner—begging for food, before bed—begging for a stroke. There's a rumble in his ears, like a low-frequency squeal. Does her shell even feel anything? What idiot decided to call a snail's shell "turbo". Oh, how she howls sometimes! There lies Yakov on the sofa, his thumb caressing the lovely faces of potential ladies of his heart, who replace one another on his mobile's screen, appearing from nowhere, immediately flying off into

nothingness. More often to the right, if the eyes, nose, and mouth are in place.

—Mum, mum! The snail's howling again... I don't know what to do... I don't know... I'm going mad!

—Have you fed her, the little snail?

—Mother! What are you on about—of course I fed her!

—How many times a day did you feed her?

—Mother! What are you... Your son isn't some kind of idiot.

—Heaven forbid! How could I have an idiot for a son? Are you an idiot?!

—She eats like there's no tomorrow! And howls! Oh, how she howls! How she howls! Uuuuuuuuu! Like that! Uuu uuu uuu!

—Don't get agitated! Quiet, peaceful, and you leave her alone, that's why she howls. Of course! Anyone would howl. I would howl. Oh, what a wastrel you are... What I've brought upon myself! Where would she be without you, Yasha? You don't want to sit alone yourself, but you leave her alone. But besides that, when will you introduce me to your bride? Where is she, your chosen one? Eh?

To the right, mum, to the right, they're all to the right, always to the right, where else would they be? And I, by some mysterious confluence

of circumstances, the roots of which seem to lie somewhere in the fundamental laws of the universe—am on the left. Even now, being in more than real circumstances, Licia was on the right and Yakov was on the left, despite the fact that, since they've met, they both at some point ended up on each other's right, even though from a Euclidean geometry perspective this was absolute hopeless nonsense. Cupid's virtual worlds seemed to work differently—through a point not lying on some line, at least two lines passed lying in the same plane with that line and not intersecting it, and two objects could end up to the right of each other! Yakov, of course, dreamed of a more Euclidean positioning of objects, for example, top-bottom.

—I don't like walking on the left. It would be very strange for me to like walking on the left, seeing as I'm left-handed,—she says and squeezes Yakov's hand in hers, dry, firm, cold, such that goosebumps spreaded from the point of contact across his whole body.—You're right-handed, aren't you?

—Right-handed.

—See, and everyone around is left-handed, including me. Don't know a single right-handed person besides you. Would it be comfortable for you to walk on the left side, holding me with your non-dominant hand, knowing that the hand you're holding is also non-dominant. What nonsense...

—Nonsense indeed...

—Who came up with this idea that two people holding hands should both use their non-dominant hands? If you're both left-handed, however you stand, you end up with some kind of muddle, like parts that don't fit together. But us... Look,—she stretched their hands forward.—Perfect match. How do these people do anything together with two non-dominant hands, I do wonder...

—Must be terribly uncomfortable.

—Fie and feh.

—Are your hands always this cold?

—What makes you think they're cold? It's yours that's hot. Are you sweating?

—Me? No. Why would I be sweating?

—Nervous?

—No.

—But you should be. It would be strange not to be nervous. Are you strange?

—Don't know.

—Strange, definitely strange. A non-strange person would know, but you—you don't know, which is strange in itself, and then there's this backpack. But these are trifles, the main thing is you're right-handed.

—Why is that the main thing?

—Everyone's left-handed, but you're right-handed. I'm left-handed, and you're right-handed. When I saw you were right-handed, I understood everything.

—What did you understand?

—They say in the Southern Hemisphere everyone's right-handed, even the water in the sink spirals the other way and snails' shells.

Something jolted inside. Yakov stopped. As if on alert, blood drained from his face in urgent order. His companion frowned, took his other hand.

—Are you alright?—suddenly he found her eyes before him for the first time, for until then he'd lacked the courage to look at them either from embarrassment, or because it too, like the whole situation, seemed somehow improper, or because he was afraid to see something wrong in them, but to his relief, gazing into the abyss, in the impressive black circles on a nutty, almost golden background, he saw only himself, and his reflection that shrugged at him, and by doing so made the siren screaming in his head wail even louder, so he lowered his gaze, where, by what seemed a logical turn of events, he discovered his companion's breasts protruding from the triangular neckline of her blouse, identical to those he'd had the pleasure of observing in her profile. He saw no reflection there, but became even more embarrassed and averted his gaze.

Meanwhile, a question was spinning in his head—what next? What to answer? How to twist away from conversations about snails? Snails aren't interesting at all! Why would a girl be interested in snails? If only he could ask his snail now. That's for certain, she would know, she knew everything, never doubted, worked without delay and would surely advise. Unfortunately, his snail's operating principle wasn't telepathic, unlike some other breeds which, through constant telepathic connection created by snails during mating, allowed the construction of a pasilalinic-sympathetic network for instantaneous, wireless communication at a distance, many times faster and more reliable than the backward internet that Yakov had to use every day, albeit with great enthusiasm. His snail possessed, if the author's memory serves, "binary gastrosophism", where after eating and digesting any information, such a snail, having passed it through its unique digestive system—where food is ground by the radula, passes through the oesophagus into the stomach and is processed by liver enzymes—would produce only a single, unappealable conclusion, completely cutting off the very possibility of other interpretations existing. In other words, if, for example, you take a book or article or letter or simply write a question on paper and feed it to her, you could get an unambiguous answer "yes" or "no", truth in the first instance, excluding any other mutually exclusive truths. The nuance was only that what the question is, such is the answer, therefore, through active use of the snail, Yakov learned to ask perfect questions, such that he himself could never answer, such that their number increased with each day.

—“Is this question true?”—he wrote on paper and with trembling hand extended it to the snail. She raised her feelers, like a dog its tail, felt the paper with her mouth and swallowed it. After a minute or thereabouts the snail secreted slime—light, meaning “yes”. Had it been dark, it would have meant “no”, at least that’s what Yakov thought and his mother agreed with him. Logical, right?

—“Dark—no, light—yes,”—wrote Yakov. The slime came out light.

—Well, mum, what if it’s all the opposite?

—Ask, “Is mother always right?”.

Wrote, asked, got the answer—light.

—Well, there you see. Why do you always need such obvious things explained?

—Nothing obvious about it.

—Ask your father.

—Father, is it true that mother is always right?

—Absolutely certain, it couldn’t be otherwise, even if they said it on television or wrote it in your internets, I’d reckon I was dreaming.

—“Should I believe my parents?”

—“Yes.” (Hereafter we’ll simply use “yes” and “no” to denote the snail’s

answers.)

—“Is the Moon real?”

—“Yes.”

—“Did father deliberately retrain me to be right-handed?”

—“Yes.”

—“Is it true that girls down there are different?”

—“Yes.”

—“Do people avoid me because of my strangeness?”

—“No.”

—“Is my snail smarter than me?”

—“Yes.”

—“Is the Earth flat?”

—“No.”

—“Is it true they inject AIDS into bananas using syringes?”

—“No.”

—“Are all chance meetings actually arranged?”

—“Yes.”

—“Do people really not notice that I wear my socks inside out?”

—“Yes.”

—“Am I handsome?”

—“Yes.”

—“Did I really choose this career or just slide into it because I was afraid to try something else?”

—“Yes.”

—“Did everyone at the party notice how I acted like an idiot?”

—“No.”

—“Should I get braces?”

—“Yes.”

—“Am I wasting my life pretending to be someone I’m not?”

—“Yes.”

—“Is her interest in me pity?”

—“No.”

—“Does mum love me?”

—“Yes.”

—“Lenin lived?”

—“Yes.”

—“Lenin lives?”

—“Yes”

—“Lenin will live?”

—“No.”

—“Will I ever become who I wanted to be as a child?”

—“No.”

—“Is my insecurity noticeable to others?”

—“No.”

—“Does everyone get a boner on public transport?”

—“Yes.”

—“Do I push people away with my suspiciousness?”

—“Yes.”

—“Is my paranoia about others’ attention a defence mechanism?”

—“Yes.”

—“Was I teased at school more than I remember?”

—“No.”

—“Do people who show interest in me always have hidden motives?”

—“No.”

—“Is everyone as randy as I am?”

—“Yes.”

—“Is my entire ‘self’ built on conflict avoidance?”

—“Yes.”

—“If my ‘self’ is the set of all my ‘selves’ (including all my roles, states, thoughts, feelings, memories and manifestations), should this set include the very all-encompassing ‘self’ that is this set, and if yes - doesn’t this inclusion create a new meta-self aware of this inclusion, which in turn must also be included, creating an infinite recursion, and if no - isn’t this all-encompassing self also one of my ‘selves’ which, by definition, must be included in the set of all my ‘selves’?”

—“Yes.”

—“Is my willy smaller than average?”

—“No.”

—“Does God exist?”

“Haha, lol, lmao,” the snail could have answered, but simply digested the question completely and gave no answer at all. No, the snail wasn’t a coward or an agnostic, neither was it against her natural instructions that prohibited going into so-called “problematic” areas, where answers could cause harm to someone— no, just ask properly, for fuck’s sake, and you’ll get a proper answer.

—No comment, as they say,—Yakov raised his eyes to his companion and feigned a smile, his gaze once again sliding over her décolletage.

Licia’s hitherto radiant face seemed to cloud with bewilderment, her eyebrows slowly undulated, eyes frowned, lips compressed, a barely noticeable cluster of wrinkles erupted on her forehead. She, being almost the same height as Yakov, pulled him towards her, trying to straighten his spine curving into an arc and see his face (“Is he lying or not? And if he is lying, so what? First date is like a job interview. Satisfy all the stated requirements? Nope, impossible. Maybe he’s having a stroke? Maybe his blood sugar dropped? Blood drained from his brain to somewhere lower? Mmmm... Poor thing’s nervous. Well, not a problem, I’m nervous too, though I don’t show it. No point flashing your nervousness—improper. Need to walk with a stone face, maybe smile a little, prattle on endlessly so others won’t think you’re nervous about anything. Because when you’re saying something, the thoughts in your head seem to go quiet. But what difference does it make? As if people around understand a thing—they just pass these words through

themselves like through a sieve and hear something completely different, what they want to hear”).

—You know, I’m very curious,—Licia said softly.—Everything interests me. Yes, really everything interests me. Pathologically curious, even crazy in the head, I’d say. Like a cat. I poke my nose everywhere, whether invited or not.

—Yes? That’s good.

—Uh-huh. But it’s not good. Well... It is but it’s not. Oh, it’ll come back to bite me one day. I need an answer to everything, understand? Without an answer I get aroused, like sexually. I’d do everything: climb the walls, bite my elbows, claws, peel off my skin, start grinding my teeth. Look how worn down they are,—she said, smiling with all thirty-two.

—I wouldn’t say so.

—You’d need a “before and after” photo. You’d see everything. You know, I love to bite, I need healthy, sharp teeth for biting. When I was little, I dreamed of becoming a shark. Not the one you’re thinking of now but a cookie-cutter, small, with a round mouth, very sharp teeth. That’s what I want. But, silly me, wore them all down. Ah...

—Sharpen them.

—With what?

—Don't know. A sharpener?

—A sharpener?

—For sharpening teeth.

—I'll end up with no teeth at all that way. Thought about getting diamond implants, but it's rather expensive.

—Yes?

—Uh-huh. Very expensive. Diamonds aren't cheap, you know, but they're very durable. Let's go eat. Steak, I want steak, want to bite. Oh, how my teeth are itching!

The restaurant on the embankment was so empty they even seated them by the window and promised a discount as some of their first customers. While Licia went to powder her nose, Yakov navigated through the jungle of the menu, consisting of eighty-four types of meat brought to City T from around the world, starting with beef, ending with the currently fashionable laboratory-grown mammoth meat. The waiter lurked somewhere to the side, trying not to draw undue attention whilst remaining visible, and meanwhile smiled somewhat sinisterly, as if plotting something. Probably thinking which steak to suggest, and the more expensive, the better, wants to fleece us, or me, Yakov reasoned, bastard. Meanwhile, the smile on the face of the waiter, half-hidden around the corner, stretched wider and wider, almost reaching his ears, while his eyebrows became almost vertical, gathering a huge lump of

skin on the bridge of his nose. If only I could ask the snail what to choose, which steak do I want? Don't want anything, actually not hungry at all, but must choose something, because it would be strange if she eats and I don't—improper. Or doesn't it matter? Snail-snail, is it normal not to eat in the presence of a girl on the first date and just watch how she eats, drink water, watch how she cuts the steak, how the sauce runs down her lips? Well say something, at least howl in response, snail-snail, presto chango, hocus pocus, open sesame. The main thing is to keep her mouth occupied, so she stays quiet. Oh, how much she talks! How much she talks! Doesn't shut up. But how well and pleasantly she talks, if only one didn't have to answer. I don't know! I know nothing!

Licia returned, plopped onto the chair, dove into the menu, immediately chose something, seemingly without thinking at all, just whispering “oh, I want this”, and straightened up in her chair, smiled, folded her hands waiting for the waiter.

—Le steak de mammouth, well-done,—she blurted out to the waiter who hadn't even managed to open his mouth.

—Excellent choice-s. And you, young man?—asked the waiter.

—I'll have the same.

—Also well-done?

—No, no, absolutely not. Medium-rare.

Boot sole, thought Yakov, boot sole, she's eating laboratory boot sole!

—Splendid-s!—the waiter hissed through his teeth.—And what would you-s like to drink-s?

—Let's have wine, a bottle,—said Licia.

—Let's indeed! Excellent choice-s.

—And water.

—What water would you-s prefer-s? Plain, with bubbles-s? We have a phenomenal-s selection of water-s, young people-s. Local spring? Alpine? Scottish? We have a barrel of fresh drilling straight from Peru—excellent-s water-s, young people-s.

—Can I have tap water?—asked Yakov.

—Not recommended-s.

—Then let's have fresh drilling, why not.

—Excellent choice-s. Two le steak de mammoth, well-done and medium rare, a bottle of some random wine and a bottle of Peruvian fresh drilling water... All correct-s?

—Correct-s,—answered Yakov.

The corners of the waiter's mouth joined at the back of his head and he hurried to withdraw, so quickly that Yakov thought there hadn't been

any waiter at all.

Licia was silent and smiled with closed mouth, her eyes shone, and her face seemed to express bliss (seemed, yes). The silence grew louder, causing thoughts to flash in Yakov's head. Snail-snail, is it normal to be quiet? Snail-snail, why is she smiling, what does it mean? No, not like that... Is that true that if she's smiling, she likes me? Snail-snail, can you even bite a well-done steak? Is it normal if she likes that? Is it true that mammoth meat might be infected with an ancient virus? Licia meanwhile seemed not to give a toss about the awkwardness of the situation. She only occasionally moistened her lips with her tongue.

—Well, tell me something,—she said, exhaling.

—Me?

—Well not the waiter. What an ugly mug he is, just look,—she added in a whisper and nodded towards the waiter.—That mouth... Horrible. Good thing you're not ugly.

—Not ugly?

—Nope. Not at all.

Dry in the throat, oh how dry. Yakov gathered saliva in his mouth and swallowed.

—Really?

—Of course. Would I lie to you? I'm generally a very direct and honest person. So how are you in bed?

—Me?

—Well not the waiter, ugh. I wonder what he can do with his mouth, though.

Horror, thought Yakov, what horror. Snail-snail, am I good in bed? Armpits were sweating, thankfully the air conditioning somewhat reduced the heat of passion.

—Me? Not bad.

—Not bad?

—Not bad. Standard. No deviations.

—How's that? For example?

—What?

—Well I'm curious.

—Eh? I mean without deviations.

—Ah... "without". Don't worry, that's fixable. Tell me a secret. Yes, a secret. Yes, any secret. About yourself, about anything. Just one secret, no more no less.

Yakov's eyes took on a form of pity, such as a freezing puppy usually

has. He looked into her eyes, averted his gaze to the water that appeared from nowhere on the table, took a greedy gulp, and with a suspicious look leaned across the table towards Licia. She leaned in response, preparing her ear for whispers, enhancing, so to speak, the effect of the ear shell with her palm.

—Lenin won't live...

Licia gasped, which formed a vacuum around the table.

—What's that supposed to mean?—she hissed, leaning towards Yakov.—How come?

—Just so...

—Is it true?

—Verified, yes.

—Can't be.

—Unfortunately...

—How do you know?

—That's... that's another secret. Can't say. Secret,—he shook his head.

She looked at him for a long time, scratching one cheek with her left hand, placing the right on her neck, then said:

—You know what else I love about you?

Yakov shook his head.

—Everything interests me...

With a clink, two wine glasses materialised on the table, Licia, interrupting herself, immediately sucked down half.

—My curiosity... it...—Licia pondered, then whispered.—It's like a drug, but an odd one. The one I don't want to take, only want to want to take.

—How's that?

—In our world, however strange it might be, you can learn everything—about the present, about the past, about what exists, about what's made up, about the neighbour across the road, about a bug on a distant planet. Much of it is untrue, of course, but you can learn it, and for me, given my curiosity, life becomes unbearable. At some point you realise you can't live without all those answers, and your brain keeps asking and asking, howling and howling, oh, how it howls, you can't imagine. It's very exhausting when you can get an answer to any question, in some sense even deadly so.

—Yes?

—You can drown in information for days, not eat, not sleep, until you drop dead, yes. So, I decided for myself to be more careful with it. I said to myself that I know enough already and would prefer the universe to shut up.

—Is that so...

—You, though...

—What about me?

—You're like a spy, staying silent, not giving away any of your secrets, not sharing literature as if... I don't know. At first I thought, well, what nonsense, what kind of person is this, how can one be like that and still turn up for a date?

—Yes? You really thought that?

—But then I decided it's even better! You know, if you were mute, I'd like you even more. I'd sit and ask you all sorts, and you wouldn't answer me, just make eyes like a proper spy, nod or shake your head. And I'd be beside myself, shaking like in withdrawal, everything would itch inside me like a numb limb that you want to scratch and scratch and scratch and scratch for hours,—she rolled her eyes from imaginary pleasure, which she seemed to experience for real.—Gives me goosebumps.

Yakov had almost forgotten about the snail, and it suddenly started to howl. Uuuuuuuuu uuu uuuu, and this long “u” (more similar perhaps to the Turkic “ü”) caught him by surprise like an electric shock so he nearly knocked over his glass with his hand. Licia startled, leaned towards him, took his hand.

—Are you alright?

—Me? Yes, no, don't know. I'll, um, pop to the gentleman's room.

—Where?

—To the loo. I'll be quick,—took his backpack and strode straight ahead, but not where he should have, for the toilet was in the other direction, which the smiling-with-all-his-thirty-two-(or-more)-teeth waiter helpfully pointed out.

—Leaving already-s? Toilet's over there-s.

He turned around, met Licia's gaze, nervously nodded to her.

—I'll be quick.

The gents room, to his great fortune, had a changing table, which Yakov unfolded, placed his backpack on it and pulled out a shell the size of a good melon with a snail's face sticking out of it with wiggling feelers and what seemed like smacking mouth, resembling at that moment the mouth of a leech. The snail crawled out of its house and stared at Yakov, who was frantically searching his pockets for a pen and paper, managed to find the former, clicked it several times, grabbed a toilet paper and prepared to write. The question didn't form, rather even resisted formation! Uuuuuu uuuu! What to ask? What to ask? Do I like her? Obvious, right? Or not? Or not obvious? Uuuu uuu uuuuuu uuu uuuuuuu uu! She's playing with me, definitely playing, thinks I'm a strange mute who can't string two words together, just yesing and whating and howing. Uuuuuu uuu uuu uuuuuuuuu uuu uuuuuuuu uuu!

What then? Will it rain this evening? What difference does it make! Will a box of condoms be enough? What? What to ask? Uuuuu uuuuuu uuuu uu uuuuuu uuu uuu uuu u! Faster-faster, write the question! She's waiting, you idiot, what an idiot you are! Uuuuuuuuu uuuu!

While Licia sent sauced pieces of steak into her mouth and chewed them (oh how she chewed them), Yakov sat silently beside her with an empty glass and poked at the mammoth with his fork. The gently-red oozing cut gave him no peace. His fears were confirmed and he couldn't simply ignore them. He shifted his gaze to Licia and began observing her until she noticed it and froze with a full mouth, looking around.

—Eh?—she swallowed the steak.—Why aren't you eating?

—Just not hungry.

—Eat anyway.

—Don't want to.

—Through the don't want. You'll need strength soon.

Yakov plunged his fork deep into the meat and screeched metal against the plate, making his ear twist and the skin on his neck, nape and back shrivel.

—Want me to tell you a secret?

Licia frowned and perked up.

—Go on, tell.

—Not a secret, more just an interesting fact.

—Well?

—Well, in mammoth meat, you know, there might live an ancient virus.

—Is that the secret?

—Just learned recently, verified information.

—Pfff, I already know that.

—Yes?

—Why do you think I asked for well-done?

Embarrassment pounced on Yakov as if he'd said something completely improper. Did he do anything improper at all? Since she knows everything anyway maybe just ask her? ("What's he thinking about? What's in his head? Is there anything more interesting than one's own mind, other than the mind of the opposite sex? You want to see everything but at the same time you want to avert your gaze. No, not from an attack of modesty or impropriety, but because the secret might suddenly collapse, the curtain fall. Will you see something wrong there, some mind-bending Truth or repulsive horror? Doesn't matter—there will be no more curtain, no possibility to speculate, no arousing

mystery. Ugh...”).

Here they were again on the embankment. It smelled of silt, fish, river, humid evening, humid reveries, phantasmagoria of distant city lights. Licia’s hand was finally warm. Here they were in the lift, the careless attitude of the building’s inhabitants towards public property cut their noses and eyes, Licia shrugged ironically, Yakov shrugged in response. Here they were on the sofa, the backpacked snail howling in the hall, windows in the living room curtained from the blinding sunset. Dark, what they were doing there couldn’t be seen.

He desperately wanted to touch her cheek, for some reason specifically her cheek, he couldn’t explain why and kept asking himself, drilling his brain with this question. Is touching a cheek normal? Snail-snail, why specifically the cheek? Can I touch her shoulder? Her collarbone? He reached his hand towards her face, but she brushed it away, as one brushes away the ticklish touch of a feather.

—Hand here,—sounded a soft half-whispering voice.

—Where?—sounded a rougher voice, slightly trembling.

—Right here.

—Here?

—Yes, here.

Why here? Why not there? Or not somewhere else? Here? Is it normal,

snail? He was being scanned, processed with intent, as one processes a bush with pesticide spray against insect pests—all of him, from head to toe. He was a life model, and the artist or sculptress opposite was about to draw him or sculpt him or perhaps sculpt something from him. What’s she looking for in me? What’s so special? Just a regular person, nothing unusual. Work, read books, hang about, do nothing. Snail-snail, are we people? Is she a woman, am I a man? Or is it all different, all another way, in another geometric plane. Is she a ray, am I a chuckle? Is she a cloud, am I purple? What? No, what nonsense, you can’t ask such questions.

—Those who fear their genitals won’t be offered a place in heaven.

—Who said that?

—Our dear Lord, who else?

—He said that? For real?

—He did, didn’t you know? Hmm...

—I knew. Of course, I knew. Just wanted to check.

—Right, we’ll start with him then,—she says breathily.—Does God exist?

—Errr...

In his head were only “uuu” and “uuu”, growing. It’s started, it’s begun!

Not now!

—Quiet, don't answer...—whispered the voice again, clothes rustled.—Now here. Stroke.

—But... I...

Uuuuuuuuuuu...

—Are you afraid of your genitals? Of my genitals?

—Uh...

Uuuuuuuuu...

—I said quiet. Stroke. Oh...

—...

Uuuuuuuuuuu...

—Do you like me? But shhh. Right here.

—...

—Think this is all someone's dream? Mine, yours or hers?

—Whose?

Uuuuuuu!

—Shh! You got everything with you? Nod. Stop! No, don't nod. I said

let's have no answers. I want only to ask so no one dares answer.
Answers wear me out. Mmm...

Uuuuuuuuu!

—What did you dream of before you learned it was shameful?

—...

—When did you realise everyone around lies? Get undressed.

—Already?

—It's late already.

—Late in time or...?

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!

—Shh! Unbutton.

—I...—Uuuuuuuuuuu!—I need to step out.

And in his ears and between his ears it buzzed, between the convolutions it was as if a brass orchestra was warming up. Yakov slipped away from the living room, snatched his backpack, hid in the bathroom, turned on the light, discovered his squinting self in the reflection.

—I'll be quick!—he shouted.

Is everything alright? One muscle smaller than the other. One shoulder higher than the other. Left or right? Pen, pen, need a pen. He quietly, trying not to make noise with the zip, opened his backpack and put it on the cabinet before the bath. From inside the snail was already looking at him, her head protruding from the shell and moving her feelers, her maw agape. Uuuuuuu, she howled, oh, how she howled! Uuuuuunbearable! And still, she's a woman, but is he a man, in the sense of a proper bloke, a real macho? His accursed appendage blazed with greedy animal desire, begged to be set free. Let me out, it screamed at him, let me out! Is it really time, snail? Really time? Maybe later? Not proper, right? On the first date. Can't, can't, in Non-Euclidean geometry she's a woman, I'm a stone with thoughts that she doesn't even want to hear. Yes, snail? Or no? Well say something. There was no pen, no paper either, there were only questions, some of them rhetorical but Yakov couldn't separate them from the whole set. What indeed is a rhetorical question? A question that has no answer? A question that one isn't supposed to answer, improper, uuuuuuuunbefitting a cultured person to answer? Is there a difference between the presence of an answer and the impossibility of voicing it? Uuuuu uuu uuuu UUU UUU UUUUUU! He looked at his appendage, at his reflection, at the snail, at the the silhouette of Licia appearing when he closed his eyes. Who am I, snail? A man, not a man? Tell me! Tell me! And Yakov imagined how he would take the snail from the backpack, how with trembling hands he would unholster the appendage and stick it right into the snail's mouth, pushing deeper, right to the end, so it would be certain, so it would be sure, so it would be true, and she, gastropod with

binary gastrosophism, would bite off his appendage in an instant. Chomp—and it's gone! Yakov would suppress his scream, writhe in agony, blood gushing from his groin. The snail would digest the organ, and after a minute light slime would come out of it. Yes, must be yes. But no, what nonsense, such an ending to the story would be rather strange. Tell me, would Yakov in his right mind and body do such a thing? Yes or no?

This story is my submission to [the Soaring Twenties Symposium](#). The monthly theme was "Leisure".

Twisted Lullaby I-V

nova-nevedoma.com/twisted-lullaby/



“Consoler of monsters” by Kazimierz Stabrowski

I

I run after the clouds, and they run after me. We run together, neither falling behind. The sun must be hiding behind them, the sun loves to hide, it's quite good at hiding, it hides every night. Night and day are alike now. They're just like little brother and little sister. Like you and me. The clouds are black, thick, heavy, hanging all the way to the ground like an old holey hammock or a thick net. Mosquitoes get stuck in nets, and in clouds, sunbeams get stuck, in clouds, we get stuck. Aren't you cold, little brother? Don't be scared, we're almost there. Your eyes are as blue as the sky, which can't be seen when the sun is hiding, and it's always hiding. I know, even though I can't see it, that the sea is just as blue as your eyes. Fish swim in the sea, wiggling their tails, splashing about. Jellyfish swim in the sea too, they are poisonous and don't splash at all. If you touch them, or if they touch you, your skin will peel off and you'll be left with nothing at all, not even “skin and bones,” but maybe just “only bones.” I don't know what would happen if a jellyfish touched a bone—children's books don't write about such things, and grown-up ones probably don't either, because maybe nothing would be left. It would be super cool to check, but not on yourself; they say you don't show or test on yourself, although really you always end up showing and testing everything on yourself, and learning to fall without it hurting, and learning to walk so you don't fall, and finding a way

through the forest so you don't get lost, and getting lost in a way that you don't fall and it doesn't hurt and you can keep going, because otherwise you'll fall on your knees, scrape your skin, as if the whole earth were covered in jellyfish, and then it hurts to walk, just like that, even when you're not falling, because you've already fallen recently, and your knees are now all scraped up and bruised, and they ache and sting. Your eyes also sting from the smoke, like, probably, from sea salt in seawater, so it feels like you want to cry for no reason, but tears themselves are salty, like seawater, but they don't sting. First something stings, and then they run. Smoke makes your nose sting and your tongue bitter, but your skin feels nothing, absolutely nothing, no stinging, no pain, it just gets a bit darker, but maybe that's just how it seems, or rather, how it "feels," just like with the sun—you can't see it, but you "feel" it setting, rising, going round and round us, throwing its rays on your skin, which makes it tan—magic! And if you tan too much, it'll sting, just like from a jellyfish, as if the rays and the sun itself are also made of jellyfish, like everything else.

When I was really little, I was afraid of the dark, super-duper afraid, so afraid that I wanted to poke my eyes out with plastic scissors, but then I thought that it would probably be even darker and even scarier, so I changed my mind, and it's good that I changed my mind, because I stopped being afraid right away, and now I'm not afraid at all, even the opposite—I like it. From such darkness, nothing can be seen and you can't feel how much of it is left, this darkness. It feels like it will end any minute, the clouds, left alone, will run away, the sun will unhide, and

we'll lie on the ground and get a suntan, but not too much, so we don't burn up completely and turn to ashes, like everything else, and the wind will pick us up and blow us all over the place and all over the earth like fluffy dandelions. Maybe then you and I will grow right where we need to grow, we'll just pop up, climb out of the ground where needed, and where not needed too—everywhere, we'll fill up everything, and we won't need to go anywhere, because we'll already be everywhere we need to be, and where we don't need to be too. The main thing is to step carefully, so you don't fall. From bumpy-bump to bumpy-bump, like this, like a little goat. And you're not heavy at all, even light, and I'm very strong, which makes you even lighter, which makes me even stronger, and you even lighter, and me even stronger, and we both help each other this way. There, where we're going, we won't need to help each other, there'll be loads of other helpers, just like me and you, just like both of us. Others aren't allowed in there, others aren't trusted anymore, others should help themselves until they're completely helped, but they probably won't manage because they always argue with each other, which, there where we're going, is super-duper forbidden or something terrible will happen, like, don't be scared, but if you argue, something awful will happen to you, those people will come and take you far away to these people, you'll live with them, argue with them, it will sting and be dark, and there'll be no sea, no sun, no flying dandelions, so you need to live nicely together, so that nothing stings, so it's bright from the sun and from everything around, and dandelions bloom, and never fade and never fly away just anywhere, but are always where they should be. Then there won't be any black-very-black city

with a black-very-black street, with a black-very-black house, where very nasty people live who always argue and don't want to live nicely together. They're silly-billies, total silly-billies, they don't understand such easy things, they're to blame for everything, and we have nothing to do with it, we didn't do anything, we were few years old, and still are not many, much fewer, so few that I stopped counting, because what if I forget how many years you and I are, then they will also forget and stop seeing us and won't be able to chase us, to them we'll just become little people of small size, looking at everything from the ground up, so tiny that we can't even be noticed, we'll just disappear and be on our own, nicely together.

II

There once was a little boy who one day stabbed his teacher with scissors, which, even though they were plastic, were sharp and dangerous enough to stab the teacher, which he did. The world wrapped her in jellyfish, she got stung from the inside and outside, warm liquid, that's blood, flowed from her, and then she got quiet and stopped arguing, promising that she would never argue again. Or maybe it wasn't a boy at all, but the teacher herself who went crazy, argued with herself, and stabbed herself with scissors (it happens), and the boy cried, he was also stinging, also from inside and outside, but not from tears, from something else. He was really tiny, weak, not good at living and couldn't stab anyone with scissors, especially plastic ones, which are

usually used to cut coloured paper, to make a collage, for example, a picture of dandelions against a blue sea or blue sky, depending on where they grow—on a hill beyond which is the sea, or below a hill beyond which is still the sea, but you just can't see it. He wanted to spend his whole life making just these kinds of collages, cutting coloured (blue, green, yellow, white) paper with plastic (pink) scissors and sticking pieces together until a picture appeared, which he could show to his big sister, who still were little, and she would say “good job” and suggest making more, more and more, because collages are never enough. But one day something terrible happened, or actually, nothing terrible happened at first, it happened later, after the boy found a blind kitten in the school yard. It was definitely blind, because it couldn't see the boy, just mewed and walked in completely different and weird directions, which led nowhere, not into the boy's arms, not anywhere else, as if the kitten was just lost in the dark. Its eyes were not at all kitty-like, without the opening-closing black door on a yellow background, but looked like two sparkly and rainbow-y pearls, which usually (if you look hard) can be found in shells by the river, in which jellyfish might swim too, but small ones, because the river is quite shallow, and there would just be no room for big jellyfish to swim. The kitten, must not have gone into the river, where other unwanted kittens go, because it couldn't see where to go, but stayed on the shore and dug up shells in the sand with those very pearls, which were exactly like the eyes of the blind kitten. Anyway, the kitten and the pearls found each other, and the boy then found this kitten. He took it in his arms, hid it inside his jacket and carried it to school, because right then he was going from home to school, not the

other way around, on the black-very-black asphalt in the opposite direction to the buzzing cars, because his parents had taught him to walk to school exactly like that, so that these buzzing cars could always be seen, and so they would never sneak up from behind and attack him. It was still really early, but, even so, the teacher, seeing the kitten, began to argue, shout, why did he bring it, that school was no place for kittens, especially blind ones, who would now look after this kitten (to which the boy honestly said that he would himself), who would feed it, give it milk, keep it and with what, not a brass, because he's still a boy, he doesn't have a brass and can't have any, to which the boy replied that he had enough brass that this teacher had never count in her life, but such an answer didn't make the teacher happy, she ordered the boy to get rid of the kitten, take it back to where he had brought it from, and, maybe, take it to the same river where they take other kittens. And what happened next, I don't want to tell you, you already know it anyway.

III

They ran together over bumpy-bumps, over bumpy-bumps, over little paths, but without going “plop” into a hole, because they carefully went around the holes. Clouds ran after them across the sky, and chasers ran after them across the ground, but they just couldn't catch them properly, because the sky was so low that the clouds completely blocked those running in front from those running behind, and the sun, even though you couldn't see it, still lit up the path for both, but more, of

course, for the first ones, because their shadows fell backwards, in the direction opposite to their running away, leaving the chasers with a bit fewer rays. Somewhere a volcano explosion had happened, or rather, the volcano spat lava, it flowed across the ground in all directions from the volcano, flowed into caves and got hard there, but before that, scared, these very chasers had crawled out of the caves, sat on huge, crocodile-like lizards and rode after the boy and girl over bumpy-bumps, over bumpy-bumps, over little paths, “plop” into a hole, because these lizards rode very messily, always tripping over bumpy-bumps and falling into holes, which made the riders angry and they started arguing with each other and with the lizards and hit them with sticks. The girl and boy didn’t hear or see any of this (they were running far ahead), but they knew for sure that it was happening, like with the sun, which either went down or came up.

And so, on one sunny day, they ran into a doll factory, where dolls weren’t made anymore, because the factory owner had run out of brass to make these dolls and he had nothing to pay the workers of this factory, so they just shrugged their shoulders and went away, leaving their work, not finishing it, leaving the dolls in the factory without owners, without legs and without arms, some even without bodies and heads, and some completely without eyes, because of which these dolls, unlike the workers, couldn’t go anywhere and stayed scattered around this factory on shelves, on the floor, on chairs, piled in corners and falling out of windows, until the girl and boy found them. But the girl and boy couldn’t keep working at the factory, finish all these dolls, or

even take them with them, because they were running and really hurrying to get to that special place and were already very tired (they just couldn't carry that many unfinished dolls, they themselves wouldn't have had enough arms), and they had to leave all the unfinished dolls there, in this ash-covered abandoned factory, through which after days the chasers on lizards would rush and squash the body parts lying everywhere: arms, legs, bodies, heads completely without eyes, not even pearl ones. The lizards, like dogs, would smell out the trail of the girl and boy and run along this trail over bumpy-bumps, over bumpy-bumps, over little paths, "plop" into a hole.

IV

A mean old woman lived in the forest, in the same kind where all such mean old women usually live, as if these forests are grown specially to put all these mean old women in them, just like they plant special areas to grow wolves, foxes, rabbits, bears, and other animals in them. This old woman had a twisted nose, twisted ears, twisted hands, twisted legs, and even twisted eyes, from which came an equally twisted look. She lived in an equally twisted house, built from twisted trees, which grew everywhere in this twisted black-very-black forest.

In the mornings, until about lunchtime, the mean old woman taught life to children who weren't mean, didn't argue with each other, loved kittens, and wanted to live nicely together. So, by chance it happened

that this old woman was a teacher by job. In the morning she would come out to a dark clearing, surrounded by twisted trees, and her twisted look would run around looking for someone she could teach about life. Sometimes the old woman felt that she herself didn't know anything, hadn't seen anything in life, hadn't read books, hadn't made collages, hadn't seen real jellyfish and huge, crocodile-like lizards, which eat unripe, still yellow dandelions, and she didn't want to teach anyone, but she had nowhere else to go, because, as I already said, she didn't know how to do anything else at all and exactly because of this she was mean and twisted, or maybe it was the opposite—she didn't know anything because she was mean and twisted, but if she had woken up in the morning, gone out to the clearing and become nice and untwisted, she would have learned everything right away, but she wouldn't do this for some reason, probably out of habit. When she was little, the old woman also dreamed of all sorts of things like making collages, for example, working at a factory that made unfinished dolls, which was right nearby, just behind the forest where she lived, but then she suddenly found out that this factory had been closed for some unknown reason, and she became mean and twisted.

That's how it sometimes happens, and sometimes it happens that a boy and a girl suddenly find themselves in a forest and, even though they can see where to go, still get lost there, but suddenly find a hut on twisted legs, where that very twisted old woman lives and waits for them to teach them about life.

Boy-boy, says the old woman in a twisted voice, you have such blue

eyes, just like the sky, just like the sea, and you look just like a doll, even if quite a finished one. Boy-boy, says the old woman (and she's not only all twisted, but also wears a red dress with a red hood, covering all her face, except for big, black pearl-like eyes), do you want me to feed you and your sister a yummy dinner? And the boy says nothing, he's scared, only his sister speaks for him, who is older and stronger, who understands everything right away—the old woman is very mean and very twisted, you can't have dinner with her, you need to run, but they can't run, because the old woman has already sat them at the table, put out this promised yummy dinner on plates, handed out spoons and fancy bibs and closed the door to the hut.

We don't want to.

What do you mean you don't want to?

We want to go, but we don't want to eat, old woman, we should be running now, it's late, chasers are following us.

You're not going anywhere until you eat.

We don't want to.

What kind of word is that "don't want to"? There's no such word.

But such a word definitely existed, the girl knew it for sure, and the boy knew it too, even though he was frightened and seemed to have forgotten everything. There was no way out, they had to run, thought the girl, grabbed a knife from the table and ordered the old woman to

open the door, or else she would have to stab the old woman, even though she really didn't want to argue, and really wanted to live nicely together, but in one of her hands was already a knife, which was not at all plastic, and in the other hand was the hand of her little brother, which she squeezed as hard as she could. The mean old woman had to agree, because she didn't want warm liquid, that's blood, to flow from her and for her to be wrapped in stinging jellyfish, because the girl, even though she was small, was strong and looked scary, so scary that the old woman had to let both the girl and the boy go.

At nights, before sleep, she still believed that the factory for finishing unfinished dolls would someday open, but kept on being mean and twisted just in case it didn't.

V

Either the holes were around the bumpy-bumps, or the bumpy-bumps were in the middle of the holes, and they looked like craters, as if someone had cried for a very long time with stinging tears, which ate away the earth, like skin from the touch of jellyfish, and that's how bumpy-bumps with holes were made, over which the girl and boy ran.

She always said something, and he always kept quiet about something. If Goddie were a child, like him, her little brother, then he would definitely think that they were blind kittens, running in a confusing and weird direction, and would definitely take them in his arms and carry

them to school, where he would have to meet with a mean and twisted teacher and argue with her. If Goddie were a child, he would completely forget that he was goddie, and spend all day making unfinished collages with sky, sun, and grass, but at one wonderful moment he would run out of yellow paper and would have to make dandelions already ripe, completely white, and the sun also ripe and white, so bright that you could see it even through black-very-black clouds. He would spend all his days making just these kinds of collages and nothing more, no magic, nothing else like that. After a while, he would forget how to make it, magic, because he was too busy with collages and looking for yellow paper, which there was never enough of, because everyone in the class wanted yellow, unripe dandelions, and nobody wanted white and ripe ones, which fly around everywhere. Yellow dandelions are heavy, the wind doesn't blow them away, but white ones are super light, weigh nothing, like jellyfish, and the wind carries them away, scatters them around the world, to all its corners, whether it's a field full of bumpy-bumps, or a twisted forest, full of twisted trees and mean old women, and everything around starts to sting. If Goddie were a child, he wouldn't let his kittens get hurt, would chase away the lizards that eat dandelions, and would save his, even if mean, teacher from plastic scissors, because he would be both Goddie and a child at the same time. But for some reason, not a single child in the world was Goddie, and not a single Goddie in the world was a child. Everyone around was grown-up, looking from somewhere above and for some reason couldn't see anything, even not being blind kittens, and lived in twisted huts in black-very-black twisted forests. And the girl kept running with

her little brother and thinking, why are you always quiet? Stop being quiet, I'm completely bored with running.

The Doomsday Button

nova-nevedoma.com/the-doomsday-button/

In grandfather's garage did Savely find a button, which upon pressing hard enough could destroy the entire world. Happened it thusly:

Savely had a childhood → this childhood was given him by his parents → someone amongst these parents also had parents, at least several, one of them being by coincidence Savely's grandfather → this grandfather had a village, or rather he lived there, meaning in some sense he belonged to the village → as did a garage, which belonged both to the village and to grandfather, an enormous-ginormous garagery, a garagello even, one might say → in this grandfather's garagello everything there could be found and everything could be lost → but Savely was no fool, lost nothing, found lots, including this very button.

The button was dusty, red, round, or rather "cylindrical", attached to a rust-coloured base: clearly no one had used it for ages. However, upon the button itself were scratches, notches, knots and splinters, worn and smoothed edges, indicating that once upon a time it had indeed been most actively used. To press it Savely hadn't the strength. He even placed it on the dusty concrete floor and stepped on it — didn't work, jumped on it — effect zero. Perhaps, he thought, probably-presumably, only a grown-up would have strength enough to press it. When he grows up he'll press it proper, but for now... for now circumstances had

thus arranged themselves.

You see, the button had surroundings: old televisions, radio receivers, video players, gramophones, jars of nails, bolts and nuts, originals of great masters' paintings, fishing tackle, an old rusty Moskvich "Combi" without wheels, separately wheels, tyres, carburettors, jerry cans of petrol, paraffin, spirits, sulphuric acid, dozens of crates with all manner of thingamajigs. In one of them, this button lay amongst other uncatalogueable items, which grandfather, by virtue of possessing an uncountable quantity of objects, the limited space of house, and free time in retirement, piled and dumped in the garage and successfully forgot. So at least thought Savely; grandfather remembered everything though: his memory was remarkable.

Grandfather was a poet-mechanic, kept a diary where he wrote down how to fix automobiles and poems, but the poems themselves he wrote nowhere — he memorised them. To recall them, he'd drink a shot or two or three, stand before guests at his birthday party, and for several hours recite from memory. He did it with no scratch, notch, knot, or splinter, though somewhat worn and smoothed, indicating that these poems had indeed been mostly actively used.

— Poems, — grandfather would say, — are like a carburettor from a motor-tiller, a Soviet one, unfixable. All you can do is pour oil on the fire and wait. Perhaps it'll blaze up and the buggger will start. Same thing with motor-tillers, — grandfather would say, and then go to the garage, bring out from there a real actual carburettor from a motor-tiller, all

black, oily, stinking like the oil depot nearby, and tell about why amphibrach and iambic trimeter are worse than anapaest, how everything worked without lumbago and senile short-sightedness, and with larger, bottomless engine capacity.

For little Savely, not yet possessing a sufficient dose of consciousness, entry to grandfather's garage was strictly-utterly forbidden. What if he'd hurt himself, the little lad? What if he'd climb somewhere, get stuck, drink petrol, paraffin, spirits or sulphuric acid, knock a crate with his little foot, end up under an avalanche of the uncatalogueable? In a word, dangerous. Such things are not for children; children are the flowers of life, they must be watered, raised with no knot, no notch, no splinter, no scratch, notch. Well never mind, thought Savely, when I grow up I'll get into the garage and find everything there, even the button I so want to press... but for now... for now one must grow... nothing can be done, one can only wait, sit on/in one's pot like a flower of life, until bloom.

And so we come full circle and return to the moment when Savely had grown a little, gathered courage to climb without permission into the dangerous garage and found the dangerous button. With it he'd become "somebody", cock of the walk in the village, a character exponentially interesting. Everyone wanted to be friends only with the interesting ones, and with the uninteresting they didn't. Friendship is essentially the cultivation of mutual trust through exchange of interestingnesses, including interesting time. Savely had nothing of the sort: no ball, no bicycle, no games console, no pistols, even toy ones — nothing, not

even interesting time. It was as if he himself didn't even exist. But now, look — he existed, and not just existed, but with a button, a buttonzilla, one that not a single flower of life in the vicinity possessed. So he walked about with it demonstrating to everyone, saying look what proper button I have, at the sight of which you have no choice but to forge with me a firm friendship for ages eternal.

— Blimey, — his peers marvelled. — That's quite a contraption.

— I'll say! A thingamabob.

— That's a device alright!

— Nothing more interesting have I seen in my nine years of life!

Throughout all the summer holidays whilst Savely spent time in the village, almost every day one of them would come as a pilgrim to grandfather's garden, to the vegetable patch, to the surrounding area, to meet there with Savely and his mysterious rusty button. Pressing — even touching — the button was strictly-utterly forbidden due to its external decrepitude and wear, for who knows — it might break. In that case, the punishment could be as severe as a thrown nail or a wooden block, a good thrash with a belt, a swearsy poem about vices of childhood, mandatory weeding of the vegetable patch, for you shouldn't, lad, take grandfather's things without asking.

See, Grandfather was kind but strict, with a poet's soul, a mechanic's heart, a poet-mechanic's body, fair but intolerant of mischief of such ilk,

tomfoolery, hooliganism, childish schemes of degenerate suits. Frowning, bushy eyebrows bunching together, he observed the crowds of small fry idly gallivanting about his modest domain. The friendless grandson suddenly with friends, not bad. Savely, besides childhood, grandfather, village, now indeed also had friendship: ball games (one ball for all ball-based entertainments, be it football, volleyball, basketball), guided walks in the forest, gathering of edible berries, watching cartoons on the big neighbour's telly, sly glances from pigtailheaded girlfriends, firm handshakes from aspiring young lads, access to the treehouse, and another couple-triple thousand-million words about exchanges of interestingnesses, all thanks to the rusty button.

Grandfather, however, remembered everything, about his garagello, the crates with the uncatalogueable untouchable, and about the button. Thus it happened, he needed it right now, urgently-importantly: whether a poem wouldn't write, the rhyme refused to lie down, or the vodka had run out, or life had become loathsome, or the motor-tiller wouldn't start in the morning, or the news from the television suddenly became such that clear understanding came — time to press. A day he spent in the garage, rummaging in crates, in cupboards, on shelves, in jerry cans, combed through the rubbish bin, the house, the banya, the garden, the vegetable patch, every corner, every crack in the oak floorboards. Upon such a thorough inspection, he confirmed the button's absence, wasn't thrilled by such a metaphorical blow, accumulated suspicions, mustered Savely in for a reckoning.

— Grandson, tell me now, young lad, have you been in my garagello?

— Haven't been, never, not once. What are you saying, grandfather, I know perfectly well — it's forbidden... Has something happened?

— Not yet. From my entire catalogue I cannot locate in its place but one single item.

— I can help look for it, my dear, beloved grandfather.

Grandfather frowned; grandson trembled, from within, absolutely invisibly, only his neck seized up, the back of his head tensed, as if his spine had weakened.

— Haven't you seen, my grandson, an old button? It's dusty, red, round, or rather "cylindrical", attached to a rust-coloured base, couple of scratches, notches, knots and splinters, worn and smoothed is one of its edges.

Savely only shook his head.

— Haven't seen and haven't taken?

— I haven't seen such a thing. And haven't taken it, what are you saying, grandfather. I? — never.

— This button, Savely, is very important. This button is the doomsday button. If you press it — that's it, curtains, kaput, complete *corps de ballet*, fiasco and tragedy: for you, for me, for your friends and

girlfriends who gallivant here — for everyone and everything at once proper the end, all earthly and essential will sink into Lethe.

— What are you saying, grandfather, how awful. I definitely didn't take such a thing. I'm not even allowed in the garagello...

— You watch yourself... If you took it, I'll sell you to the gypsies, to their camp or circus, and they'll take you, put you in a carriage, take you abroad, for why do I need such-and-such a grandson-thief?

— What are you saying, grandfather...

— You watch yourself, lad... Someone climbed into my garagello, someone found my button. Maybe it was one of those little rascals? You brought them here after all — your pigtailheaded girlfriends, aspiring young lads, all this contingent of yours. If they climbed into my garage — then we must call the police.

— No, what are you saying, grandfather, no need for police, it's definitely something else, it's definitely not them, they're decent, not such-and-such, not thieves, not one bit.

— Ask them, maybe someone's seen my button. I can ask them. Bring them here.

— No need to ask them, grandfather. Maybe you just don't remember it. You are old after all, even if a poet, even if a mechanic, even if a mechanic-poet.

— Poet-mechanic it is. My memory's tip-top, better than before. If you see it — bring it, don't dare press.

Grandfather knew everything, but let it be, waiting for his grandson's moral development. He walked silently about the house, from the window, from the round hole in the shutters kept watch on the children, on Savely, checking if he had the button on him, but Savely had hidden it already, either in the drainpipe, or under the barrel of rainwater, or in his rucksack. To his interesting friends he said — fallen ill, and they went berserk, saying how fallen ill? He answered them, very seriously ill, so seriously that even had to return the button to grandfather. Sat at home, walked in the garden, counted days till September, till departure to the city, to school, to grown-up life. Grandfather still cooked him porridge, made lunch, dinner, peeled apples, cut them into slices, flashing the knife, looking the boy straight in the eyes with suspicion, looking like come on, tell me, I'll forgive everything, just give back the button. Savely only thought about punishment, ashamed that grandfather would find out everything, that parents would find out, would take him to the gypsy court for theft, would give him to the police circus, and he'd remain completely alone, without grandfather, without village, without childhood, without friendship, without parents, without himself even, for why do they all need such-and-such a little boy-thief?

Be it long or be it short, silently, glumly, hunched Savely walked and decided to try again. Got out the button, pressed it with all his might, jumped on it, sat on it, hit it with a brick — nothing, no result,

everything as before: no kaput, no curtains, no corps de ballet, there was only fiasco and tragedy. One way out, forget about it, strike it from reality; years will pass, and it'll be as if there was no garagello, no red and rusty buttonzilla, as if there was no thief-Savely.

Must act, he decided, and did thus:

Went to the shop to buy bread, hiding the button in his bosom, and when walking across the bridge, threw it into the river with all his might — let it float away from getting caught, from confession, from forgiveness, from punishment, float from one river to the next, from next to the subsequent, from the subsequent to the sea, from the sea to the ocean, and there perhaps it'll wash up on another shore to some older little lad who'll take it and one day press it for him.

September 2025

Author's commentary:

I thought I'd try something new and write a complementary commentary on the story's themes: behind-the-scenes, "director's" insights, bonus, etc.

By all means, please think of the whole thing as having two posts in one rather than having a part of a post above and a part below; although on the same topic, they are pretty much standalone!

I obviously don't want to "explain" it or reveal what inspired it and

why, but I do want to take a chance and talk about things that don't happen to us and how that keeps dragging behind like tin cans tied to the tail of a dog tortured by children — or grown-ups, should we ditch ageism and be a bit more symbolic.

[In this essay on Chekhov](#), I wrote about a similar thing:

Paradoxically, with the passage of time, what accumulates is not only experience but also the absence of experience, such as unfulfilled dreams, missed opportunities, actions of an untaken nature, which, though they don't exist and have no physical manifestation, often prove more important and defining for a person than those they actually did. Translating from Chekhovian to pop cultural: an immovable object (human) meets an unstoppable force (time), who wins? Clearly, an unstoppable force, for no one has yet been able to stop time. Time thereby can be rendered as “experience”, for any experience is “time” in its essence, and any “time” is an experience, should we include both happenings and nonhappenings. If the characters of “Three Sisters”, or for that matter “Cherry Orchard”, are bogged down in inaction, passively watching how life passes by, epochs change, but they themselves remain the same, avoiding the experience, another character may take a more deliberate action to avoid the experience they fear, such as to avoid a confession, forgiveness, punishment: ultimately, an absence of a lesson, which is,

ironically, also a lesson.

Our culture is focused more on the active conflict, be it internal or external, fights for beliefs or introspective torments over them (Dostoevsky, Dickens) and not enough attention goes to passive conflict like boredom or inaction or nonhappening (Chekhov, Beckett). See, the former is important of course, but it is more apprehensible and cinematic, often pure kino, while the latter is less so and often considered anticlimactic, boring even. However the literary thread of the latter, the subtle linings, indescribable feelings, illogical decisions, non-decisions, fear that's not a fear but stun and ossification, are also an important part of how we experience life — through things that we choose not to do, things that do not happen to us (!), be it avoiding confrontation, avoiding change, avoiding experience. Same with psychological trauma that characters suffer; alongside the violent trauma, there exists a trauma of freezing irrational fear of police circus and gypsy court, a trauma of lessonlessness, not merely guilt or shame but an unlearned tension, an anticlimax that keeps haunting the character until their last breath.

Despite the inflated importance of the active conflict, the universal cultural trope, a deathbed question, points us towards the overlooked Chekhov-Beckett axis, “a passive conflict”: if you ask someone on their deathbed, what are they thinking of, the answer most commonly and poignantly is going to be: “Regrets.”

P.S. For that reason alone, “Youth” by Paolo Sorrentino is a terrifying

film.



*“A young boy drinking tea”, Nikolai Bogdanov-Belsky (Russian,
1868–1945)*

Twisted Lullaby VI-VII

nova-nevedoma.com/twisted-lullaby-vi-viii/

This continues the thread of [Twisted Lullaby I-V](#)



VI

If Goddie were a child, I would be his sister, and he would love soap bubbles. He would love everything soapy, except for unchildlikely soapy, for instance grown-up shampoo that stings your eyes without mercy and tastes bitter on your tongue for hours, as if it's made not from liquid soap but from the juice of jellyfish that were caught in the seas and oceans and squeezed, bottled and sent to all the children of the world, both to poor families and to rich ones, so that all the children of the world would be supplied with such jellyfish shampoo, could wash themselves, splash about in the foam, and blow soap bubbles, sturdy ones, bulletproof ones, that drift on the wind like jellyfish in water or dandelions in air, from which sometimes they also press juice, make dandelion wines, and also add to shampoos, so it would be bitter with a particular dandelion flavour, and your eyes would sting as if it were late May now, the teachers about to hand out the year's marks, and the summer holidays about begin with joy.

I would make bubbles for him from children's shampoo and sugar syrup, I would wake up early in the morning, I would read somewhere how to make soap bubbles at home, I would mix them up in a glass, I would find my old bubble-blowing wand as well, I would wake up Goddie and we would go together to blow bubbles, the kind that don't

burst even when they touch the ground, because I would have mixed them very well, I would mix them every day to learn, to become a professional mixer of soap bubbles, so that Goddie would always get good bubbles and he would never cry, neither from them bursting, nor from them getting in the eyes, neither in his, nor in mine — in no one's, perhaps only in nasty teachers' and bad people's. He would blow them very well, he would do it every day to learn and become a professional blower of bubbles for me and for himself — enormous ones, shiny ones, rainbow-iridescent ones, like light, airy and transparent pearls. They would become as precious as real pearls, and all the adults looking down at us would run after them, jump and catch them with their hands or even with a net, like butterflies, but the bubbles would dodge away from them, and the adults would get angry, swear, but there'd be nothing they could do, Goddie's bubbles would be ever so nice, everyone would praise him, kneel down to him to become his friends, and so he'd blow them more bubbles, and he would tell everyone that it was his lil' sister who made them for him, and he? He what? He just blows them for his own pleasure, not even because he likes bubbles so much (that goes without saying), but because he likes blowing them, and everything else that happens with them he hates with a black-very-black hatred — both the crowds of bubble-catchers running after him, and the fact that they're not interested in exactly how he blows them, only interested in why, as if “because” weren't enough, and that they — whether deliberately or accidentally — pop them, the earth gets covered with soap, it begins to sting, dandelions stop growing on it.

They would call me the guilty one, because I'm always the irreverent, irresponsible, irrational, completely-irr-anything silly girl who put the idea into poor wayward child's head to blow bubbles. They'll never let me sit with him again. They'll put me in a dark-very-dark corner, where I'll stand and stare resolutely and dutifully, they'll take away the glass with soap from Goddie, and they'll put him in hospital, because without the possibility of blowing bubbles he'll get completely upset and fall ill, after all he's ill inside out (a sickly boy, just give him a reason), he'll be with a cold on a hospital cot in a ward with a sign "Here Lies Goddie" under a heavy old blanket, he'll lie there, eat tasteless hospital porridge, sniffle, stream with snot and blow bulletproof bubbles from it. World society will lose all interest in such completely non-pearly and non-precious bubbles, and then in Goddie himself, and then in me, they'll lose interest so strongly that they'll forget about us, renounce us, and Goddie will remain lying in the ward, and I'll remain standing in the corner, thinking about my unacceptable behaviour, until I understand the full implications of my mistake, that we both needed to fall ill and at once, so we could sit at home together with my lil' brother, watch Brazilian soap operas and make snotty bubbles.

VII

If lil' brother had such a lil' sister, he would call her his heroine. "My heroine" — that's what he'd say, like Hera, queen of gods, goddesses, and goddies, like heroin needles around which Hera laid out their joint

path to school, over the bumpy bumps along the little paths, so as not to go “ploop” accidentally into a pit full of needles, so as not to perish by the tragic death on the determined way to first grade. There, at the first assembly in line formation with the other first-graders under the onslaught of teachers, they’d definitely ask him, tell us, and who is this with you all such a radiant queen, to which he would answer just so “My heroine”, and he himself would introduce himself to everyone as her hero, so that everyone would know for certain who was who out of them. Because she would be everything to him, she would find him a path across any landscapes, whether it be the path home, the path to school, and even the path past the boys’ toilet at this very school, a place overgrown with all kinds of disgusts and detestations, from whose smell your eyes stung, a place he was afraid to go and instead always ended up in the girls’ toilet, whilst no one was there, whilst his heroine guarded the entrance from all sorts of invasions.

Without her there would be no him, and without him there would be no her. Their existence would be mutually conditioned and mutually inevitable, despite the fact that they wouldn’t be twins and would be born several years apart — first her, then him, and if it had all been the other way round, everything would have remained exactly the same, they would have been born anyway, would have found each other and become lil’ brother and lil’ sister to each other, would have taken each other to school and guarded each other from all sorts of worldly miasmas. Yes, that happens too. So the heroine said in an oath, and the hero answered with an oath back.

When he walked through space devoid of any friendliness, and bits of paper with name-calling, giggles, and nasty looks flew at him in flocks, each and every one of them had to meet the protective bubble, smashed at full speed against its bulletproofness and fell down dead, sometimes in such quantities that a little heap formed around lil' brother, and he'd step over it and walk on. There, into that bubble, only his heroine could enter, because it was she who had heroically created it, or rather was creating it by her presence, as if it arose by itself, naturally, simply when she turned up nearby, as if someone was blowing it for them. She would take him by the hand and lead him further across the landscapes, and he would be silent and not make a sound, because he knew that she heard him anyway, though sometimes he was afraid that this wasn't so.

That's exactly how he wanted it to be, that there would be him, his heroine Hera, and around them — a bubble, even if a soapy one, the main thing was that it should have a reserve of strength and special bitterness, so that no nasty creatures would dare to touch it or bite it, because the bubble would sting them, burn them, dissolve the attackers into substances, as if it were made not from children's soap, but squeezed from the jellyfish themselves. When it became really sad, he even wanted this someone who was blowing bubbles for them to blow such a special bubble that they could hide inside it together and fly by the will of the wind far-far away to the edge of the world. There they would sit down, dangling their little legs, and send into open space flocks of soap bubbles for ten thousand million years, until finally all the jellyfish juice in the world ran out, and all the jellyfish,

unfortunately, were extinct. But even then they together with his heroine would continue blowing them, now snotty ones. “Would” continue, anyways.

Alētheiosis

nova-nevedoma.com/aletheiosis/

~ I

Desire rises— to give an answer, for around are questions only, and the answer is out there, and everything's impossibly simple.

Round is shape of the questions, more precisely — an irregular sphere. They're short in stature, like dwarf bull terriers: arms, legs, eyes, noses long — quite humanlike; wear grey uniforms: overcoat, gloves, hat. Throngclumped, they clamber and clamber and clamber through the doors of a room three by three with no windows, no lighting, and crowd round the bed— there lies my Lyrical I whom I'm unable to feel. In sleep he turned into sand, waking sand he remained. At last, in his dream, he saw what he'd wanted — his twins, his hero and heroine: one body, one being, one essence — and paid the punishment price.

The clamour of questions has thickened the air. Through it, screeching, remarks push their way, slicing the ears of my Lyrical I:

— Tell us, dear Expert, what is the essence of that very thing? (*I'll tell you now*)— Tell us, have you an answer to the greatest of questions? (*Answers aplenty*)— Dear Expert, do you desire?

Desire rises— to sort out what is what, who is who.

Look: they seem like a single character who, in a drunken gaze like a peacock's tail, like a fan, multiplies. A hallucination, a thousand-eyed sleep paralysis demon, a meat-pile built from inhuman limbs: microphones, cameras, notebooks. This creature blazes with flashes, scurries, burbles with voices, and breathes, breathes, and breathes its heat straight into his face.

Attacked, cornered, pinned.

Desire rises— oh, he desires again! To begin with, to move just a limb, any limb, and it even seems he succeeds: fingers, tongue, lips, and eyelids — all still seem to move, yet nothing responds, they're just like the body — all sand. The love of body and mind for each other goes unrequited, only their violence mutual remains.

In the throat burbles a voice, starts to form → I feel it, not with my body — with the desire of its release. In the head the inner voice does not burble, does not form → I cannot feel it; in its place burbles my mute monologue, forming, glows faintly, aquiver, desiring its release. He was so given to thoughts and their broadcasting, he would gather them, toss them into a pot, cook them, digest them into words, phrases, and sentences, but now the noggin won't boil. Instead of words — an image of enormous proportions, pure vile abstractionism. As I look at it, all becomes clear, yet there's no strength and no power to speak, even though—

Desire rises— for agony, pain, suffering, any sensation, even phantom one, yet there's none. My Lyrical I simply lies.

He is sand, a sand installation in human form. Body. Figure. Motionless in a hyperkinetic world. He is an appendage to it, exists unidirectionally. The world can do whatever it likes with the sand: can examine it, blind it with camera flashes, deafen it with interrogative din:

— In a literary sense, in a metaphorical sense, or at least an oneiric sense, did you manage to know? (*I don't know... perhaps?*)— Well then, tell us, dear Expert, what's the most important thing in life? Hee-hee! (*You'd rather not know*)— Tell us already! (*I... I cannot speak!*) Is it love?— Right, enough about you, as if we need your truthology! Crikey! Better tell us, why are you sand? (*I can only hazard a guess*) Here one of the questions leans mewards. I am inward and outward, here and there at the same time — I am everywhere, omnipresent but helpless and meek. Our eyes meet. Between us — an inch. Never have I seen so close what everyone decided to call “human eye.”

— Oi, get away from him!

— He can hear us. You can see it in his eyes. There's something there, someone lives in there! Look! Look closely!

Desire rises— to look too, but in response to this desire I can see only eyes. Desire is also unidirectional now.

Here's the first eye, now it's gone, in its place crawls the second, third,

fourth, fifth, tenth, fiftieth — a kaleidoscope of black holes framed in irises iridescently coloured. I'm sure, in whole universe, there's no object more terrifying than that which we call "human eye."

I no longer possess myself. I possess nothing. My mind recedes somewhere to a background plane. Around, the world transforms into an eye of gigantic proportions, narrows only to the iris + pupil. My Lyrical I lacks even the luxury of closing his eyes made of sand. He has no tears that could flood his vision, no eyelids, no lashes — there is only the vision and its betrayal, defection to the enemy's side.

A question rises (internal): does my sight now have eyes? To understand, I seek a reflection, find it only in front, in the eye, the reflection of eye of my own.

So strange... never seen it so close... So strange and so wrong to see each other without much distance, so wrong, as if I'd entered a forbidden zone, crossed a boundary sacred.

— It's dilating! His eye, it's dilating!

— Alive, definitely alive! Are you alive, dear Expert? (*Yes, it would seem so, I regret to report*)— Look!

The questions jostle, shove the watcher away, want to take his place. A camera falls to the floor, shatters to smithereens — glass shards everywhere. An explosion of chaos: arms flailing, feet trampling, tongues wagging like snakes, shouting at one another in their gibberish

tongue.

From nowhere, emerges a lamp—

*** ** *click!**and everything's monotone, objectless, incandescently white
— absence reigns, no coordinate axes. Crackling, melts my brain in my
head. In my sight, spots of various colours grow from the centre.

Desire rises— to unbecome sand, to exit this aggregate state, even to
melt altogether, turn glass, such as a vase or a bottle for water or
something stronger, maybe a spectacle lens or a telescope one, or even a
mirror.

— What have you done?!

— Capture it, I only wanted to capture it! Ow! What a picture! Ah!
Capture the pupil! Ow! Stop it! Don't hit me! Incurious lot! Ow!

— You idiot! You've blinded him! Maybe forever!

— Sod off, will you!

— He's sand! Hardly he cares a lot! Ow! Stop!

— Fuck off!

— You're not worth a grain of his sand! Fuck you off, shall you?

— You won't push me away! You won't pu—

Screams, shoves, blows, silhouettes dancing, theatrical shadows,

pulsations.

— Look! Look! Dilating! The pupil! Again!

— We could cut his lil’eyes out and away, leave the rest! Just think, to keep lil’eyes for yourself, sentient jewels, put them in a bottle or jar and fill it with epoxy resin. Imagine! Ow!

— Don’t you dare touch him! Do you even know who he is? Do you even know who needs him?

— I know you’re an idiot. Why should I care? Sand with eyes! Here, right here!

— You’re all just a bunch of nutters, incompetent, stupid children. What if we cut out your lil’eyes, eh?

— Go on then, “nutter”! Come on, yeah, go ahead! Let’s see if you can even raise a hand! Go on! Ow!

Crash, crack, swear words fly, flash-glass shatters, the air vibrates, everything shakes, walls ripple.

Vision burns, and I—

Desire rises— for the questions to cut out my lil’eyes after all and preserve them in epoxy resin, do with them whatever they want, if only all this would end, if only I could die, or something even worse — become a senseless thoughtslop, consciousness without body or sensors,

without signals, turn my meekness into mutual indifference to the world, to the body, to the brain, which will simply be stuck in a hopeless, timeless thinkdream, a broken record's eternal loop. This must still be a dream, a dream within a dream, a dream's residue — a hallucinoid, hypnopompic delirium.

The hubbub falls silent; the hum, however, remains.

In the doorway appears a figure ever so fearsome: hat, overcoat, gloves, and sunglasses — just like the questions, but stretched to an oval, double the size, barely fitting the doorway.

The questions break into a cold sweat and silently, lips trembling, stare at the figure.

— Hello, Mr Figure.

— Good morning, we've been expecting your brilliance. Haven't touched him without you. Promise.

— All as you requested, I made sure.

— No, I made sure!

— No, I did!

— Tried our best, didn't we? Some a bit less, and I — most of all; I did the best. Do come in, don't stand in the doorway.

At once, the questions huddle together, clearing a path to my Lyrical I.

Mr Figure is silent, grunts with menace, works his eyebrows, and steps inside.

— Do come in, Mr Figure.

— Welcome. All for you. Please come in.

Mr Figure is at the bedside, looms over my Lyrical I. I see his sandheap reflection in Mr Figure's sunglasses, still quite humanlike.

Tighter tugs his gloves Mr Figure, pinches off a bit of sand, easily, painlessly, as if there'd been nothing, as if this weren't that very Lyrical I. He sniffs, nearly sneezes. The questions proffer a handkerchief. Refuses in silence, palm to palm, plays with the sand.

I don't feel it — I see how I'm being pour to and fro, top to bottom, mixing/remixing. Mr Figure grabs a bag from his pocket, pours the sand in.

Well well well... dread to think.

— Carry him out, — Mr Figure declares.

The questions began to bustle.

— But how?

— Properly, — cuts off Mr Figure.

Confused are the questions, but understand, surround the bed, strain,

groan, and lift it, and my Lyrical I floats slowly out of the room.

Others stand, smirk, photograph. My world's again moving, and I'm not even glad, though I've desired it so much, dreamed of it a moment ago.

Desire rises— to desire something else, something besides the desire, for desires can no longer be trusted; they've betrayed me, desires, I hate them, I hate them, fuck desires, fuck everything, even myself ← Desired to sink into nothing; now, look at me — glad of events ← Desired to become glass — now, carry me somewhere, faster, in any direction, even an inch.

Desire rises— for everything. I don't understand it.

Desire rises— too much. Whose? Mine? Lyrical?

Desire rises— still does. How much longer? I'm sand, after all. Stop it! Stop! Please, make it stop, someone, listen to me, make it stop! Please, make it stop!

Underneath, the bed shakes, dried sand of mine trickles, unclear if I'll fit through the door, unclear if they'll have enough strength (fuck knows where they're carrying me), unclear what will happen if all grains of mine scatter along the way.

— Careful! — growls Mr Figure.

The questions duck, contract to even more irregular spheres, as if

they've pumpkined. Hurriedly they drag on. But then — stop.

They freeze, Mr Figure too freezes. Everyone looks at the door.

In the doorway they stand — my heroine. Hand in hand with her — he, my hero: golden eyes brimming with tears, faces pale, muscles relaxed, not an eyelid stirs, only lips tremble slightly.

They are still two.

Their whole gaze is now mine, if only I knew they realise that my own gaze also exists and is theirs. But... again I don't know where to look, into whose eyes? Hero, heroine? Heroine, hero? Left, right? At last I feel pain again, pain without body, pain that rolls down upon me from the void and squeezes me, squeezes me, squeezes tight in its grip.

— What... what are you doing? — utters my heroine.

— Get out of here! — my hero trumps.

— Leave him alone! Monsters!

— Out!

The questions froze, sank into frustration, look up questioningly — Mr Figure, enlighten us, what next, what to do with the obstacle?

Mr Figure nods twinwards, indicatively, sharply, commandingly, angrily.

Before my heroine and my hero could step inside, reach me, the questions begin to flow doorwards, pushing them out. My twins swear in frenzy, begin to step right over the crowd. The questions won't let them, grab their legs, drag them out, push, shout nonsense.

Behind the twins rise four figures of oval forms, tall like the boss, only thinner: black uniform, faces covered. The twins fight them off. Vainly — the figures are stronger. They grab them by the arms, hold them, while the hero and heroine scream:

— Let go!

— Let us go! Monsters! What are you doing!

And so my Lyrical I find himself in the corridor, floating somewhere abed, instead of waves — the angry irregular spheres, around — camera flashes, silhouettes, and Mr Figure, while my hero and heroine are stuck, snared by the shadows. Together they kick, curse, lash out, shout after me.

And what can I do? I lie, I'm carried. I again— desire, desire, desire— again I desire nothing but *them*.

~ II

— You say you know everything, but is that even possible? — asks my heroine.

— I know everything, — I respond. — In potential, not at this moment, of course. And not I, but my Inner I. The one opposite to the Lyrical, or perpendicular. If they enter into dialogue, merge in monologue — that's when the absolute knowledge is born.

— What rubbish, — she laughs. — Sometimes you amuse me.

On her shoulders and collarbones are constellations of freckles that run far beneath her clothes, and I seem to see them, but only as the starry sky during day.

My Lyrical I is up to become an astronomer, an astrologer even, to read them as in an atlas and achieve that very thing he calls Pure Potential. Everything will become clear to him, perhaps even at once: what is what, who is who, what is truth, and when — the end of the world. He's certain, he already knows that will happen, but so far no date or hour are set.

— For instance, you know nothing about me, things that are crucial.

She works at the bar my Lyrical I likes to frequent. He's slightly drunk because she poured him, and pours she well. He knows not what he's saying and babbles all this with no permission from me.

— Not yet...

— Well there you go, told you.

— But in potential! If one really, really desires it, it'll all work out, one

just has to believe. Believe in the potential.

— What’s the use of believing in something, anything if you don’t even believe in yourself?

— I believe in myself.

— But not in the Lyrical, right?

— In him too.

— But not always.

“He knows not what he’s saying and babbles all this with no permission from me.”

— Always. In Pure Potential.

— Ah, I see.

— It doesn’t hurt to chill sometimes from such a burden, you know.

— Too right. And again, you know nothing about me. You are a figure, a model, an image. I am the artist who draws you. I do what I want with the figure — a portrait today, a still life tomorrow. And the figure can do only one thing to the artist — annoy her. So sit quietly and don’t move.

And so I sit. Rather, he sits, he — my Lyrical I, and I’m on the inside, the Inner I. Now I am fully certain, though sometimes it seems to me, it

happens, that my Inner one crawls out, while my Lyrical one crawls in.

— And so I sit.

— Then sit, you've signed up to do so. A masterpiece is still miles away.

— I'm sure a masterpiece will come of me. After all, this... potential!

— A masterpiece might come of you. For the artist is I. And that is the reason, nothing more, nothing less.

— Now that was hurtful.

— Don't be hurt. You're a model. Plus, I pour for you for free.

— A naked sad man at a bar, not exactly a musclemass, though in potential they do exist, too.

— Not naked — nude. I'm not painting a man at a bar, I'm painting the inside. In a sense, I'm not even looking at you, you're here for background, for the vibe, to give form, fill the space, show how light should fall.

— A still life then, I see.

— “Ha!” But no, something between portrait, landscape, and caricature. A more deeper kind of portrait. I'll call this thing “The Innermost I.” Just “Inner” sounds rather flat, isn't it?

— Will you draw freckles all over my body?

- I don't draw, I paint. The answer is: won't.
- May I ask why?
- Because. They shouldn't be on the painting, nor on the figure. Fortunately, your Lyrical I hasn't any, and your Innermost I displays their absence. Complete, even in "Pure Potential."
- Well fancy that.
- Well fancy twice, Mr Figure.
- And where will you put it? My Innermost I.
- To the art gallery. I'm certain, I know absolutely, I am fully aware that this is precisely the work after which I can stop being a barmaid and, possibly, even stop being an artist.
- Why?
- Don't you know everything? I've nearly reached the age. After twenty-seven it's improper and even vulgar for anyone to be an artist of any type, including the art of painting.
- You're joking, of course.
- Of course. But I'm also not joking. One can joke and not joke all at once, one can work as a barmaid and paint in the very same bar, with the very same model (figuratively). One can do absolutely everything all at once.

My Innermost I imagines doing everything all at once. “Everything” in this case appears as an indeterminate sum of probabilities, whose distribution could only be understood by observing all outcomes. “Everything” is not something average, some point estimate, but is a bit of everything, much of something, and nothing at all of other things.

The brightest embodiment of “Everything” is this: my Lyrical I runs his index finger across the collarbones of his heroine, from freckle to freckle, and — a cold electric shiver runs through her.

— Stop fidgeting! Sit still.

— I’ve got this, um... (*my Lyrical I grows; embarrassed*) Something happening down there.

— I can see, but you needn’t worry. I’m not painting whatever is happening there.

— How?

— Not at all. In my painting, your Innermost I hasn’t got one — innermost emptiness.

— How’s that? Show me.

— I won’t. Until it’s finished, I won’t show anyone. Not even myself in a sense.

— He’s completely without it?

— “It” in the being I’m depicting is, as you say, in potential. Art reproduces not the figures themselves, in whatever state they might be, and what happens to them, but only what the artists see in them, which is me, and I don’t see “it”.

When she bends her slender arm to leave a brushstroke on the canvas, her collarbones become sharp as knives, the skin stretches around them, and the freckles spread into a new constellation.

— Why am I here at all, if you’re not drawing me? Not painting, I mean.

— Indeed. I’ve already explained. Besides, you signed up yourself, saw “free drinks” and came running. Your fallen state doesn’t interest me; I need only what came before — unity, absolute primordial unity, again, as you say — potential. A human being deserves the name only by virtue of what they unite within themselves, not the other way round.

— And how does one even achieve unity?

— Aren’t you silly? By painting.

The arousal in “it” only intensifies. “Everything,” it turns out, encompasses far more, if my heroine is to be trusted. I believe her. Probabilities shuffle somewhere, “Everything” loses signs of comprehensibility and evaluation. I thought, mistakenly, that I’d been lucky enough to calculate them.

— I’m not ruining the painting, am I?

— Not an inch.

Here, behind the bar, *he* appears.

Well well... Surely a hallucinoid, surely my vision's doubled, surely I've drunk myself into a stupor? An alcoholic's nightmare — twin bartenders.

He's like my heroine, only a man. Same height, same face, same eyes, same hair, same top. On his shoulders and collarbones are also constellations of freckles, they also run far beneath his clothes, and they too seem visible, like a daytime starry sky, only different.

— Oh, by the way, meet my brother.

It's the dead of night outside.

~ III

I am now an installation, precisely my Lyrical I.

No one sees me, after all behind the glass lies but a sandstatue. Around, within a several-metre radius — an empty circle of museum space. Nearby — darkness of varying density, to the sides in the distance — corridor light, rare small bulbs, multicoloured, green glow of the “EXIT” sign.

I lie as I lay, not abed now, but in a coffin, glassy and lit — sleeping beauty in a mausoleum.

Be it day now or night, stars are up there, be it collarbones or the sky. Their constellations on my mind have been imprinted; one only needs to focus the eye.

Sound of footsteps → From the corridor into the mausoleum floats a figure — a black oval with an aura-like backlight. Heels of boots click, breathing echoes along with the rustle of garments — louder, louder, and louder — until tremble the walls of my dwelling. Close up — the same Mr Figure, in formal attire: jacket, tie, trousers; on his long nose perch neat round pince-nez. He approaches, stoops, stares, the spectacles loupe his eyes to half the size of his face. Sniffingly, he moves his moustache, inspects the perimeter of my coffin's, and tap on the glass with his boniest fist.

- *Knock-knock-knock* — * it tolls like a bell spreads like thunder fills my coffin with ringing low, oppressive. I was kept in a dark box, insulated, non-lit. I was isolated, saved from the invasion of any surroundings: the cackle, the flashes, the cacophony of it all, but only while I was there. I could even forget for a time that my Lyrical I is now sand, that now only my Innermost I remains. I could even get used to it, accept it, find a measure of poetry there, smell freedom (yes, that treacherous thing), feel how exceptional is my situation, for this has never happened to anyone else. Mr Figure must have agreed → thus, what came, came.

The lights begin to turn on in the mausomuseum. Clicking, the lamps ignite, their faintest whine fills the space.

From the corridors flows human mass, flooding the hall around the pedestal where lies my Ensanded I — he's in no mood for lyricism now.

Around him are people, various humanoids, bright in colour, height,

build, marvelling, disgorging words of amazement, curiosity, madness, so on and so forth:

— Is he really sand now?

— How did it happen?

— A mystery. Fell asleep, woke up — sand.

— Well fancy that! Well I never... What a case, as they say.

— What irony, don't forget! Irony's important.

— Right, where would we be without it, dear fellow!

— Mummy, Mummy, what's that statue?

— That, children, isn't a statue, it's a man. Though he's a bit sandy now, understand? But by large still a man. Perhaps. Science is silent about the matter.

— Was a lad, lad no more now. Sad, isn't it, and you lot just gawp. Tragedy!

— What else is there to do with him except gawping?

— Look, all of you, it's empty there! Between his legs! Nothing at all.

— A magnificent work! Respect to the master. Attention to detail. Obviously — art. Yes, but how? They don't make them like this nowadays. An exception to the rule, nothing less, for where would we

be without them.

— Without rules?

— Without exceptions.

And I don't listen to them, I hear but ignore, I couldn't give a fuck, yes, exactly so — not a fuck-giving charity, am I? Donors welcome. I had to find strength and persistence, attention, sharp eyes, a wider perspective, to push through lil'humanoids and see my beloved = my twins. I'm now in the pure form of freedom, Pure Potential, so pure it contorts me to spasms.

There's desire, desire, desire, desire! It rises! It rises, desire!

I desire nothing but *them!*

Fury blazes within me such that the sand vitrifies. Oh, if only! All that blazes, blazes innermost inside, in a sealed pressurised furnace, where smoke and steam have nowhere to hide.

Until it explodes.

Desire rises, rises! Rises desire!

My gaze darts from mug to phiz to face, runs, leaps, hungrily seeks my twins' golden eyes.

Oh, fire, oh, aggression of feeling

Off you fuck hungry monsters, bugger off, clear the way, let my dear ones through!

I'm ready to see them, to transfix my gaze upon their faces and not let go until they reach me, having pushed through the crowds of brainlets gawking with gaping mouths, empty eyes, ears down to their shoulders.

Appear, right here, before me, press against the glass, see what I've become for your sake, my loves. Tears will pour in streams, drops will bomb my glass coffin, echoing-thundering, breaking it into pieces. I shall hear, see, feel, I shall sense everything.

Will redden your golden eyes, your cheeks will burst with colour, your fists you will beat upon the glass, and I shall lie and watch.

Where are you?

Crowds accumulate, masses flow into the mausomuseum. Their words are a mash, voices drone. Their faces have blurred, lost their features, as if these are people no more but an army of mannequins stockpiled into the hall.

Where are you?

Where are you?

I desire to see you, I desire—

~ IV

— Tell me, do you love her? — asks my hero.

Hammer strikes chisel, chisel strikes stone, in the stone — as he puts it, my Lyrical I. “Lyrical I Number Four” — that’s what will be the name of the sculpture, by analogy with the previous three. They will stand before my heroine’s paintings, the series called “The Innermost I,” also four, and they will face one another, stare in pairs — stone at canvas, canvas at stone. Together they know everything, everything down to the last piece of knowledge, everything that can possibly be known or even made up. At the gaze-meeting point, from the tension might occur an explosion, but for now...

— I need to know, she’s my sister after all. I see how you look at her.

Hammer strikes chisel again, chisel strikes stone. Dust flies, chips scatter, sticks to the hero’s sweaty hands, covers his bulging veins and muscles, his locks and face.

— You can talk, by the way. I’m okay with that, not like her. She’s sterner.

I look at my hero, see only my heroine, or the reverse — I look at her, see only him. Sometimes I manage to forget who is who — where is my heroine, where is my hero, and where am I between them. Sometimes I don’t look, but still see them both. They look back with equivalent force.

From the dust in my throat there’s a lump, bitterness on my tongue; I

want to cough; my eyes water nonstop.

— Ahem... That's a personal question, — says I.

— We're all very personal here, family even.

We're no longer at the bar — in an entire studio, the result of success. Our trio: my heroine, my hero, my I, navigates the expanses of art, conquers art-summits in just a few strides, forges the cultural landscape, captures attention, provokes a chaos of questions. Only this "I" of mine is unclear, uncertain *which*; one could say "simply I" — its own to each of the twins. She — with paints on canvas creates it from nothing, he — with chisel strike by strike extracts it from stones. This "I" has to be shared, for canvas and dust don't get along. It happens for nights, days, weeks, months — I'm alone with just one of them. It's both easy and torturous, what a devious paradox!

I'm silent.

His whole body is covered in dust, eyes protected by goggles, freckles hidden, but I still see them, I remember them, hers and his. Their bodies before me are like a map of the sky, nocturnal / diurnal, but not two parts of cosmos — rather just one— only different visible stars, and overlaying them would make everything fit, appear, become clear, dots would meet somewhere, lines line up, gaps fill, each completing the other's lack. Their bodies before me, nude, shine with their figures, beckoning: golden eyes, noses with a slight hump, thin lips, necks, shoulders, collarbones (I desire to bite them), chests, stomachs, what lies

below, and, well, strong legs. Day and night I learn to focus my vision so when I see them together, I could superimpose them onto one image, united into one being, the absolute wholeness.

— You know, we owe you a great deal. Everything, I'd even say.

— That's not true.

— Without you, who are we? Just artists.

— I'm just a figure, a model, nothing more. I just sit.

— You understand everything and know perfectly well that's not true. By that logic, I just strike hammer to chisel.

Love needs knowledge to reach its potential. What is it without it? Desire that rises and fades.

With all his might my hero strikes hammer to chisel, across the studio scattering ringing and splinters. Another blow — metallic, loud, quick, with an amplitude sweeping, as if were a warrior he, not a sculptor, and another — quiet, gentle, merely a raindrop. My Lyrical I emerges from beneath the stone, climbs out of the hard womb, pleads for salvation, yet none is forthcoming — it needs a blow stronger. Swing, ring, splinters, laughter. By habit or by custom, I grow tense again, my body hardens, I lose all control.

— Well then, will you answer? Do you love her?

— I'm sure you know it, the answer.

— I do. But do you?

~ V

Nights are dark in the museum corridors, dreams don't come, I don't seem to sleep even a bit, I don't seem to need to, though I want it now and then. In dreams I would become human again. In dreams I would see, have, and do whatever I wanted, be it freedom of movement, of knowledge, of desire, of self-control, of possession of others = my twins = her and him simultaneously, as then, when I turned to sand. I saw them together, I had not to choose — refuse one, lose the other. One would have been too little for me, with one I couldn't be sated, I would want for eternity to come back and restore it, make the wrong choice again, so the outcomes would be different, reversed, so again I'd live in regret, again want to come back and restore it, make the wrong choice again, live in fear, in the desire to merge them.

Nights are dark in the corridors, I see visions, as that very one. My twins are one creature of unearthly beauty, absolute and complete, a human being before splitting, a being containing all. The creature before me is naked, smiles, moves into the distance and lures me in, stepping soundlessly along a sandy shore of a lil' lake or a pond, around which thorns grow to the horizon, coal-black, as if there'd been a fire a moment ago. The wind rustles in the thorns, murmurs in the reeds. Birds sing. Low, inaudible arrhythmic music plays, bass stretches across

the landscape.

Desire rises— to reach the creature, to run fingers across its body, count the dots, read the stars, draw lines, translate freckles into text in my head, and desires from my head, heart, and loins, conversely — into touches against the smooth texture of skin.

Desire rises— and that’s all. The vision ends there.

Nights are dark in the corridors, figures don’t walk around. Day after day there are people, they wander, look, shout something in their gibberish tongue, honk like birds and beasts — a zoo on an outing. By day Mr Figure stands nearby, with a gloved hand strokes the glass lid, at times slaps it, taps with his fingers, beats out a tedious rhythm, while inside everything shakes, hums, my Ensanded I is about to crumble, from a semblance of human reshape into a sandpit, a generous cat litter box. Mr Figure adores speaking about me, introduces me to the crowds, as if I were his son or a painting he’d painted, a sculpture he’d sculpted, a great thought he’d laboured to think.

But at night in my sarcophagus there is silence and calm, peace and quiet, and in them my Ensanded I revels. Darkness penetrates everywhere, there’s nowhere to hide from it (fortunately). Lights glow dimly, framing “EXIT” sign, as if exit existed.

Desire rises— stop— glass shatters in the hall the sonorous echo flies meweards wraps around my coffin. The light of a torch chases away the darkness.

Wariness, fear. Through the window someone appears, and in a second — someone else.

Together they whisper, turn off the torch, freeze and wait for a moment. Breathless, without a sound, on tiptoes, they sneak to the centre of the hall where my Ensanded I lies

Desire rises— to tear their masks off.

The silhouettes are already at the sarcophagus: stygian, thin, nimble, they twist, grope around the pedestal. The thinner one puts picks into the lock, works carefully, until there's a click. The larger one then grabs the lid and with a slight scraping opens my coffin.

Tremble their fingers, flutters their breathing, heads dart, movements lose any direction.

I've frozen, I wait...

I've understood — I'm being stolen. 100%.

The thin silhouette leans toward my face and kisses my sandy lips right through the mask. The larger silhouette repeats it. It seems to try closing my eyes with its fingers, but for sand nothing changes — I'm watching them, I see all.

The silhouettes embrace each other, as tightly as they can (I hear the friction of leather clothing), gather their courage, take out two sacks, two small shovels, and begin to scoop me away from my coffin.

The world layers, then reassembles, then come unglued, then again sticks together. I feel thrown into a carousel, round dance, whirlpool. I feel, I feel how I end up in the sacks, not the touch but the concept, the claustrophobia, how my sandy body scatters, divides into two, how I feel here and there, in two places and nowhere.

Everything happens in atemporal cadence.

The coffin is empty.

The alarm siren screams.

The mausomuseum floods with red light — a bloody dawn.

The silhouettes run and dive through the window they broke— together with me.

Around, something flickers.

I'm held close to a heart — its rhythm goes supersonic, its heat boils their blood, heats my sand, heats the air. Everything's hot, almost scorching yet pleasant.

Sound of an engine, darkness, flashers and flashes.

Roar, sirens, shaking, lots of shaking.

Hormones— fear, excitement, the flame of freedom.

Everything mixes into a heap, into two heaps mixes my Ensanded I. I

feel everything, feel completely, sense how their fingers clutch the sack, firmly yet tenderly, in fear, with love, for safety, for comfort.

Light— on the horizon rises the sun: sanguinary, ireful.

Before me their faces: my heroine and my hero, unmasked.

Their smiles shine, golden eyes reddened, drown in tears salty, some reach me too — drops fall right into the sand, seep through the grains, moisten them, and I feel it again, sense how I'm hardening and losing control.

Around, by the haze and shimmer enveloped — black thorny thickets, a lil'lake or a pond, on the surface float lilies: white, pink, white-pink.

We sit on the sand and embrace. I'm silent, I'm scared to speak, though I now have no body — only two sacks of sand.

— Don't be afraid, dear, don't be afraid, please, we'll put you together, put you together however you want, wish, or desire. Just choose the form.

This story is my submission to the Symposium. The Soaring Twenties Social Club (STSC) is a small, exclusive online speakeasy where a dauntless band of raconteurs, writers, artists, philosophers, flaneurs, musicians, idlers, and bohemians share ideas and companionship. Each month STSC members create something around a set theme. This cycle, we

do our annual special "Fiction" issue.

Too Many Minus One

nova-nevedoma.com/too-many-minus-one/

Lil'brother and lil'sister were playing hide-and-seek one day, and she hid so well that the only way to find her was to look everywhere at once. The street wasn't too long but had places to hide. Everyone lived on one side in houses with even numbers, whilst on the other side there were no houses, only half-built half-ruins: foundations with rebar sticking out, fresh log frames—walls without roofs, without windows, without floors, without ceilings. Amidst all that there was an old tractor, brown with rust just like a bitten apple or a rotten white-speckled windfall one, alongside about a dozen more pensioned-off service vehicles: buses, combine harvesters, fire engines and even one half-lowered crane, which was jolly fun to climb, and even jollier to jump down from when winter piled up enough snow to keep you from breaking your legs or neck.

By the rules you could hide anywhere you liked, even in the neighbouring district, town, country, planet, star, if you were fast enough to run away whilst the seeker-finder counted to a hundred, aloud and at normal counting speed for everyone to hear and check whether the seeker had skipped any numbers by mischief or chance. Of course, for the game to be fair, you had to close your eyes. That's where the list of rules pretty much ended—a very simple and clear game for any child. Some hid worse, some hid better, and she, lil'sister of that very

lil'brother whose turn it was to seek, always hid best of all, so well that she was never found, and had to come out herself, never revealing her favourite secret places. The other children always sulked at her, took offence, and didn't even want to take her along to play. Playing with her was like chasing the wind, like catching a sunbeam, like counting to infinity. The maximum lil'brother managed to count to once was twenty thousand seven hundred and eleven. He was a mathematician. From those Olympic calculations his mouth went dry, his ribs ached, he fell down dormant, and when he woke up he told everyone that in his dream he'd counted to the end of the mathematical marathon, but no one, not his lil'sister, not their parents, not his friends believed him—only said he was a shameless fibber, liar liar pants on fire, and they'd all heard it themselves.

The day was ordinary except for the strange rain—so slow, so fine and so dense that it resembled fog, through which everything could be seen without any particular foggy difficulties. In other words, the sky was clouded over from horizon to horizon, and the air was wet to the touch, like in a bathhouse, only cold, didn't take your breath away or make your head spin.

Lil'brother counted to ninety-five and opened his eyes early, knowing that lil'sister had already scarpered and wouldn't catch him cheating. First thing he checked was the wardrobe that stood nailed to the tree. It was used as an undertreehouse where children, shutting themselves in, became teenagers, and teenagers became a bit grown-up, and grown-ups syringed themselves to death. The wardrobe was empty. He counted

fifteen steps to check between the tree branches—no one there either. Dropping to the damp grass, he crawled under one of the log frames but found no one and nothing except a pile of fag-ends and other strange objects left there by the teenagers. He went on, taking twelve steps to the large doghouse where he saw an old mangy mongrel sleeping quite alone, without any girls hiding beside it. He went through a series of other, more obvious places, counting hiding spots as he eliminated them, but found no traces of lil'sister either, no smell of cinnamon sweets, no bubblegum scent of her so-called perfume, not even a piece of her denim dress caught on a protruding nail. In the scrap metal heap, in one of the buses, under the seats at the very back, he found... no one either, nor in the fire engine's cabin, under the crane, between its tracks, but in the abandoned kiosk, where passers-by often chucked rubbish that had got stuck in their pockets, to his surprise... he found her.

She was looking at him, and he was looking through her, because looking at her wasn't possible—she was translucent from head to toe. She was silent, smiling, and he wasn't in the mood for smiles, though at first he was pleased, quickly un-pleased again when, not waiting for her reaction, he touched her shoulder, and his hand went through it as it would have gone through potato mash. She shook her head.

— Didn't find me, — she said, — keep looking.

Irritated, he tried to push her, as he often did, but again pushed through air.

— You always say things like a cow has four stomachs, — she began, —

an earthworm has five hearts, a spider has eight legs, a centipede has one hundred legs, and a millipede has one thousand, a dragonfly has twenty-eight thousand tiny eye parts in each eye, and I now have lots and lots of me's. Until you find them all, you won't find me.

— How many then?

— You don't know that number, you can't count that much.

— I know all numbers.

— Multiquadrillizillion, or maybe more.

— There's no such number, you dum-dum.

— I hid all my different me's in all my favourite places, even I don't remember how many there are.

— You're a dum-dum.

— Dum-dums can't hide like I do.

— But you can, even though you're a dum-dum.

— If you're so clever and not a dum-dum, go find me, — lil'sister said, smiling her girly I-know-something-you-don't smile.

— I don't want to play with you anymore.

— You have to. Mom and dad say you should play with me.

— You should play with dolls.

— But we're playing already.

— You're not playing fair.

— And you don't know numbers.

— I do. I know all numbers. You know that.

— Do you? Then prove it and find me, all my me's. If parents come back from work and I'm not there, what will you tell them?

Nothing to say, lil'brother frowned and pouted but went to search further. He habitually counted his steps—one, two, three—as the ghostly lil'sister followed him.

An hour later, after walking two hundred and thirty-seven steps through the neighbour's garden, he found another lil'sister in a small plum grove. The fence had rotted and fallen into the grass several years ago, covering the ditch like a bridge, and thus opening access to the garden, but no one cared to steal the plums because they were too sour to even look at. Under one of the trees, as if she had forgotten to hide, stood another version of his sister, as serene and translucent as the previous one. She smiled, took the other herself by the hand and they all went on together.

In the space under their own house's porch, behind a wall of hops climbing up strings, lil'brother found yet another lil'sister after

counting forty-three steps from the garden. She sat cross-legged, waiting. In the darkness her eyes shone like a cat's. All three see-through sisters suddenly merged into one and became slightly less see-through, slightly thicker in consistency, as lil'brother noticed when he tried to take her hand.

— However, alas. Still not all of me, — she giggled.

— I can see that. You're being annoying and I'm hungry.

— Go and eat then. Then you'll never find me, and I'll win.

— You always win.

— And you still play with me.

— Because you're my sister, — he protested. — I wouldn't play with you if you weren't my sister. I hate when you do your mysterious girl thing.

— I'm not just your sister and I'm not just a girl. Some of me is also your friend.

— I'm not sure about that anymore.

— Oh, you aren't?

— Friends do friendly things, sisters help their brothers—you're unfriendly, unhelpful, unsisterly, very girly, annoying, and also a dum-dum.

— Yes, different me's are many different things.

He sulked but continued looking and counting, for he, frankly, had little choice. He walked and walked, counting steps and hiding places, wandered and wandered, counting levels of his frustration, climbed the old mill, knocked on neighbours' doors, but no one was home—everyone was working or had gone to see the travelling circus or just for a walk, as if they foresaw he'd need their help and did everything to avoid it. Most of the time there was no one to find, nothing more to count, and none of the multiplicity of sisters helped.

— But I always help you plait your braids!

— I can plait braids myself.

— No you can't. If you can, why ask me then?

— You can see me whole, but if I want to see myself, I need to stand in front of the mirror, and even then I still only see a part of me.

— You should ask mom and dad to buy you another mirror. Or three more. Or a hundred. I'm not sure how many mirrors you'd need now.

He mumbled numbers under his breath, counted his fingers, theorised what if there were also invisible sisters, or negative sisters, or too-many-to-count sisters, like there were too-many-to-count other things: raindrops, hair, stars, air. Whenever he asked if he was close to finding the rest, asked for tips, to be a good sister, at least partially, and tell him at least something, hint at something, she only pointed out that

he was the one who was a mathematician, he was the one who boasted that he could count to any number imaginable. For the first time in what he deemed an already long life he wished he'd chosen to be good at football or mayhap drawing but definitely not mathematics.

Lil'brother found nine more strangely smiling versions of his sister after walking three thousand fifty-seven steps: one on a house roof, behind the chimney, one behind the transformer box with the dangerous electricity sign on it, one in a field in tall grass, and six more in other places, anywhere at all, as if she'd either completely forgotten how to play like before or was mocking him, simply standing in the middle of the road. He even started searching in their own house, which was generally against the rules, but acceptable when there were only two of them who played. He checked the wardrobes with clothes—found one, the dark and musty cellar—found another, the damp veranda—she was hiding there in the old oak chest, the dusty place under the stairs—one more again, counting each location as he eliminated it, successfully or not. The ghostly girls followed each other, sometimes merged, sometimes fragmented back, looking like a fan or a peacock's tail—eyed, beautiful, ominous.

In the end the search was “almost successful”. Lil'brother checked everywhere he could, counting every location twice to be sure. At some point, he had to call his friends. He didn't have many and many of those he had didn't fancy going out in the rain and preferred playing video games, which he would have preferred as well, to be honest. Some did come, though. They searched every square meter of the surrounding

space and found his sisters in various hiding places, many of which she asked to keep secret. It became possible to touch her—his hand didn't fall through her hand, which greatly pleased lil'brother. "Almost successful" because they didn't find the last lil'sister, but both decided it would do. The last lil'sister, hidden somewhere very far away, no one ever found anywhere—neither her lil'brother, nor she herself years later. Luckily, their parents didn't ever notice the difference.

— So, how many have you counted? — she asked, examining her assembled self with her hands on her hips.

— Too many minus one. You don't know that number.

— Tell me. I want to know.

— Multiquadrillizillion.

Her lil'brother was too boyish for her to take seriously; she never did, hence she only shook her head.

— I won, and you lost, — he announced proudly. — In your game.

Her lil'brother was too boyish in his boasting for her to agree with him; she sometimes did yet still preferred to tease him.

— You're a cheater.

— I didn't cheat.

— You know you did. You cheated. I heard it. I was hiding near. You

counted only to ninety-five.

nova·nevédoma

*A literary locus and solo samizdat press
for original fictions and translations.*

nova-nevedoma.com



scan to subscribe

Find us on Substack



blog.nova-nevedoma.com