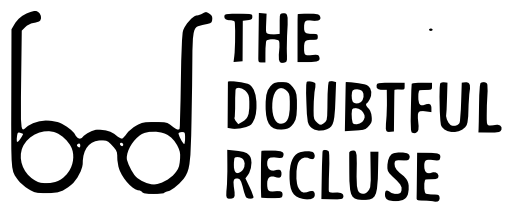


ROBERT MOSCALIUC

THE EFFETE

A NOVEL



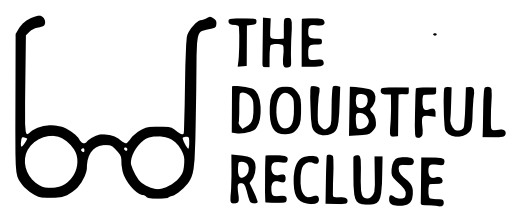
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Designed by Robert Moscaliuc & The Doubtful Recluse.

Published in Italy and the European Union.



2016

www.magnificentourage.wordpress.com

*TO M.L., WHO NEVER KNEW THE TRUTH AND HOPEFULLY
NEVER WILL.
THIS IS FOR YOU.*

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Prologue

Too much of a man to be a woman, and too much of a woman to be a man, I could only be an animal, half feline, half fish, a sexual chimera, the junction where all fantasies meet.

Don't name me yet; I'm not your pet, let me be.

Don't call me anything.

I'm a performer; don't give me a part yet. There is time for that.

I became a performer in the Theater a few years ago when my social life had suddenly come to a halt. Even today, as it was back then, I have no friends and do my best to alienate those who try to become friends. I keep telling myself that these new acquaintances who start "acting" as friends will eventually lose interest and vanish like they unmistakably do. And they do so, elegantly, one by one they go away, and I always presume it is their fault. I'm not bitter to see the back of them. It is never my fault, even though deep down I predict their departure with meticulous self-consciousness as if to prepare myself for it, if not to unconsciously trigger it. I am lucid as any human being can be under my circumstances and I pride myself in being an impossible protagonist. Yet, I am well aware that it is not something to be proud of. It's almost pathological to think in

such a way, isn't it? Somehow, at this present moment, I can't seem to manage to get up from the slums my mind has fallen in. I am not ill. I am perfectly normal.

What am I to do? Am I not as feeble as you?

My mind is a list of scenarios, a record of half-faces and whole sentences taken out of context. Self-fashioned slums, I call them, and up to this day I haven't managed to understand why I am doing this to myself. I am a mystery to myself and deep down I secretly hope I am a mystery to the people around me. Life means suffering and I agree to it mutely and entirely, no rebelliousness in my bones.

The only rebelliousness I have is that against my own body, against my catlike walk, the slyness I employ in my pursuit of pleasure, the stench of the scales that cover my body.

This is why I sought to become a performer, and not just any performer, but the protagonist of a story that would no longer be a part of the cogs and springs of my own mind. I took exquisite delight in letting others fathom a story for me, in becoming a passive actor. Here is what you need to say, this is what you need to do, and no creativity is necessary, no higher purpose. I stand tied to the strings of somebody else's mind, an invisible spectator, and I, the marionette. This is why I went to the Theatür, and later, that's how I met the love of my life, Remy.

Somehow, when you look for the end, an end, something happens, and that thing tells you that you should just hang on for just another day. It's like a new song that you hear on the radio while driving and then you look forward to it, and you live for one more day just to hear it again. Just one more song and this day, too, shall pass.

This is his story after all, Remy's, not mine, even though, as you shall see in the following pages, I wrote it as if it were mine. It is mine, when I think of it since it is me who wrote it. As a final and grand act of kindness and love to myself and to you, dear reader, I'll spill it out, word by word. Let this be a wet footprint on the floors of your mind.

He asked me to write it in this way before we said goodbye. I can only hope that by reading or hearing it you will feel the same way I felt and still feel about him even though I haven't seen him or heard from him for almost four years. Four years is not that

much. It's not a lifetime, you'll say, but they have been the most agonizing four years of my life, four years in which I've indulged with almost mathematical precision in all kinds of vices that would slowly and painstakingly take away the remainder of my days.

I started smoking the very day we said goodbye feverishly to each other.

I was in my brother's car, we had stopped at a gas station along the highway, and he, my brother, was outside smoking. I called Remy on his cell phone, and we were talking, and I was telling him I was out having dinner with some friends, and we were going to see each other the next day in the afternoon. We, the lovers. We'll meet at the airport and then eat something, and that we'll hold hands and try to be happy. I could almost hear his smile through the phone like a child who hears ghosts at night under his bed. And I knew that it was going to be the last time we speak, no goodbyes, nothing else. I knew it the moment he picked up the phone. In fact, I knew it even before dialling his number. And I hoped, thus stranded on the brink of this final and painful solution, the devil might just finally listen to my prayers and magically transform me into somebody else. Into the person he desired and hoped to see. That didn't happen, of course. The thought of disappearing from his life entirely grew large, so large that it covered the sky. We'll just stop talking and then forget about each other. I did stop talking at one point. I told him I was going to call him back. I switched off my phone immediately to switch it back on three days later.

At that time, I blamed the brother for my initiation into smoking.

When I was asked why I had started, the scapegoat was always my brother. And his driving skills and genetics and this fucking world and other Freudian explanations, never Remy, never those shared moments of affection that felt like the end. Was that the end of solitude and cold sheets?

When I turned my phone back on there were two text messages from him. In one of them, he was asking me if everything was okay. In the other one, he was desperately pushing me aside, telling me that he always knew. He expected it. A ghost lover, that's what he called me. I denied it till the end.

He tried calling me again, but I switched off my phone just to avoid seeing his number and name.

Slowly, Remy drifted into oblivion.

The universe was to be blamed for this. The unfair and uneven distribution of beauty. The falseness of all those stories about Faust and the devil. The stupidity of believing in the existence of a Prince Charming, believing that there is one defining moment, love at first sight [*laugh*], and all those bags of crap with which we adorn those hot air balloons we ride to nothingness. What I regret most after all this time is not having understood that in order to fly you need to let go of all those stories because they pull you down. Like a suicidal maniac I filled my pockets with stones and walked into the murky waters of my solitude.

Then I started doing drugs, whatever came into my hands, and with each sip from this deadly goblet I hoped to come closer to my death, the kind of death that would make my oblivion complete and irreversible.

The drugs did alleviate the pain, and yet as my veins turned into torrents of pleasure Remy's figure stood like a giant boulder, and pleasure washed over and went away the way it came. I have preserved an acute memory of him despite the fact that we've never kissed or touched in any way. In those moments of all-embracing clarity so sublimely constructed by those wretched narcotics, that memory came into full view as if there was nothing else hidden in between the folds of my assaulted brain.

As if Remy was the only thing in there.

And I accepted that vision when it came like a father to greet his prodigal son returning, and those moments of assault on my senses soon turned into places of refuge, and I was a refugee. And there we touched and cried in each other's arms, and after that we stood and watched how those torrents of pleasure swirling like whirlpools around us dissipated and roared until the stars in the sky were visible again to the naked eye.

Our bodies were naked eyes. Our skin had the acute sensitivity of fragile corneas. And then he was gone again and I cried like a child that cries after a dead father, loving and hating him at the same time. In his absence, I became the prodigal son.

Remy, you are the fear that comes with hunger.

The Theatür, on the other hand, was a permanent state of assault; it was the suspension of whatever I was and whatever I thought I was. It was a narcotic in itself. In the ecstasy of my performance I no longer had to think about my lack of friends, all social rules of conduct suspended while I was in there, or rather I had to receive a different set of rules, rules that ultimately forced me to accept myself. I had to be myself in there. So I took my clothes off, discarding the feelings of fear and shame that had been so minutely ingrained into my system. I stopped praying, and did my best to forget each and every prayer I memorized so diligently when I was a child. I did my best to forget about everything, the bullying from high school, their laughter, and my fear of them. Stripped of all these, like a resurrected messiah, I entered the Theatür.

Dream One

Two faggots on a spaceship, dreaming. [*This is a possible title for this story, if you wish*]. Write this down, you'll need it for future reference. You'll have this dream with you forever; nurture it like a baby, feed it, let it suck your breast dry.

We were on a spaceship, dressed in white metal, pompous white metal dresses, the flesh underneath, Robocop style, the kind you see in Hollywood films, and we were smiling: I was the lady of the spaceship, you told me, and you were the lord in control. I was under your command and in awe of the pompousness of my white metal dress, faggot.

Anyways, we had no sense of purpose in the vastness of the Milky Way, that kind of crap, every gesture we made was pointless, you know, that kind of immortal bag of shit you hear at the university studying Borges. So we gave up. We sat there, looking at the stars, doing nothing, except for holding hands if that can be considered doing something. The stars did not move, and if they did move we had no sense of it.

We did not care, Jesus, about the fucking stars, we believed we were alone, and we were. I can't really say whether we were utterly alone. One never knows how that goes, there's always somebody watching. God? Whatever was out there, it was watching us, and we didn't give a fuck.

I extended my arm delicately to you and touched the back of your neck, eyelashes fluttering the way a man can flutter his eyelashes at another man. I felt like fucking Marilyn Monroe. I wanted to say: look at us, two faggots holding hands on a spaceship. The word, you said, please avoid that word, and I promised I would avoid it. So, we were holding hands and I acted like a lady and you acted like a man sipping sugarless tea in the right manner, your erect pinkie standing apart from the teacup handle.

There's no sight of our feet, but one takes it for granted that our feet were standing on the floor of the spaceship, which was probably made of glass so that we could see the stars under us.

Could I say that we were stepping on the stars? What a load of romantic crap you would say. So no, there's no sight of our feet. This dream is like indigestion, or constipation rather, because we must follow some sort of internal logic that is completely extraneous to us, beings made of flesh.

What kind of tea was it? I have no idea, though there was an idea of tea nonetheless, some nameless drink. There were the teacups so naturally one assumes we were drinking tea. Could there be coffee instead of tea? That is not entirely impossible considering that grandmother always used the cups to drink coffee in the afternoon. Tea is for the sick, she would say, so no tea around the house please, especially in the afternoon.

I can't see your shoulders. Not because they're hidden behind the metal dress but rather because I'm not looking at them. I could spend an eternity looking at your shoulders imagining the hands that have touched them in the throes of orgasm. This doesn't mean, of course that you have no shoulders. I'm not looking at them; I'm assuming your shoulders are where they're supposed to be. There's more to this dream, the world does not revolve around shoulders.

We had no sense of smell or taste, no sense of time or space.

We kept on swimming in the black molasses of the Milky Way. A paradox, we were, white, not like this sheet of paper you are holding now in your hands. A different kind of white, the kind of white that makes you fight until the blood comes out. The eye gets used to the contrast, it desires it.

What makes the universe go round if not the fact that we are here, conjoined like a pair of circus Siamese twins.

And then.

And then the Milky Way got really milky, like yuck, the milk was all over the place, and it stank. The Milky Way has gone off, you suggested. But it wasn't that, it smelled like chlorine; bleach water, like fish, in that area whatsoever. It's semen, you suggested, that's sperm, all over the place. It's Semen Way now, you suggested, and I said, shut up, you faggot, let's observe. And in the middle of this sea of white there was a metal sphere constantly going up and down, up and down, like potato chips being dipped into a sauce infinitely.

Shiny, beautiful metal sphere, I like you so much, I'm in love with you. It was a perfect sphere. I even told you, look, it's a perfect sphere, look at the shadows and little lights playing hide and seek on that perfect sphere. You nodded in agreement. Of course, you couldn't have nodded in agreement because you had no head; your head was made of eyelashes. I can only see your eyelashes, fluttering. There was an idea of nodding in agreement because I wanted you to agree with me.

And yet, first impressions are always wrong.

And yet, the sphere was not a sphere at all; it was more on the egg side of things. It was a metal egg always moving up and down and you put your teacup on the table and stared at the shiny egg. We both stared at it, saying nothing, but thinking so many things.

You thought: [*this part intentionally left blank*]. You accused me of censorship, and I laughed because it was just another way of telling me I'm crazy. The censor is always stupid. One of the reasons why I censored your thoughts was because my thoughts are much more important in this particular case.

And I thought: oh, the barren womb, no child shall ever come out of it, the eggshell shall never break. In your dreams, you said. And I said, yes, this is my dream, faggot, my dream for you. Let's fly together under the belly of this shiny sphere until it covers the sky.

The Finiteness of the Alphabet

This consciousness is borrowed.

This consciousness shall not be wasted on you, on anyone for that matter.

[Insert deep breath here. Then carry on reading.]

That's how things begin, he thinks, with a door opening or closing, depends on the situation in which you find yourself. You can never know what's behind a closed door unless you open it. Ha, ha! How pathetic, to be thinking of that, of doors, and of mirrors for that matter, or anything that might suggest a certain amount of mystery, metaphorical thinking and so on. He can sense the presence of somebody behind the door but he's afraid to open it. He reaches out, touches the handle hoping that whoever is behind the door might sense his hesitation and do something just for the sake of breaking the ice. Yet nothing happens.

The rattle of the pipes somewhere, distant, a ventilator maybe, the constant hum of tireless entropy, bricks talking to each other, the whole thing is a dialogue he cannot stay out of, it absorbs him like a giant sponge.

His hand goes back to his pocket. He takes a step back and looks around. The corridor is flanked on both sides by doors like the one he now stands in front of and it feels as if he's back in the house, that house, reliving that moment when he had to tell his mother about everything and a lump in his throat kept stopping him. Mother, please understand, he finds himself thinking. Then, come back. The hum of the building, indeed, awakened entirely to a hazy reality. He finds it difficult to stand on his own feet.

Every movement is like a rehearsal, he feels. Every word coming out of his mouth must be rehearsed first. Careful calculations are made; possible reactions are taken into account. What might the audience think? What will my mother say when she finds out? What will father say? The letters of the alphabet are carefully lined up against an imaginary wall: reaction A,

reaction B, reaction C, and so on, until the entire alphabet is spent on possible outcomes.

He pushes the handle with his right hand, a rush of adrenaline, it's time to act, and procrastinating would only make it worse. The body is huddled over the metal railing of the bridge and it falls into the water. First slowly, then really falling. The handle makes a terrible sound, rubber on metal. [*A list of sounds, hundreds, infinite, the kind of list detectives make, or do they?*] That would wake somebody up in the morning, he thinks, that sound. Terrible thing to be woken up by it especially after a heavy night spent in the Theatür. He hasn't told his mother about the Theatür either. He's hoping not to tell her, she wouldn't understand it anyway. He's hoping to get away with it. Pretend nothing of the sort ever happened to boys like him. She will find out eventually, focus on the now. [*Mothers know, they're supposed to know, I'm your lump of flesh, mother.*]

He lingers in the doorway wishing his presence will be acknowledged and he won't have to witness anything embarrassing. There's somebody already inside the booth. A heap of clothes then, carefully folded on a chair by the wall, the heat that stays behind on the sheets like a poem of passionate lost love. It's so difficult to do this. Why does it have to be like this? Why this veil descending like a whisper over everything, like dust that settles stubbornly over the tracks that were once so alive? He isn't seeing the heap of clothes, the shirt and the jeans, but he is seeing this succession of words laid out as on a string one after the other driven forward by nothing actually, nothing except maybe the desire to see them like that, to talk about them as such, as a heap of clothes, as a shirt carefully folded and placed on top of the jeans, the heap of clothes, no, the heap of words staring back at him as a hole in the ground would stare back at a congregation of mourners gathered around a grave before the first fist of mud is thrown over something that was once a life. And the mourners know that a reaching hand extending beyond the gaping mouth of the ground would never, never be able to take back what has been taken away, not even the name that once belonged to the corpse.

Then there's the cheap smell, another presence, invading his nostrils, a combination of sweat and wood. Something,

something, the wolf in the nightmare, or just a really big dog that can be either bad or good, and the mind plays with these two options, a juggler that mind, and there is a point where both options are in the air, dancing, and the mind stops and looks at you for a moment and smiles, and it is a smile telling you the situation is as clear as it can get. The smell in the room. On other occasions he would have been able to guess the fragrance. It's too vague. He takes a look inside, his left foot still in the hallway, and immediately regrets it. He has the indistinct feeling it's a bad idea to go inside somebody else's booth while the sign on the door says BUSY in big red letters.

The first thing he sees is a red curtain and for a moment he feels as if the smell comes from the curtain itself. It's a mistake, the thought tiptoes on his tongue, to associate a smell with the first thing you stumble upon. The curtain covers another entrance, barely visible behind it, an attempt to maintain appearances and a sense of intimacy, privacy almost. Near this second entrance there is a wooden lectern, a small reading lamp embedded in its top margins, and on it a purple folder neatly decked with the logo of the Theatür, a cube with a small opening on top like a chipping in the edge. Next to the folder a small screen, turned off except for a luminous dot blinking erratically, and a keyboard. The opposite wall is covered entirely by a mirror. 'I'm in', he says, loud, his left foot still holding the door. [*Should he say that? Should he say anything?*] There is a short silence, and then a voice, machinelike, comes through one of the speakers. 'Will you do that for me?' Then another voice, official, closer, intimate, that of a woman. By closing this door you accept the terms and conditions of the Theatür regarding joint performances. He closes the door and starts taking his clothes off, one by one, a ritual dictated by someone who isn't him, a different version of him maybe, one rendered invisible by years and years of shame, now coming out as man who's been found not guilty by the jurors. Such boyishness, candour in every move, the kind of movements cigarette smoke makes in its ascent to the atmosphere.

Opposite the mirror, stacked neatly against the wall, stands a row of five metal lockers, their contents made indistinct by dark Plexiglas doors.

One of the rules of the Theatür: once you enter a booth you cannot get out unless your client grants you an exit token, or the performance is over. Most clients don't grant exits. They pay for it after all. The client is always right.

The other voice comes thundering through the speakers again. 'Will you do that for me? Kneel for me, put your hands together as if you are praying!' The door clicks. Everything else becomes irrelevant. Even the mother waiting to be told the big black secret. No standing ovation for you if you're coward enough to ask for an exit token. Sometimes things might get a little rough between performer and client. Thank the saints for the plastic wall that separates us, he thinks, humans from beasts, masters from slaves. He never understood which is which. On which side of the wall does he stand? Never show you're afraid, any sign of fear easily turns off clients. Just do what you are told, don't think about it. Take your shirt off, jeans, leave your boxer shorts on, and don't smile unless you are told to smile. You are not allowed to show emotions on your own. You can have emotions but you can only show those that are prescribed by the client.

He takes a quick look at the profile of the client included in the purple folder. Nothing special, they're all the same: there's no picture included except for the one added automatically by the system and the information inserted is full of contradictions. No carefully construed identities, nobody expects that, five wasted minutes on which to build a virtual life complete with fetishes and fantasies. [*My own feet, or my own boxer shorts turn me on.*]

Headline: married guy who could no longer bear the smell of his wife's cunt runs away from home to experiment with younger boys. They're all little kickers when they turn sixty. [*I can't stand my wife anymore, she's such a bore, and she's such a pain in the ass. These women, they do not want to be taught.*] Teach hypocrisy to the younger generations, then. The kind of men that will look at you from above as if they're giving you permission to discover something that has long been hidden under the clothes they wear every day. I know some things you don't know, son, so listen to me. Yes, father, forgive me. [*Laugh*]

The Theatür offers complete anonymity and discretion. That's what they are looking for. Boys locked up in plastic cases, blindfolded, bodies and lives outlined in a couple of words, too

general and vague to actually mean something. They don't wish to know too much, it makes them nervous and tense, so it's better to tone it down with the words and descriptions.

Behind all this secrecy there's the promise of quick release, a moment of complete oblivion when wives disappear. It's not like you're getting married after the show is over. He puts the folder back on the lectern.

He types in the request to enter. Time to spice things up a bit. That turns them on, he thinks. Do what the master asks of you, no questions asked. The computer acknowledges his request and asks for his name and password. His other self descends back into his skin, and it fits like a glove. Little boy jumping off the fence, falling softly on the ground, catlike, running away from home, the mother unknowingly peeling potatoes in the kitchen. Time to play a game. Put your blindfold on.

He takes a quick look in the mirror before placing the blindfold. Black boxer shorts, his favourites, some workout is needed, for sure, a few hours at the gym for a couple of weeks would do the trick. He still looks good, he thinks, too bad for the eyes, the client won't be able to see them. Once you're inside the booth it's the rest of the body that matters. Body over mind, honey, we want to see some action. We'll mask our deepest and dirtiest desires with a long and transparent veil of philosophical brooding. Hundreds of male bodies on a conveyor belt, one after the other, like children getting ready for their first day of school, eager to meet new people, not yet knowing that as they grow older they'll start keeping bigger secrets from each other and their body will have to keep up, and change, and hate, until they'll start loving, and hating. The hair is fine, a bit long, and curly, needs a trim, tomorrow, he thinks. It's going to be a bad idea, he says to himself, the haircut that is. The hairdresser is going to do that dramatic *voilà* while uncovering the disturbing newness of his look. And then he's going to regret it as he always does. Details get lost with the blindfold on. He pulls the curtain to reveal the second entrance.

Though blindfolded, he can still see the faint blue light guiding his steps toward the stage. They call it a stage but it's nothing like a stage. Once you pass through the curtained entrance there is a narrow corridor leading to the stage flanked by dim blue lights.

He can feel that smell again, stronger now. It must be one of those cheap scented candles. Somehow all the booths smell the same. You'll never be able to forget the smell. It's like a mouse, the smell, some sort of rodent, or some other animal that you don't want in your house, he thinks. It gets into your house, finds a cosy place, and it stays there for as long as it can. You get used to it, and you almost forget it, until it returns with new meanings.

'I'm your dad', the other voice continues, emotionless, 'I made you'. He can see a faint light, almost romantic, at the end of the corridor. The corridor suddenly gets wider, the air conditioner is on, and the cold air gives a sharp edge to the smell. It's almost pleasant. 'Rise from your mother's womb, I command you to, come to the world and let your body be exploited by our deepest desires.' The ultimate fantasy, the father who's having an affair with the son while mother is out shopping. I gave life to you, it's high time I got something back from this initial investment. Oh no, it's not disgusting, it couldn't be disgusting, that second nature is naturally endowed with abstraction, rules are suspended when satisfaction enters the room or simply shows its naked leg behind the door.

There's a body in the middle of the stage in foetal position. He can see the outline of the curved spine like that of a hopeless and humiliated man, a heap of flesh about to receive its fatal blow.

A thought creeps in like water under a closed door. He has the uncanny feeling he already knows that heap of flesh, every inch of its skin, it's that heap of flesh that was, in another reality, the coronation of his fantasies. He had once fallen in love with this beautiful trapezius, the thighs glistening under the spotlight.

Muscles are not just muscles. Skin is not just skin, but a network of free associations, there are no ligaments in the body, not that kind of ligaments at least, other kind of ligaments, infinitely long knotting body to emotion.

The body is first a body, and then it's something else, a prayer, he thinks, a build-up of promises, above all, promises of affection, don't call it love yet, the mind doesn't like it, and satisfaction, the sooner the better. Agastopia they call it, that's the word, admiring just one part of someone's body, the rest doesn't matter, the rest is, it exists, the rest is of no consequence. What will he say? What should he say? He thinks of the alphabet

again: reaction A, reaction B, reaction C, and so on, until the end of the alphabet. The alphabet is limited; he needs a letter for every shade of emotion, joy plus something else, a pinch of annoyance here and there to make it more interesting, or annoyance with a pinch of joy, the possibilities are endless.

Character B, please stand by, the female voice comes through the speakers, he stops; his request to enter the show has not yet been accepted, rule of the Theater, certain conditions must be met before another performer can enter the stage. He needs to be introduced; the transitions must be slow and elegant, like in a dance. How much time does he need? The paranoid type, he presumes, he'll check every detail in the performer's profile, interpret every word, find nuances in it, and only then he'll grant access. The other performer is still on the floor, position unchanged, his curved spine a vision of pain. He can see the outline of his ribs half hidden in shadow.

'Do you have somebody else?' the other voice disrupts the silence. 'Tell me, are you in love with somebody else?' This must be the moment the client is expecting, when a version of truth caves in. He's been practicing his happily-ever-after. Make it look credible, otherwise no credits for you. *[Enter jealous father, ready to crush whoever stands in the way of his desires. The audience is applauding loudly, they know the actor.]*

'Who is he?' The voice goes at it again, rougher now, with a hint of fury, the finiteness of the alphabet. 'I'm in love with him', the other performer says, his voice intimately held at his chest. 'I met him at the coffee shop, he's a nice guy, I might want to spend the rest of my life with him'. Coffee shop, he thinks, good choice, the last place on earth where they would have met. A cruise ship would have been so much better. Romantic places seem more plausible. They seem to prefer that, the ideal husbands, majestic wedding ring on their finger, in marriage attitude matters.

'What have I done to deserve this? Have I not been good enough for you?' You're married, he thinks, and you're probably a dirty old man who's too afraid to face the truth. I bet you think of little boys when you fuck that cunt wife of yours, the one you married thinking it will pass. A second nature must always be dismissed. Desire does not vanish it takes different shapes. You

think of the violence of your passion and it turns you on. Request pending.

'Stand up, confront me', the other performer stands up; he can almost sense the relief in his muscles, bones cracking. 'You have been very good to me, father', he says, 'but I think it's time to move on'.

The speakers fall silent for a couple of moments. There's only one moment, he thinks, the moment when you realize things are no longer working, revelation, light, and fusion, like a car that comes out of a long tunnel. Your eyes try to adjust to the light, dumbfounded, you think it suddenly makes sense; three dimensions of time, and all of them make sense, at the same time. In moments like these you become a small god, a rooster in the backyard proudly walking. Too bad it comes at moments like these. Character B, access has been granted; you may now enter the stage.

He steps over the black and yellow line that divides the corridor and the stage, moving carefully, looking at his bare feet, unfamiliar with the structure of the stage. He goes toward the other performer not knowing what else he should be doing. 'Is this him? Is this the guy you met in the coffee shop?' There is a moment of silence again, the other performer turns toward him in surprise, not expecting anyone. The other performer is not blindfolded. Dark hair frames his face. 'Answer me! Is this him?' He comes closer. He's sweating. 'No,' the other performer pauses, mouth open, 'yes, this is him, this is the guy I have fallen in love with.'

Your beauty is like a majestic combination of lines and sound, your body is a symphony, tragic, commanding, he thinks. Is there no way out of this room? The smile, and again the mind juggling with the two possibilities. The smile of the actor or the smile of the character. The mind smiles too as the two possibilities go up and then down. I'm starting to like this game. Isn't this what I was made for?

'Kneel', the voice says. He doesn't do anything, just stares at the other performer who doesn't do anything either. 'Kneel', the voice says again, now furious. The other performer kneels. Then the voice is suddenly telling him to take his blindfold off. A short look at the other performer and he understands, play by the

rules, avoid clichés, don't get too creative otherwise you don't get the credits and it's all in vain.

'Look at me,' the voice booms, 'I want to see your eyes when you tell me that you are in love with him.' He turns toward the audience, but there's no one there, the light coming from the stage doesn't go far into whatever is beyond the plastic wall, and he can only see himself and the other performer, half naked, as if caught kissing in church when nobody was looking.

The actor knows not how the audience feels in such circumstances, that's why lines and practiced gestures are needed, some form of outline to limit any emotional deviations. The actor is a slave first to a hidden author and then to a hidden spectator, that's the beauty of the Theatür, that's what they've told him when he was taken in. And he accepted it, mainly because he has never been able to take care of himself, he had always felt the need of somebody else, and the Theatür promised to take care of him, and more.

'Have you slept with him yet? Was it good?' the voice echoes. He looks at the other performer and waits for some sort of sign, which doesn't come, or, at least, doesn't come fast enough because seconds seem like hours. He needs to intervene, and fast. 'We made love, yes,' he says, 'a few days after we've met. It was very good, I've rarely felt like that in my life.' He immediately feels sorry about having said it, too much, he thinks, might have gone over the line with this one, that final rarely was a bit too much. It has been said; he cannot take it back, he can't do that, not even in the labyrinthine rooms of the Theatür where things can be moulded to look like other things.

He tries to take it back. 'It was unusual, for me,' he says, almost apologetically. No, he doesn't feel sorry for the bastard, he shouldn't feel sorry. He looks at the other performer again but all he gets is a blank stare. The other performer is a statue, alluring, full of hidden meanings not even the sculptor would have fathomed in his time. 'You find it unusual to make love to another guy?' It's a question he did expect, so the reply comes swiftly. 'I used to find it unusual, but now, since I've done it a couple of times, I no longer find it unusual.' The spectator bursts into a fit of laughter. Again, that look like rapid fire, they're both little boys now, and father is trying to explain a sex joke by taking

the sex out of it. And they pretend to understand. You idiot, he thinks of the hidden spectator, go back to your wife and see if there's any meaning there, because here you won't find any that might suit your needs.

This is only recreational, like smoking weed, there's no commitment to it, he hopes there's no serious commitment to it, otherwise the Theatür wouldn't make sense, this whole meticulous construction of false identities.

There is a moment of silence and a click. He watches the other performer as a shadow of horror crosses his face. This must be it, he thinks, the client has quit the session and has moved on to other performers or to the kind of performance the client himself must do once he is out of the Theatür. Mechanically, the female voice, official and even, comes through the speakers. The client has requested a rupture in the stage symbiosis. Please refer to the appointed backstage lockers.

On stage, the lights are dimmed and the guiding blue lights come into view. They don't say anything to each other and move swiftly to the front chamber where the metal lockers are now marked with blood red lights. Behind the small glass doors of the lockers and under the red light the objects inside seem almost supernatural.

Stage symbiosis, he recalls, means that their act needs to split so that the client could give directions to each performer individually. They won't be able to talk to each other either. Two planets, orbiting, too far to fall into each other's gravitational pull. He opens the locker to find a small plastic case. He can hear the other performer breathing heavily. They have been warned against this. Things often go wrong when stage symbiosis is broken. They need to be careful and opt out if things get too dangerous. 'You need to put this in your ear,' the other performer says. Inside the small plastic case there is one earplug, the size of a bean. He pushes it inside his right ear, as far as it can go. 'I think we need to put this on too.' The other performer points to a neatly packed bundle tied with a red ribbon placed on the top shelf of one of the lockers.

The woman's voice comes back this time through their earplugs. You have one minute and twenty seconds resume your performance. They unpack their bundles: two latex costumes, an

outer layer resembling skin, same colour, same opacity, complete with body hair and sacks for their genitals. Rumour has it that none of the clients has yet managed to make the difference, or shown signs of having made out the difference. No complaints were filed, no memberships were cancelled yet because of that. People keep coming to the Theatür.

He takes his boxers off, his back turned to the other performer, and eases himself into the strange costume like a little boy who has been asked to undress for a medical check. He did that, a few years back, when high school boys were being recruited for the army. Luckily for him the law changed and it was no longer compulsory to enrol with the army when his time came. He can still feel the bitter shame of that moment, when he had to ask the supervisor to go in alone. All the other boys went in there together, a group of shameless retards. Now he has gone well beyond that point, beyond feeling ashamed of his own body and genitals. That second nature is always present, just around the corner, ready to intervene even if only called upon to cover your eyes when something embarrassing is about to happen or has already happened.

He sees the other performer hesitating, his boxers still on, the latex costume dangling from his right hand. 'I won't look,' he says, 'here, I'll turn around'. He turns around, his face to the wall, and hears the whisper of clothes coming off and falling to the floor, and then the hiss of latex pulled over heels and knees. Feels like a second skin, he thinks. 'Put your underwear back,' the other performer says, 'he'll notice the change if you go in without your underwear.' Not a second skin then, because he doesn't feel ashamed of it, he should have felt a bit ashamed, just one bit, being naked in front of somebody he doesn't yet know very well. Something at the back of his mind tells him, in a scornful tone, that maybe he isn't at all past that boyish shame. He smiles, and then realizes where he is.

He can see the other performer's back, sleek neck, muscular shoulders and arms. He must have been the apple of somebody's eye for sure, girls giggling when he showed up, other boys secretly wishing he were dead, or at least somewhere else, far away, not in their backyard, not in their garden of roses. Do I look like that? He wonders, and for a split second he wishes he

could get out of his body just to have a glimpse of his own back and neck. There's no time for that, they need to get back on stage, and their client is waiting. 'I'm Milo,' the other performer says. He smiles, reaction A, even in the Theatür, symbol of user discretion and anonymity, there is space for good manners, reaction B, a moment of happiness, reaction C, reaction D, he stops at D. He cannot recall what D stands for. D stands for desire. Ha, ha! It's all very funny. He shakes Milo's hand, a firm grip; that is what they tell you, it's all about the grip, makes you look good in the other person's eyes. 'Remy,' he says, 'I'm Remy.'

The woman's voice comes again through the earplug, more urgent now. Your time has expired; please resume your performance.

The light has been switched back on, and the stage feels different as if it has been refreshed by magic while they were away. He wonders how long the show will take. The client must have gained forces in their absence. Is your cock still hard, you pathetic moron, or do you need some new turn on to make it work? The other performer kneels at his feet with a swift movement. He did not expect that. He didn't hear anything being said, and then he remembers that the client will be giving them orders separately. Performers might turn against each other, the Theatür Handbook says if it's in the interest of the spectator. 'Don't move,' the voice of the spectator sounds different, more commanding, threatening almost, as if the client has found out some secret information about him in the meantime and now seeks revenge. Milo leans forward still on his knees and cradles his right cheek on his belly. He can feel his hesitation and the warmth of Milo's cheek on his belly. 'Caress his head,' the voice says, and for a moment he feels as if the voice is coming from somewhere else, a voice caught in between the folds of his brain. In the confusion he doesn't do anything and the voice comes back. 'I said, caress his head!'

He reaches out and takes Milo's head in between his hands and caresses it lovingly, like a mother would do to a child. He can feel Milo relaxing and yielding to his touch, pushing against his belly, moving closer. 'You are both disgusting,' the voice booms, 'look at you, pathetic faggots'. Milo's body grows instantly rigid. It's

okay, nobody likes that word anyway. I don't like it either. You must really hate it, he thinks while still stroking Milo's hair.

Just keep playing the game, forget about the words, it will soon be over, he wants to say but doesn't. Is Milo thinking the same? He wishes he could say all these words to Milo, reassure him of his presence and his support.

'You think there's a future to this? This has no meaning, and it won't acquire meaning no matter how hard you try.' He thinks, reaction A, fury, reaction B, anger, I would punch him in the face right now if I had the chance to do it, reaction C, reaction D, and so on. There are not enough letters in the alphabet. Reconsider the list again, reality might not be as complex as you believe it is.

Reaction M: he's lost in that embrace, Milo's warm body surrendering to his body as if asking for protection. And he feels as if he could offer Milo that protection, if not here then somewhere else, outside the Theatür, beyond the desires and commands of the client. All they need, he thinks, is a moment of solitude, to set things straight. [*The juggler is smiling. Self-righteously.*] The lights are dimmed, there is a sort of commotion in his earplug, and another voice comes through the speakers. The user has left the show. You have both been granted exit tokens. Please refer to your section supervisor.

Speed. The senses finally aware of it, charging, moving, their breathing audible, the show is over, the actor must shed his mask. Milo stands up abruptly and pulls at his latex costume as if to convince his body that it's not his real skin that is making him feel so uncomfortable. 'Do you think he bought it?' He, Remy, feels disconcerted, as if woken up from a deep sleep. 'We'll see about that,' Milo says, 'we'll have to check it with the supervisor's office on our way out.' Milo goes backstage and he follows him, guided by the blue lights coming from the floor.

He takes off the latex costume and puts his clothes back on. Milo is doing the same completely unaffected by his presence. The boxer briefs, the jeans, and then the white shirt. They do it in silence. There's only that faint sound coming from the walls as if the bricks themselves are talking to each other, the sounds of a faraway overly industrialized city. The constant hum or energy being consumed.

In the Theatür you are always being watched by somebody, there is no blind spot in here, he thinks. His earlier shame feels somehow useless now, and if he could he would take it back, it's ridiculous. Milo is singing some shapeless tune, probably to avoid engaging in conversation. He puts the earplugs back in their plastic case and neatly folds the latex costume into a bundle that he then ties with the ribbon that originally belonged to them. His shirt still smells of his perfume.

'Is this your first time here?' He is startled, caught like that while halfway through buttoning his shirt, his belt undone. Milo looks embarrassed. 'Yes', he says, 'this is my first time. That was my first show, to tell you the truth.' Milo is nodding his head rhythmically as if to the beats of a song of which he is the only listener. 'Have you been here long? I noticed that you know your way around the stage.' Milo keeps nodding, keeping eye contact with him. 'Yeah,' he says, 'I've been around for a while, I haven't seen you before, and that's why I asked you.' He doesn't say anything, disarmed by Milo's sudden change of attitude. It must be the clothes, he thinks, they must have some sort of magic power, he becomes a completely different person when he's out of them. Must be that perfume, what's it called, the Pit of Passion, easy to remember, an alliteration that leaves a mark on your sense of hearing, and also your sense of smell. Some say it drives people mad with desire: the pit of passion puts you in peril, beware [*the B pronounced like a P, to maintain the alliteration*]. That's what the commercials say. He thinks of wide stretches of lavender fields and bergamot, their inescapable smell. On a couple of occasions he had thought of purchasing a bottle or two, just to see how it works. It's like getting a tattoo, he thinks, it says too much about you, so he let it go.

'I'm waiting for you,' Milo says, as if things hadn't been clear before. 'Why would you want to wait for me?' His heart starts racing, he can feel blood rising to his ears. He must look ridiculous, he thinks. 'We both need to check out with our supervisor,' Milo says, 'so maybe you could hurry up a bit, I'd like to do another show today.' The body falling while asleep, the sudden gasp of terror, and then the realization that the ground beneath your feet is not a giant's open mouth. For a second he has the strong urge to just run away without saying anything, but

then, he thinks, that would only add to the current ridiculousness of the situation. And all this time he was putting his clothes back on slowly so as to prolong his stay and maybe have a chat with Milo. But it was never about that, he thinks, disappointed. It's all about the credits received for the show. He remembers it now; it was there, in the Theatür's list of rules of conduct. When two performers play a part in the same act they need to split the credits in equal parts according to the amount of work and energy they have put into it. That's why they need to go together to the supervisor, to see whether their efforts are sold at a good value. Both parties need to attend the bargain, so as to avoid further hassle. Everything has to be done within a legal framework, as prescribed by the Theatür Handbook for Beginners.

Every kind of relationship that can occur within the walls of the Theatür has already been described in legal terms. There is no way out. Even our bodies, he thinks, even our own bodies fall into categories. Bodies are reduced to forms, shapes, and those shapes are further named, placed into other categories, slight differences are flattened like bumps in the road, absorbed by a protective system that doesn't want its users to suffer too much from the shock of novelty. Like pawns in a game of chess our bodies are aligned for inspection, and then placed in little boxes that are never the right size. One is always too small or too big for the kind of boxes they create during sleepless nights.

'Yeah, sure, I'll be ready in a second.' He pulls his jeans on, and the leather jacket, the kind of clothes, his brother once told him, that have to be worn with some sort of boyish pride he has never managed to claim as his own. He couldn't even fake it; he didn't have the stamina for that. His brother told him that too, that he didn't have the guts to do that sort of thing, act smoothly with the girls, use his good looks to seduce them into his bed. It wasn't the seducing that was an issue for him, it was what came after, he just couldn't cope with the fact that making love to other bodies involved reducing that body to a tool of pleasure, to obtain and end. Very Kantian, a friend of his told him, your own body is a weapon of choice, use it wisely. The first and last weapon, he thinks, and then, is this any different? Is the Theatür any different? You are their weapon of choice, that's the essential

difference, what sets the Theatür apart from the rest of your life. Others get to choose your body and use it as a weapon of choice against other bodies or against themselves in the absence of stage symbiosis, as the Theatür handbook calls it.

Milo has wandered off, cell phone in his hand, the features of his face turned sharp by the blue light of the screen. He checks his pockets as he always does before leaving, wallet, check, cell phone, check, Theatür ID card, check, everything is where it should be. He stops on his way out to look at Milo and his childlike beauty, afraid to interrupt him. Milo notices the change and turns toward him, opens his mouth as if to say 'there you are' but stops and looks away embarrassed caught in an awkward situation. He looks away too to ease the momentary tension. He holds the door open for Milo who passes absentmindedly beside him still looking at his phone. Yes, he says, it's the Pit of Passion for sure, and it was applied on his clothes and not on the skin, as it should've been. That's why he couldn't feel it while they were performing. Must be because his skin does not retain other smells other than his own. Perfumes react differently to different skin types. Your body is your weapon of choice, he thinks, even when it comes to smells.

They turn into the long corridor flanked by closed red doors on both sides. A big red-on-white sign at the end of the corridor says QUIET PLEASE. The irony of it, he thinks, it's not just in the halls of the Theatür that you have to keep silent. Once you are out through the front door you must keep silent about what is going on inside, there's a clause in your contract about that. If you ever get out, that is. There is a loop in all that carefully constructed legal system, he remembers, in case a client meets you outside the Theatür and reveals his identity as a client then you are allowed to divulge your own identity. But that rarely happens since the Theatür is famous for its user discretion. It never happens, other users have agreed, it has never happened up to this point, those sick bastards are too afraid to get their heads out of their assholes. At least, that is what the many virtual discussion forums of the Theatür say. He doesn't even know those people, doesn't know what music they like, and yet, he is able to imagine them sitting at their desks posting commentaries and asking questions. No pale faces, he imagines, no hungry

college graduates who function on a couple of coffees per day, these are all people whose irony is directed both at a system that exploits their differences and pays them back for displaying those differences, and at themselves. Look at what I'm doing, every post seems to be saying, but at least I'm doing something, and I'm getting paid for it. This is honest work. [*Smiley face. Wink.*]

Reaction A, he makes a mental note of it, is to laugh at the prospect of meeting a client outside, a married man with his wife and kids at the grocery store pushing their carts or standing in line. Of course none of them would make a scene of it, he wouldn't do that because that wouldn't even be possible since he never knows who his clients are after all. Reaction B, he makes another mental note, take things seriously, be afraid even, who knows what kind of person the client really is, maybe one of those sex maniacs who would turn to violence when cornered. Sometimes you can't take your hands off what you like, or worst, desire to have. And then, there's reaction C, do nothing, stop thinking about it since it might never happen, clients are very reluctant about hinting at what they might be carrying under their many layers of skin. Skin grows rough with age, and with it the pile of construed identities. With every passing year secrets are buried deeper inside the chest, behind the sternum, close to the heart.

Milo is still silent bent over the phone while they are walking. There's a long way to the supervisor's office and he's kind of counting on Milo's sense of direction. 'So how old are you, Milo?' Milo doesn't give any sign of having heard the question. He doesn't say anything thinking that Milo doesn't like talking too much. There's a hiatus in his movements, and then Milo stops. 'Excuse me?' This was a mistake, he thinks, I shouldn't have asked him that. 'How old are you, Milo?' There's another long pause. He's pissed, for sure, he thinks. 'I'm twenty-seven,' Milo replies with what looks like a dreamy look, 'turned twenty-seven last week.' He's still very young, he thinks, must be one of those disappointed with life who turn against the politics of the body, against their own bodies, straight guys who turn bisexual overnight in need of money, out of hunger, rebelliousness, homosexuals who turn straight or bisexual because they realize that the beauty of their own bodies can ultimately be turned into

a weapon, and there's nothing like the determination of a sex orphan-slash-adoptee, equally accepted and turned down by both sides of the spectrum.

The Theatür is my mother and father, the hymn of the Theatür goes; I love my mother but have problems with my father. We all have daddy issues, he thinks, and through its ultimate discretion the Theatür offers ways to cope with that. But you're not the only one with issues in that blood-red booth, he thinks, oh no, you're not alone, the Theatür deals with your problems by trying to deal with other people's monsters.

The loving mother, her destitute children gathering around and pulling at her skirt, the odious father who turns them into a business, get your weapons out and protect the family, or anything that is worth protecting, your dignity for instance.

'Happy birthday then,' he says trying to cheer Milo up at least for a bit, 'sorry for the late entry.' He pulls out a nervous laugh. Milo makes a gesture with his hand dismissing the whole situation as if saying 'meh, nothing of consequence.' Of course Milo doesn't care, he thinks, I must be the only one to have wished him a happy birthday. Not a very happy date of birth, a mother called a whore by a drunken father maybe, a child of unprotected sex and bad parenting, and then brothers and sisters coming from a different loving father but a father nonetheless. A child resembling a dark spot, a disease that leaves the mother's womb scarred for the rest of her life. Sometimes a mother's love will work to fight against that prejudice, but sometimes it won't. You wouldn't want to have a stone tied to your ankles while trying to save yourself from drowning.

'Did you celebrate?' The answer would certainly be negative, he thinks, but even so, it's worth a try, that's what people do, care about other people, ask questions, expect an answer, engage in some sort of conversation, find things out. Help them? I'm a failed messiah, he thinks and somehow he knows that Milo would reject any kind of help. Milo is part of an intricate network of friends and acquaintances, he believes, he seems too reluctant to make any sort of contact with unknown individuals. Maybe that's my mistake, he thinks, presuming there is some reluctance when it comes to boyish looking guys. They're not alone, are they? Who am I to seek the friendship of such a pariah as Milo? He

weighs the situation, makes a mental list of possibilities: possibility A, the purpose of all this talk, friendship, possibility B, Milo might perceive him as the desperate child trying to fit in, Milo being on the side of the cool guys. In his mind he smiles at his silliness. 'No,' Milo says with the same dreamy look on his face. There it is, he thinks, the child that hides behind the cool jeans and the Pit of Passion. He would have wished to celebrate it in some way.

They turn into another long corridor. They all look the same, the corridors, there's even the same sign saying QUIET PLEASE. Another performer gets out of one of the booths, a girl this time. She is wearing a long dress and a red jacket that looks like it is made out of crocodile skin thrown over her shoulders. Long red earrings, the kind Cleopatra would wear in films, and a bracelet that looks like a thick string whose ends are tied with a green ring, a hint of perfume, no lipstick, the earrings make up for it, short haired. She nods quietly noticing their presence.

'Hey, Elaina,' Milo says, the words coming out almost inaudibly. 'Hey, Milo, this perv is obsessed with me. I'm barely restraining myself from calling him a motherfucker. Heck, I'm barely restraining myself from throwing a shoe or something at that son of a bitch!' She moves swiftly along the corridor not even looking at them, talking all the time as if some internal monologue is going on inside her mind and she is thinking out loud. 'How many times?' Milo seems vaguely interested in her. 'This is the eighth time he makes a request to enter my show. I bet he's the kind of fat imbecile who can't even see his prick because of his enormous belly.'

Disappointment like a drop of ink in a glass of water. He had imagined his clients being fit and successful businessmen who can't think of other ways to spend their money and who are no longer interested in their submissive wives. It's the kind of submission that they can't bear, he thinks, the kind of submission that is expected of married women, the social kind of submission, peer pressure. What did the third monkey do? Peer pressure, honey, she got married to a nice guy who occasionally masturbates to other men touching and kissing, playing the submissive slaves. We work hard, they say, we have the right to indulge in such pleasures every once in a while. He imagines this

coming out of the mouth of a hairy guy who looks good in a suit but hides love handles underneath carefully ironed shirts. You don't even iron my shirts anymore, honey, I have to take them out every Friday for somebody else to iron them, pick them up on Monday. You have a hoard of assistants; let them pick up your laundry, that pesky secretary of yours, she smells too good for a secretary.

'I never keep track of my clients,' Milo says, 'I can't remember usernames, mostly because I don't want to, I just want to keep my memory free for other things.' Elaina keeps walking without looking back her dress levitating around her thin legs like a superhero cape. He can see a shadow of her legs moving elegantly beneath the dress, he thinks of a goddess. What brings you here? You could have any guy you want outside the Theatür, a job better than this. Then he thinks of Mother Theatür, her breast ripe, ready to feed her hungry children, and Father Theatür forcing them to pay for the dark breast milk oozing from her nipples, whore of Babylon.

'We know that,' Elaina replies looking bored and dismissing him with a gesture of the hand, 'we are well aware of that, Milo.' Her neck curls like that of a snake. What is she referring to? What does Milo do once he is outside the Theatür? Maybe he never goes outside the building. Some of the performers, he had read in one of the discussion forums, have no place else to go so they sleep in their booths. Some of them get paid for it, for sleeping that is, because some of the clients are sexually aroused by the innocence of sleeping boys and girls. You become a weapon of choice even when you sleep.

'Your birthday was last week, right?' Elaina asks. Milo looks thoroughly annoyed. 'Yeah', he replies and throws a quick glance at him. 'I did not celebrate, if that's what you want to ask, I never celebrate, it's just another day of my life, there's nothing to celebrate about that.' Elaina chuckles playfully. Does he smell pity? Milo smiles, his face changes. So you can smile, he thinks and feels jealous for a second, jealous of Elaina and her charm strong enough to break the invisible shield that levitates around Milo.

They take a left and they find themselves in another long corridor flanked by red doors on both sides. He wouldn't find his

way back for sure, he thinks, he did not keep track of the turns they've made along the way. He's been focusing too much on Milo's moving hips and the smell of his clothes. Really puts you in peril, he thinks, that perfume, you lose your sense of direction. Other users come out of their booths and they nod quickly, furtively, at them. Is he supposed to remember the other users? You get used to them, at one point, you see their faces every day, build some sort of fraternity, brotherhood of the Theatür, Mother Theatür.

'Elaina,' Milo breaks the silence, 'this is Remy, and he did a show with me, just now.' Elaina turns toward him abruptly, like an animal that suddenly considers a carcass as a possible snack in the absence of other alternatives, and he is startled by the sudden change of attention. She weighs him with a quick look her eyes moving up and down. She smiles. A string of saliva flexes between her lower lip and upper teeth. 'You did a show with Milo, il Magnifico?' He doesn't know what to say, so his words come out frightened like that of children caught red handed with the biscuit jar. 'Yeah, it was my first show, nothing special.' Elaina bursts into laughter and stops walking. Milo stops too and leans against the wall. The other performers throw a quick look at them, that laughter could wake up the dead, he thinks, so perfect in its structure that it almost seems fake, the laughter of an actor in a play. Who's laughing, the actor or the character? Did the author of the play foresee that kind of laughter? Did he make a note of it at the bottom of the page or in the stage directions? Is that laughter the work of art of the director himself? She stops laughing for a second to look at him, see his reaction, maybe, and then starts laughing again with the same force.

One of the doors on their left side opens and a guy's head pops out. 'Quiet please,' he says and puts a finger to his lips. The head then disappears and the door closes. Elaina regains her earlier seriousness. 'He's done his first show with Milo the Magnifico and he says it's nothing special. Oh, honey, you still need to learn some things around here. Your innocence is outstanding.' Why is Milo not defending himself in all of this? He looks at him but he is still absorbed by whatever is happening on the screen of his cell phone. 'Is there something that I should know about Milo the

Magnifico?' A challenge, he thinks, that's what Milo needs right now, something that would pull him away from the hypnotizing blue light of his cell phone. Milo doesn't react, here's your pariah, he thinks, acting all cool and indifferent even when it comes to his own reputation.

A flight of stairs, they climb it in silence, Elaina moving like a panther on the branches of a tree her dress fluttering in the movement. The corridor is getting narrower as they climb so they need to break formation, Elaina first, Milo, and him, other performers following them. None of the others are talking except them. He takes a furtive look at the other performers climbing the stairs, they all seem determined to reach the top of the stairs as quick as possible, there's no time to waste, time that could otherwise be spent performing, earning credits, covering the dry days, as the Theatür handbook calls them. Those are the days in which their clients seem reluctant to spend their money on masturbation and watching performers submit to their will. Elaina too has a decisive kind of walking, her heels loud on the marble stairs. Her laughter makes itself heard every once in a while as if the episode of the Magnifico keeps repeating in her head.

'There's nothing to know,' he, Milo, says glancing sideways, 'you're not missing out on anything.' Elaina laughs again and turns to him, an amused look on her face, then resumes her determined walk toward the top of the stairs. Of course there is nothing to know, he thinks, an aura of mystery around you is always good to have, girls adore that, his brother used to tell him. He can almost see the invisible shield covering Milo's body, Milo the untouchable, child of the Theatür; did your mother teach you that? How to hide your own self from the prying eyes of others? Mother Theatür knitting shields for her children, thread made out of painstakingly distilled memories turned over so that their chitin shell stands on the outside, one chitin shell next to the other makes a strong shield. My boy, Milo, the warrior, Mother Theatür says. You'll turn him into a pussy, Father Theatür says; let him be, let him be a man. The child starts hating the father for that, there's a broken line between the father and the child, but the child doesn't feel lost. Do you ever feel lost Milo? It's hard to believe that somebody like Milo could ever feel lost.

'How long have you been here, Elaina?' She mumbles something almost tripping. Milo extends a hand to help her but she refuses it and regains her balance by leaning slightly against the wall. 'Very long,' she replies, 'it feels like I was born here.' Daughter of the Theatür, he thinks, but he only says 'hmm, that long.' Milo seems to recollect something and looks up, at her legs maybe. 'You were already here when I came,' he says, 'you were even wearing the same jacket, I remember it now.' Elaina laughs again. 'It's a cool jacket,' she says, 'I bought it with my first stipend, a moment of utter joy.' She moves her hands frantically as she talks. 'I remember when I first came here, felt scared and inexperienced, I thought my first show was a mess, but it turns out it was pretty good compared to my other shows. Got the biggest tip for that one. That particular client seemed to like my innocence. It was also the longest show. It felt exhausting and that night I promised myself I wouldn't do it again.' That's strange, he thinks, I do not feel scared at all, and the show felt very natural to me, like riding a bicycle after a long pause, you know the steps, your mind just clicks into place.

They reach the top of the stairs out of breath. There's a slight hesitation even in Elaina's steps, she seems to be lost, and he too feels lost. He has never been on this side of the building. Milo doesn't stop, he doesn't acknowledge their hesitation and keeps on walking leaving them behind. 'And yet, you are still here,' he, Milo, says, 'marching on, playing the innocent girl. They still like that, don't they?' A smirk. Elaine falters for a long moment, and for the first time since they've met he can see that a sensitive spot has been touched. She looks ugly, he thinks, once her determination dissipates.

Reaction A, he thinks, anger, reaction B, disillusionment, a little girl who's lost her hope in the human kind. Her eyes are wet and she looks like she wants to cry, but she doesn't. A greater force inside her stops her from doing that. It would ruin her composure. It would ruin everything actually. The whole package. She takes two hesitant steps forward then her decisiveness comes to life and she starts walking again her heels digging deeply into the marble floor. 'Don't talk to me about innocence, you mad hatter,' she says, almost jokingly, 'I taught you everything you know.' He follows them not knowing whether

to leave them alone and slow down or keep walking. He decides to give them some space and, pretending to adjust one of his shoes, he stops for a moment and then starts walking again.

They turn into another long corridor that does not have as many doors as the previous ones. There's an indeterminate opening at the end of the corridor, its walls adorned with what appear to be paintings he cannot make out at the moment. He can hear human voices and phones ringing coming from the opening, the rustle of movement, paper, keyboards, and printers. Milo goes in first, then Elaine, and finally himself. The opening is an oversized office with desks aligned parallel to the wall. There's a person working at each desk, and they all seem to be inputting commands into the computer in front of them that appears to be displaying lists of numbers distributed chaotically on the screen. They don't talk to each other, and they're just repeating the numbers as if to memorize them, staring blankly at the screen.

Milo and Elaine don't mind any of the office workers. No quick glance thrown at the opposite wall, the one that was supposed to be filled with paintings but is actually full of TV screens showing empty booths, performers acting, and even, if his guess is right, the telling shadows of some of the clients. He can see the legs of one of the clients twitching nervously. They look like the legs of a plastic doll, glossy in the half-light of the audience booth. He doesn't have time to have a better look, Elaine and Milo are rushing forward and he has to keep up. Do they know their true identities? Do they know their clients or do they just keep record of the false identities that users create in order to enter the Theatür?

The office further divides into three smaller offices and they enter the one in the middle. There's a round table in the middle but the office is empty except for a talking computer, its voice toneless and mechanical, and another device that resembles a plastic case with small crevices as if for small memory disks. 'There's no one here,' Milo says, 'I've never met our supervisor, he's never around.'

They wait for a couple of minutes to see if somebody shows up but there's no sign of the supervisor. The computer keeps on talking. 'The Theatür,' the voice of the computer is saying, 'was founded in 1983 by Christopher Wyatt, at that time a young

entrepreneur who sought to extend his family's business by offering high quality entertainment at very low prices. Since then, the Theatür has grown into a multinational company with millions of employees and thousands of performances every hour. In 1998, Christopher Wyatt's death at the age of 51 was a terrible setback for the company's booming development, but Wyatt's son, Mason, now aged 29, successfully managed to revive the spirit of the Theatür and even extend its variety of services maintaining the same low prices.'

Still no sign of the supervisor, Milo is growing impatient. 'Why did he die? Why did Christopher Wyatt die? He was still young,' he says, looking at Milo. 'He died of AIDS,' Milo replies absent minded. He makes a pause and shifts his weight on the other leg. 'At least that's what I heard.' Elaine shrugs as if to say that she doesn't know or doesn't care to know. And then there's Mason, Christopher's son, he thinks, how come he has never met him? He works there now and he doesn't even know who his superiors are. In fact, he doesn't even know how he ended up here, in the Theatür, in the first place.

Mother Theatür, Father, how was I born? He imagines his parents simply avoiding the question like all parents do as if any act of creation is something to be done in solitude. But every act of creation is done in solitude, he thinks, solitude is what pushes you to create, to mould an alternative to that solitude, give life to entities that could talk back, beings capable of fury, and anger, and, in the end, like a sort of redemption, love, because love tops them all. No, love is the glitch in the system, he thinks, the mistake, the underdeveloped child of solitude, born prematurely, its marred beauty sustained by a small pumping heart that despite its physical fragility still manages to send blood throughout the unpaved streets of the body. How do you pave that street? By living, he concludes, by running, breathing, and by doing all those things that help you escape objectification.

The policy of the Theatür would have something to say about that, for sure, he thinks. 'Looks like we have to do this by ourselves,' Elaine says, 'again, as we always do, actually.' Milo nods in approval and moves toward the plastic case sitting beside the talking computer, which keeps narrating the history of the Theatür, and takes his wallet out, then, out of it, a card that looks

like an identity card. 'Give me yours,' he commands. He takes his wallet out and the small plastic card is there, user name and code next to the photo of a younger baby faced version of himself. He gives it to Milo. 'When there is stage symbiosis,' Milo explains, his voice official, 'first, you have to insert the card of the performer that started the show, that's me.' He inserts his card in one of the crevices and the machine acknowledges its presence by making a short beep. The computer stops narrating the story of Christopher Wyatt and starts giving orders. 'Please insert the identification card of other performers in case of stage symbiosis.' Milo makes a gesture with his hand to show where his, Remy's, card goes in. He inserts it in one of the other crevices and the machine makes another beep. 'Your credit score has been automatically updated. You may now extract your identification cards.' In the absence of the supervisor, he thinks, they have to surrender to a small plastic case that utters commands. He suddenly feels small and insignificant in this act of surrender.

Elaina inserts her own ID card and the machine speaks again. They linger for a couple more minutes to see if any supervisor appears. The people from the other part of the office keep repeating numbers and inserting them into their computers, none of them seems to even acknowledge their presence, not even a glance. Completely absorbed by their screens they almost seem robotic, their faces registering no emotions.

He looks again at the TV screens covering the wall trying to find the user with the twitching prosthetic leg but he can't find it anymore. Screens turn on and off, other booths, other users, and other performers, all of them most likely unaware of this love triangle that extends between them, the cruelly anonymous audience, and the innocent-looking eye of the camera. A particular screen catches his eye and he focuses on it. He can see what looks like a human body tied to the ceiling with leather belts and strings swinging dangerously over something that looks like a coffin made out of glass. The arms of the performer seem lifeless, hanging, unconsciously pointing at the glass coffin. He cannot see his face clearly, his long hair hanging over his face, but the guy seems lifeless, a cadaver being rocked back and forth by some mechanism invisible to the eye. That must be where the

client is hiding, he thinks appalled by the scene, in the glass coffin, masturbating most likely.

'Can you see that,' he tells Milo and Elaina, 'the third screen, bottom right,' yet before he finishes his sentence another image appears as if to cover up the previous clip. 'Did you see that? Did you see that man hanging over the glass coffin? Was he dead?' Elaina shrugs and Milo doesn't seem to notice the commotion still absorbed by the hypnotizing screen of his cell phone. Nobody else seems to have noticed him, voices keep repeating numbers, and fingers keep pushing data into computers. 'Nobody's coming,' Milo says still looking at his phone; 'I need to go, got some stuff to do.' He, Milo, doesn't look at them on his way out. Elaina doesn't say anything but stops in the doorway to look at him and opens her mouth as if to say something, but nothing comes out. Should I follow them, he wonders, or should I just stay here till somebody comes? He hates this weakness, not knowing what to do or say.

Elaina turns toward the way they came and starts walking her decisive walk, her heels digging deep into the pavement. 'I guess I'll see you around,' he says but she replies by dismissing him with a gesture as if to say, yeah, whatever, don't bother. He waits for another couple of minutes as the computer continues narrating the story of the Theatür's founding fathers and the publication of the Theatür Handbook for old and new users and performers alike. 'The ethical code of the Theatür,' the mechanical voice says, 'forbids any physical contact between performers and users so as to avoid any kind of physical damage that both parties might inflict upon each other. To ensure this, every booth is divided into two parts that are separated by a bulletproof screen. Even in the case of stage symbiosis [*two performers appear on the screen their faces too common to remember*] between two or more users the Theatür takes every measure of protection. When acting together our performers are asked to wear full body protection, so as to avoid the spreading of bacteria and viruses.' That's why they needed the latex costumes, he thinks, to protect themselves from diseases that some performers might have. He makes a mental note of it and smiles: Mother Theatür, you take good care of your children, Father Theatür you are the great absent in this act, that's why we don't like you.

The computer screen is now showing images of other performers, winners of the Theatür Olympics, it seems, performers who have set a record with the amount of credit received per one show. One of the performer is wearing a green and blue latex costume and he can't stop but think that he looks like a pheasant, his hair colourful too like that of a rebellious child. Apparently, this guy set the record by gaining 86 credits for one of his shows, no stage symbiosis involved. The picture is in full screen now and he can see some other performers cheering for him. He can see Milo too, wearing the same clothes as if they were the only clothes he had. Maybe those are the only clothes Milo has, he thinks, or maybe the picture was very recent, that remains to be settled. And then there is Milo again, in full screen, a medal swinging lightly on his chest, people around him cheering. Milo Magnifico, last year's winner of the Theatür Olympic, and 137 credits for one of his shows. He makes a mental note to himself: find out more about Milo and his adventures in the Theatür. But first, he thinks as he gets up and looks at the long row of desks that seems to be descending as it advances toward the exit, first, he'll have to get out of there. He starts walking, first slowly as if undecided and then faster, and as he does that he notices that the people working at the computers are tied with leather belts to their chairs.

Dream Two

A king's cape on my back, I'm standing in front of the mirror in the hallway of a small wooden house, not much of a hallway. I'm looking at myself, turning right, and then left, and right again, then left again. Far away, on the other side of the road, by the fence that separates our lot from that of our neighbours, grandmother and the neighbour are watching me closely, smiling, no, laughing even. They are laughing at my show. That's what he does, grandmother says, such a show off, that child.

Child, child, I'm fucking fabulous and you can't handle it.

When I'm walking on mother's high heels, red lipstick on, beautiful yellow dress, I'm fabulous and you can't handle it.

I'm walking up the street in mother's high heels and suddenly it feels strange. I'm aware of this tirade I'm putting on and I'm ashamed of going into the shop and buying rice for grandmother. So I'm telling my girl friend to go in instead of me.

If I'm wearing my mother's high heels does this mean I'm poor?

A boy wearing his mother's high heels, he doesn't have his own shoes, boy shoes, flip-flops, something of the kind. A state of suspension of disbelief, the lipstick does the trick. What is this boy doing? I'm waiting down the street, far away from the shop, leaning against the fence of the dispensary. It's four o'clock in the afternoon. I'm sweating in my high heels. Because I'm fat, the chubby kid, head like an oversized watermelon. Soon, your eyes will no longer be visible inside your head, they tell me. This ugly guy told me this at the shop when I was not wearing mother's high heels.

The friend comes back with the rice. I make sure it's the right kind of rice.

The shop is very far from home. We're walking down the street in my mother's leather high heels, sandals rather, not the fancy kind. The kind my mother won't wear anymore because of some inexplicable change in fashion.

But the king's cape, now that is even more fabulous than my mother's dress and high heels. I made it, the cape, stitched the bed sheets to a jeans shirt. The result was not as I had expected it, but nonetheless it was fabulous. And while I was thinking of the king that would wear the cape my brother and another friend of his were making ugly masks to celebrate New Year's Eve. They were ugly masks, dried beans instead of teeth, and fake strands of hair. I wanted to add style to something that was supposed to be scary.

Grandmother doesn't agree, of course, but she has to laugh because the neighbour is laughing too, so she has to turn it into a joke, to avoid embarrassment.

This kid is a sissy, can't you see. He has the ears of a donkey.

I heard grandmother telling it to grandfather one night when she had wrongly presumed I was fast asleep. The neighbour said it, that I have the ears of a donkey. She can't do anything about it, can she? Except scorn the plump neighbour for saying that about children.

I played with girls and dolls mostly, when nobody was around to see it.

I was playing with my girl friend on the front terrace of my godmother's house and I had two dolls. They were talking to each other, talking about the weather most of the time, or shopping. And then they were walking, plain walking; when I notice that somebody has been watching me for a while now, and he was smiling in a condescending way. And the dolls started having a fight because that's what boys are supposed to do when they play with dolls. They were really going at each other, these dolls, pulling at their hair, slapping each other until the guy watching me went away. I hoped I would never see him again.

That boy is a girl.

Grandmother and mother led me away from embarrassing situations.

Go to your room, they would say, we'll deal with you later. I do not have a room and so I hid in the pantry, under the wooden ladder that goes to the attic.

They told me to go home and stay there. Because nobody would see me there, hidden behind the walls of a deserted house. My parents went in there only during the night to sleep. During

the day the house was empty and scary. Terrifying polar bears would come down the stairs, and wolves, there were wolves all over the place. I put mother's high heels on to forget about the wolves and the bears. They enjoyed my show, they applauded at the end of it, standing ovation, and I was fucking fabulous.

There's something wrong with this boy.

He has the ears of a donkey.

My body is made out of two separate parts, and upper part and a lower part. There is a big difference between the feet and the genitals, and the head. Two separate towels must be used, one for the face and one for the genitals and the feet. You can't use the same towel; it's a dirty habit. Sometimes you can dry your feet by using the clothes discarded in the laundry basket. Grandmother's nightdress is a good choice.

You must wash your hands the minute you get out of bed. Somehow during the night, unknowingly, mysteriously, boys touch their genitals while asleep. You can't use your hands at breakfast after you have touched your genitals during the night. The body is an appalling work of art.

This boy is a sissy. There must be something wrong with him.

Stop touching your genitals, you'll turn into a fornicator when you'll grow older. Your father is a fornicator; you don't want to turn into your father. I promised grandmother I won't turn into a fornicator.

Years later I still keep my promise by not forgetting that divided body.

Years later I'm on a trip with my high-school friends and we're having a break next to a lime tree, and my biology teacher is telling us about the fucking lime tree and its literary significance. My English teacher on the other hand is telling me to go grab her purse from the bus, and I'm walking down the aisle looking for her purse telling my fellow companions to make way for me. And I said it in a certain way, in that way, sissy like.

This boy is a girl.

I'm sitting on the front porch of grandmother's house, my brother is sitting beside me, and there's grandmother standing in front of us. I can't see her face because she is ashamed of something, I'm not sure of what. I know what it is, but I'm afraid she does not know it. My brother, and me, we were once playing

mom and dad and we went too far. He was old enough to know, I was young enough to be innocent. In my dreams grandmother comes stripped of her own will and thoughts. Grandmother is an empty vessel. I pour my guilt into her and she comes as grandmother. She has come to punish me.

She is standing in front of the fountain, laughing, a sunny day, and I'm coming down the steps of the house, and she is laughing by the fountain, wiping her mouth with her apron. I know that laugh so well. Mother knows why she's laughing. Go out and play, it's a sunny day, why don't you go out like the other kids?

Both of you, shame on you, grandmother says, both of you need to be buried alive.

And my first thought is to find rat poison and ingest it before being buried alive. I'll die faster that way. I did not think of running, I did not mind asking why. I only thought of ways to die faster. And quickly grandmother is carrying me away because a shadow covers the front yard, a shadow like an accusing index finger.

Both of you, shame on you, both of you need to be buried alive, you can't hide from me because I'll follow you to heavens and back.

Dissenting Nuptials

He takes the piece of chalk but doesn't know what to do with it since there are no walls or blackboards to write on, there's not even a floor, he presumes there is a floor because he is standing and there is something under his feet, he feels the hardness of something underneath, yet when he looks down he can't see what it is, the word 'floor' refuses to attach itself to whatever he feels under his feet.

Like a word suddenly forgotten the floor slips through his fingers, he can feel it's there, a dark spot at the back of his mind, but he can't recall it and he falters, the word like a bump in the road. And then there's that piece of chalk, he can't find a reason for it, despair creeping like cold rain into his bones.

He takes a step forward and looks down again hoping to see his feet but all he sees is a coffin made out of glass, he lowers himself and cups his hands against the dark glass to see if he can have a glimpse of whatever is inside but he can only see his reflection, a pair of tired eyes and the outline of a face that doesn't seem remotely his, it looks familiar but it's not his. He looks inside the coffin again touching the cold glass with his forehead. He can see the outline of an immobile body, its symmetry perfect, so perfect, he thinks, that it doesn't even look human, it has the shape of a human body but its head seems too round to be human, the arms slightly detached from the body, equal distance from the body, the same for the feet. It looks like a doll, he thinks, a dummy, and as his sight familiarizes with the light he can see its glossy feet, and the almost undetectable twitch that grows more violent as he looks at it. He senses a movement in the air and looks up to see Milo hanging above him, tied to the ceiling with leather belts, his hands rocking to and fro like those of a dead man. Who is dead, he wonders, the performer or the character?

He tries to say something but as he opens his mouth nothing comes out, not even his breath, he can only feel a heaviness growing in his chest, the guilt of not being able to do something about it, to help Milo. He stands up and tries to reach for one of Milo's hand and check whether he is still alive, yet, as he gets up

the ceiling is itself moving upwards and the whole room becomes a curved tower with Milo hanging from the top of it.

And then there's the chalk, the obsessive thought comes back at him in full force, an armoured knight coming at full speed toward him. What is he supposed to do with the chalk? He can almost feel the weight of that question on his brain. Lead, rusted metal, and the smell of blood. Mother, he thinks in desperation, what am I supposed to do with this piece of chalk? He can't save Milo for sure, but then, in the end he doesn't know whether Milo really needs to be saved. He looks up and wants to ask Milo whether this is just a trick but he can't, the words refuse to come out. He looks back at the coffin and there is some sort of commotion, a herd of thoughts rushing in, logic itself returns like a disease with no symptoms.

Was there something before this room? The clouds, yes, the clouds, though not really the clouds, the spine of clouds, something that resembles the spine of clouds, that's how sleep tiptoes in, through the spine of the clouds. Colour, colour, and then those grey little spines, drops of colour here and there, rainbow, and repetition. Eerie feeling of having seen those spines before. In the guts of a gutted pig, that's exactly what they look like. The guts before being emptied out and washed and used as membrane for salami. Reality has teeth in this endless loop, until it disappears completely and the mind is plugged into another reality altogether, one in which people can't speak and they can't run.

Then the clouds dissipate with the briskness of a door being banged some time after midnight by a faceless neighbour, or the cry of a nightmarish baby who is crying for no reason.

The truth is alarming. He was never inside that room; never saw the coffin up close, so this must be a dream, it must be a dream, his mind goes in loops, turning and turning like a dying animal until he realizes he is actually in his bed, in some sort of bed, a distant red light signalling where the light switch should be. He stands upright and pushes his hands against the sheets to see if there is somebody else with him in bed. The sheets feel warm but there's nobody there. There's no sign of a window as he tries to peer through the darkness. For one moment he is the room, there's nothing else but the room just like when two

bodies touch there's nothing else but the acknowledgement of that touch.

He pushes the blanket aside so as to move freely and places his feet on the floor; it feels cold compared to the warmth of the bed, he is overly aware of that coldness in his toes. There's nothing else but the cold floor. The body produces heat by itself, the floor does not, that is why the floor is a heated inanimate object, what idiotic thoughts, he thinks. Letting that knowledge seep in. The floor seems to respond to his thoughts. He goes toward the little red light on the wall and pushes against the button. The lights switch on and it's painful, his eyes find it difficult to adjust and he tries to cover them by placing his arm over them. The room has no windows. At the opposite end of the room there is a desk with a lamp on it, and a leather chair neatly placed under it. On the desk he finds a leather bound notebook, a diary of some sort, he opens it at the first page. There's only one entry in the diary so he quickly goes through it. It looks like his handwriting but familiarity with a kind of writing does not prove its source. Nothing of consequence, he thinks, there's just some stuff about my first day at the Theater, and Milo, and Elaina, and the talking computer. Strangely enough, he did not include anything about the offices upstairs and those men and women tied to their chairs repeating numbers like in a choir. It doesn't even mention Milo's medal, the crowd cheering at his feet. Nothing about that. He wonders, the people in the office, are they still at it?

Milo, the thought comes to him with such force that he cannot dismiss it as fast as he would like to. There's a strangeness to that thought he cannot explain. It comes both with anticipation and hopelessness, the anticipation of the child and the hopelessness of the adult who doesn't believe in miracles anymore. He keeps thinking of the way Milo looked just before he entered the booth for the stage symbiosis, alone, but not anxious, a body that surrendered to whatever force was at that point commanding it. Was that a part of the performance? He can now see where the confusion comes from, he's not sure though, it must be, he thinks, it must be that thin line between performance and real self, between the lone child that yields to forces stronger than him, the naked boy kneeling like in prayer, hunting for that stream of words coming from the speakers, and his other side, il

Magnifico, as Elaina called him, the arrogant man wearing his boyish pride on his lapels. He's immature, he thinks, there's no doubt about that, a spoiled brat, one who never had to ask for anything, one who had only to look at something in a certain way and that thing would immediately and automatically yield to his call and fall into his possession. His feet are cold so he goes back to bed abandoning his [?] diary.

He pulls the covers over his feet and leans against the pillow only to realize that he had not switched off the lights. He gets up and suddenly notices the door as if it has appeared out of nowhere. Why did he not notice it before? He goes to it and tries the handle. It clicks but the door does not move so he pulls harder until it opens. QUIET PLEASE. And then the other doors flanking the long and familiar corridor. There's no one around, the doors have no names and no numbers, and they all look the same. The bulletproof screen, he thinks and almost jumps back inside the room. The room is spinning. Concrete. No camera either, no sign of it at least. A regular room. He closes the front door. He decides it is a front door.

There is another door on the opposite wall so he tries that one too to see what's behind it. He pushes the handle and the door yields to his push easily. He reaches out, hesitantly, to find the light switch. It's exactly where he thought it would be. There's an open shower cabin at the other end, a towel thrown on the floor, and his clothes neatly folded on the laundry basket. On the left-side wall there's a cabinet with a mirror and a sink underneath, liquid soap, two towels, one red one white, bottles of perfume, Pit of Passion among them, he notices. On the opposite side, attached to the wall, a toilet, its seat lowered, toilet paper, and a pair of shoes next to it. Dirty socks most likely, and there's no window, no washing machine.

It smells as if nobody's been living here, a ghost apartment, he thinks and as he does that another thought slips by, unattended: and I'm the ghost. But he denies it, he pushes the thought back, drowns it, tries to delete even the memory of it, like a mother would do with her aborted child. Thoughts can be moments, places where one wouldn't want to return.

He closes the door and returns to his bed, another slip of the mind, it's not his bed, he thinks, he has no memory of it and

consequently couldn't be his. He sits on it hesitating as if to test its firmness and then pulls the covers over his legs and lower body finding the warmth of the sheets both pleasurable and intimidating as if another body might have been sleeping in it without his knowledge. He cannot deny that extra presence he feels so he pulls the covers and lets them fall on the floor. There is another pillow next to him and there is a small crease in the middle of it where another head might have rested. A question or a statement of fact? That mind, a seal playing with a ball trying to balance it on its muzzle. He smells the pillow, sees himself smelling the pillow, that childish embarrassment, but he can't make out other odours other than his own. Nothing other than a statement of fact then. He pulls the covers back and puts his head on the pillow where that other head might have rested and suddenly feels protected, a sensation that works like a shield against the tirade of dark thoughts. Remy the soldier, and his army of soothing pillows. He chuckles to himself.

His body is drifting, silently, his mind no longer racing. He thinks of Elaina and her uncanny jacket, and then of Milo and his majestic stubbornness, the way he refuses to fit into any category, the way he seems to be leaping from one pole to the other. He dreams of Milo again, no longer hanging from the ceiling, but in a state of innocence, before being lured to hide under the warm wings of the Theatür. Then he dreams of himself meeting that other Milo under different circumstances, more pleasant ones maybe, and he dreams of Milo touching him in a sort of way and of himself yielding to that touch, falling for it, descending then rising up again until everything starts to accelerate and sparks of pain ooze from the points where skin meets skin, until it gets really painful and he is begging Milo to stop because he can't take it anymore. Milo is no longer Milo, and Elaina is somebody else altogether, not somebody but something, a body taken out of blurry photographs moving at the speed of life through the unwelcoming eye of the camera, crashing against the retina of the viewer. In his dreams Milo opens his mouth and instead of saying something only a muffled cry comes out and he wakes up.

He gets out of bed and goes to the bathroom and washes his face slowly, letting the cold water linger on his face. He pulls his jeans on. This game, of knowing where things were and where

they are now. A vast network of locations, a map whose coordinates are towels, pairs of jeans, laundry baskets.

He doesn't even know what time it is. Despite this lack of knowledge somehow he knows that it's time to get up and do something, go to work, try to find the supervisor, somebody that could explain this present state of affairs. He opens the cabinet and finds a small plastic bottle with some pills in it. There's a note attached to the bottle saying "to be taken every day, in the morning preferably." The label on the bottle says: REMWHY_88. His user name, he thinks, noticing the playfulness of the name. My name is Remy with a "why" at the end, he used to say.

But to whom? He stops and looks at his reflection in the mirror. All this resumes ultimately to the presence of somebody else, the issue of agency. Here is the ghost, the black swan. I'm glad to see you today. I'm glad to see you too. You've changed so much. You fucking left me to rot in here and now you're telling me you're glad to see me? What you see is my creation, all mine, I did it. Even this obscure capacity to feel, even that has been carefully construed when you were too busy fucking around with life. I am made of steel, clockwork, bitch. I am here to stay. The water starts running. Cold, lukewarm, warm, hot, hopscotch. Words trickling out instead of water, and then the haze. This must be what reality feels like. A wave of words that is, endless cycles of hunger and satisfaction, contamination, desire, seeker seeking to quench that desire, drown it in the flesh of somebody else, so, in the end, it's all a question of matching desires. Bring your desires to the table, boys, put them on like hunters do with their animal skins. Let's see whose desire matches with another's desire. All men merry at the round table, matching desires, drinking, thinking about each other's wives. [*If only you could see this.*] The water, the haze. That didn't help anyway, the playfulness of the user name that is, no one actually notices things like that. He takes one of the pills and swallows it with a big gulp of tap water. The water has a sweet taste. He puts his shirt on after smelling it.

He goes back into the room and puts his jacket on and the shoes. The socks still look clean, he thinks, I might get away with it for another day, the shirt too, the collar looks clean, and it still smells of softener. He remembers the bottle of Pit of Passion so

he rushes back to the bathroom cabinet to spray some of it on him, the neck and wrists, never directly on the clothes. It may last longer that way, but he needs to make the perfume more personal by letting it mix with his body's odour. A perfume becomes your own when applied directly to the skin, he thinks, he must have read that somewhere, or heard it in one of the commercials for the Pit of Passion beauty line. Strangely enough, it was the only beauty line the Theatür ever created. All others failed because the Pit of Passion managed to stay on top of the bestselling lists since the very beginning of the Theatür. It was first created, he remembers from the Theatür's presentation booklet, as a beauty line intended for the founder, Wyatt, and his son, Mason, but it soon turned into an emblem of the whole institution. You could smell a performer miles away, that's how strong and alluring it was. Nobody knows what happened to the creator of the Pit of Passion, it has remained a mystery and some say the original formula disappeared just like its creator did. Then how can they still be making it if the original formula was lost?

So it can't be the original formula, he thinks, things might have changed in the meantime, some new ingredients added, pheromones maybe, something that would make the smell a catalyst, the spark that ignites chemical processes inside the body once it gets through your nose and into your system. If it can have such effects on those who smell it, imagine what effects it might have on those who use it. He takes his wallet and cell phone and goes out of the apartment. The door clicks and he turns left without knowing why, following the exit sign.

There is no exit. Was it always this obvious? All you have to do is follow the signs and then you'll find the exit, mighty exit, the king exits, the good daughter now dead. But then the exit might be so far away that at one point you just give up, not because you reach your physical limits but because you reach every other limit there is. And then there is the dark vastness outside, of which you know almost nothing, or nothing at all. Fear grows larger than any desire of escape, fear is always larger, it goes beyond the body, it becomes invisible coating, icing on the cake.

At the end of every corridor another corridor opens, same red doors, same sign saying QUIET PLEASE on every corridor. He

keeps going left thinking that at one point the corridor will change into something else, an office maybe, something that would break the monotony. Then, at one point, one of the corridors opens to a set of stairs, very similar to those he had encountered while walking with Elaina and Milo the other day.

He stops, yesterday? The word slips by, meaningless, not finding any concept to attach to. Was it yesterday? It couldn't be, could it? He takes the stairs. It feels like drowning, he thinks, not knowing, it's like fighting for the surface, for that gulp of air that would make the difference between death-now and another minute of life. He stops again and leans against the wall. His memory slips again like silk on glass, he can hear the whisper of that movement, memory moving sideways, upwards and downwards, hurtling, moving in all directions at the same time, now here, now there, it makes him dizzy, yesterday feels like it hasn't happened yet, like he still has to perform in stage symbiosis with Milo, meet Elaine, and walk that long walk toward the supervisor's office. That's not a condition of the future, he thinks, one of the characteristics of the future is that it hasn't happened yet, that it has to happen, that it's unpredictable, that's what makes the future be future. But then this knowledge, a dead man hanging from the ceiling, that relevant knowledge, it works its way back up, the man who has hanged himself is climbing the rope back up to see what's beyond the rope. Logically, it's impossible, he thinks, he already knows Elaina and Milo, he already did the long walk to the supervisor's office, there was nobody there, the past cannot be the future. He is sweating as if he has forgotten something really important and his trip upstairs would be meaningless without that one thing he had forgotten to bring. He checks his pockets, everything's there, all his belongings. As he starts moving again he can feel the Pit of Passion surrounding him, it's all over him now, like a scarlet letter worn on his chest.

The flight of stairs seems to go on forever and there's no end in sight. There's another exit sign that tells him to go back, but he doesn't go back because somehow he knows that it won't take him anywhere, and for a split second he feels lost and breathless. He stops again and looks up trying to see what lies ahead. Seeing

nothing he starts moving again with renewed force. He can now hear the faint footsteps of somebody else going up.

The white arrow showing the way. The white arrow on a fluorescent green guiding the traveller's steps. The white arrow going through the heart of the little traveller, through the chest. Circus music, people cheering, a clown smiling but crying, and then the mind on a monocycle, juggling, the colourful balls are already in the air.

Exit sign.

Though there is no actual exit, you must go this way.

Lonely traveller. Arrow going through your chest.

Warrior.

Keep danger at bay. Protect your country.

He stops and looks down to see if he could catch a glimpse of whoever is following him but he could only see a hand holding tight to the railing then letting go, gripping and letting, each movement done with the decisiveness of a killer intent on taking someone's life with the same easiness and firmness. The hand stops moving, its owner probably listening, and he can see ears growing on that marching hand, and an eye in the middle of it, looking upwards, looking at him, aware of his knowledge, of his presence, following him.

Spiralling upwards.

He starts running, taking two steps at a time, then three steps at a time, the flight of stairs keeps going up, and that hand marching on, a hand moving along the written pages of a book, following meaning, finding none, realizes that its very movement is the meaning. Death is a moving body, death steals that capacity of movement and makes stillness the biggest fear that a body can have, and movement its greatest fascination. He stops to have a look at the progress of his opponent. The hand stops too, its palm turned upwards, and in the middle of that palm an eye, looking at him, scrutinizing him. He is sweating heavily and drops of sweat are falling over the railing as he looks down. The eye is blinking, the hand is closing and opening. He is running

again, the Pit of Passion is now a mixture of sweat and metal. He reaches the top of the stairs and pushes against the first door that he finds. The door clicks into place and he waits to see if somebody is really following him. Minutes pass.

'You can't go in like that,' somebody from behind tells him, 'you'll need to wait for a couple of minutes.' It's Milo, he thinks, thank Mother Theatür it's Milo, the man who doesn't have to make up for anything, his exotic beauty, the beauty misplaced, he thinks, he's wearing brown-red pants, a greyish white t-shirt and a grey cardigan. His skin darker in contrast with the t-shirt. He sees his childhood fears, and imagines Milo feeding breadcrumbs to pigeons in a deserted marketplace, and singing, singing all the time, a song that sounds like another song, but is not the same song. Where are the other kids? His song seems to be saying something about that. He thinks, the kid that is Milo: I must invent a new game, the game that would make all the other kids jealous. It's not genius, the kid smiles to himself, that's what people do, create things that would make all the other jealous, the jealousy of individual discovery, of unshared revelation.

'What are you doing here?' he, Remy, asks. Milo looks unimpressed by his display of sweat and breathlessness. 'We're going in together,' he says, 'our credit score was really high after our last performance.' He quickly remembers their performance, the way he felt, and the way Milo yielded to his touch. 'I thought that one went pretty bad,' he says but Milo doesn't seem to listen. 'Was that yesterday? Our performance. I have some problems remembering things,' he says. Milo starts walking in the opposite direction brushing past him. 'Was that yesterday? I don't,' pause, 'it feels weird.' Milo stops and turns around to look at him. His reply sounds like an echo. 'Yesterday?'

He follows him not knowing what else to do and thinking it would be weird to ask. 'There was somebody following me on the stairs,' he says, 'there was a hand, and it had eyes on it.' He immediately regrets saying it but Milo doesn't seem to notice. They are back on the stairs going up. He looks down. No hand to be seen. They turn right into another corridor flanked on both sides by red doors, no numbers, no names, nothing, they all look the same, he will never be able to go back to his room, or

whatever that was, his mind refuses to record the way simply because everything resembles everything else.

Warrior. Go this way.

As they turn he notices that Milo's pants are not brown-red at all, they seem to have acquired a greenish hue in the meantime, and his t-shirt is actually yellowish. The corridor further divides into two similar corridors, one of them slightly elevated, the other descending, they take the latter. It feels like falling. Milo doesn't say anything; he reminds him of Elaina and of her kind of walking, full of intent. He counts the doors, one, two, three doors, four doors, he's not using the Pit of Passion today, or maybe he didn't feel it, that must be it, five doors, or seven maybe, that must be it, his nose is now so accustomed to the smell that he's not feeling it anymore, nine doors, no, he thinks, eleven, that must have been the eleventh door, the number slips by like a child who has stolen something and thinks he could never be caught. He keeps on counting despite this short hiatus, twelve doors, thirteen doors, on his right, then there are the doors on the left side, multiply the final number by two and that should do it, seventeen doors, eighteen doors, he sees another performer waiting at the nineteenth door, he nods to Milo, but he doesn't seem to answer back.

'I can't get in,' the guy says, 'I was called in two hours ago but my access has not been yet granted.' Milo shrugs. 'Limbo', he says without stopping. There's a sudden look of horror on the guy's face and as they turn into another corridor he hears the guy saying out loud 'you think? You think it's limbo?' And then he can hear his laughter, nervous laughter and an uncertain 'oh' that was meant for him only.

Milo is the warrior here. He is the lonely traveller.

He's lost count, and so he looks back to see whether he could start again with the nineteenth door but he can't see or hear the guy anymore. Milo stops suddenly and he bumps into him slightly not expecting the sudden stop. Milo takes his ID card out of his back pocket then stops his hand in mid-air. 'Do you want to go first? Or do you want me to go first? There's no difference in terms of credit score, we both get the same.' Milo is smiling. That boyish pride again, that of being the older brother taking care of the younger one. Let me explain, hand raised, wetting his

lower lip, the rest comes out meaninglessly. But it's that gesture, hand raised elegantly like that of a benevolent schoolteacher explaining an abstract concept, the kind of schoolteacher students fall in love with, fantasize about. The rest comes nonetheless, but all muddled up.

D.I.S.S.E.C.T.

Meta-layer: the mind descending like a Martian probe, perfunctorily, precisely, scans the surrounding patch of epidermis. Removes the first layer. A long pause. The results are disappointing. Moving on. The mind now frantic and feverish. What does it do then? It recalls. The mind grows impatient, it grunts like an animal, starts jumping, starts crying. Flushed, steaming, hysterical, like somebody looking for something that has been lost, throwing the cushions from the sofa, pushing the sofa away, hair all tangled up, red in the cheeks, furious. It pulls the books away from their shelves. And screams.

Initial layer: void.

Second layer: void.

And so on.

It says stop. Please stop this. Milo doesn't fit anywhere, he doesn't fit in any of the stories. He's not the saviour, deus ex machina, he's not one of the three helpers, he's not the evil witch, he's not this, he's not that, he's just not.

He did not expect that, but he agrees to it, he will go in first, see how it works out. Milo takes a step back, his card still suspended in mid-air, and then nods toward the crevice next to the door handle. He inserts his card and looks up at the doorframe thinking that some sign might appear. Nothing happens for a few seconds. The door clicks open and his card is ejected through the same crevice. He enters and as he is closing the door behind him he throws a shy look at Milo as if he is entrusting him with a secret. Milo doesn't seem to register his look; he just stares blankly at him, his face slightly amused.

He closes the door over that image, over Milo's ingenuous beauty, as if to enclose it for a later viewing, and for a moment he

feels envious, envious of Milo. Well, what can I say, congratulations, Milo, he thinks, you have created the game that would make all the other kids envious, you don't have to think of doing anything else, to change other people's opinions, you just have to be present and everything will just click into place. Milo is present, the man who doesn't have to make up for anything. There's that smell again, and the red curtains. The booth, it looks exactly like the one he had been into before, the one in which he met Milo for the first time.

He takes off his jacket but then he remembers that he has to read the client file before doing anything and await instructions from the headquarters. He takes the folder from the lectern and looks at the profile. There's a picture this time and it doesn't appear to be the same client, it comes with a different user name, different fetishes, and different interests. Why would I care about your interests? As if it would make a difference. Nothing could change the fact that you are here, in the Theatür, looking for solitary pleasure, hidden away from the realities of adult life. And he's no different, he thinks bitterly, nothing will ever change the fact that he's working in the Theatür getting naked and doing things in front of a guy who's not interested in cunt anymore. The guy likes hiking; he smiles and feels a wave of laughter tickling his throat. He looks at the picture and thinks the guy doesn't look like a guy who likes hiking, must be some sort of trick, to make him more interesting than he really is. He must be forty-something but the profile says he's thirty-five. The guy's closer to the dreaded age limit that way. The kind of age limit younger performers unconsciously agree upon, out of what? To feel better about themselves? Empowered? A sense of dignity, more likely. Here's not the young man who puts his body on display for older guys. But then, do they really know the age of the client since they have no inkling about what the clients look like at the moment of the performance. Pictures are pictures, easily modifiable, or simply good for a number of reasons that range from sheer luck to camera angles and the photographer's good hand.

Hiking. They usually do that, put in the things that they would have liked to do but never had the courage. Even that is a sort of escape for them, having the freedom to invent things about their

own lives and live, at least for the duration of their stay inside the Theatür, the life they had fathomed for themselves. He's married, of course. They never say whether they have children or not as if their children's innocence would be marred by those very words. Even if you don't do that, he thinks, even so, their innocence will be forever marred.

There's a beep, and then a voice, the familiar female voice comes through the speakers, slowly, mechanically. 'The user has requested that the performer go in fully clothed. Performer,' there's a short pause and then another voice comes through the speakers, 'Remwhy,' pause, 'underscore,' pause, 'eighty-eight,' another pause and the female voice is back, 'your access has been granted.' There is another beep then silence. He puts his jacket back and pushes the curtain. He can see the lights growing brighter on stage and the blue guiding lights showing him the way through the narrow corridor that leads to the stage. He follows the guiding lights and when he reaches the stage he feels dumbfounded by the lights as if he is about to be attacked by something. He puts his hand over his eyes to shield them from the lights. That doesn't help too much and he can see his own reflection into the wall of glass separating the audience from the stage.

There is a moment of silence and he doesn't know what to do. Then a voice comes through the speakers. 'How old are you?' The number appears in his mind, clearly, like a picture in high-definition, but he refuses to acknowledge it. Let's play the game your way, he thinks, you've lied about you age, I'm going to lie about mine. 'I'm nineteen,' he replies, and takes his jacket off. The client grunts, a grunt full of anticipation and pleasure. 'I knew it,' the voice says, 'I knew it from the moment you first entered the stage. I could've sworn you were nineteen.' He smiles. He's nineteen now, and as the number comes into focus he can feel energy growing into him, some sort of unfamiliar vigour growing in his muscles, recklessness maybe, the feeling that he might just do what he wants without thinking too much about it.

'I see you're getting ahead of me,' the voice says almost reproachful, 'I did not tell you to take your coat off. You disobeyed my orders, fully clothed I asked.' He suddenly feels

annoyed. Furious, almost, the only thought that keeps him from bursting out is the fact that Milo is just outside the booth, and he is about to get in. He leans slightly to the right, his weight on his right foot, puts his hands in his pockets, responding to the clichés of the age, he thinks, and smiles, slightly, and then more defiantly. He can see himself smiling, reflected in the wall of glass, the unfamiliar smile growing on his face like a drop of blood on a perfectly white shirt, wide and menacing like a raised fist.

'You're just a spoiled brat, aren't you?' The smile doesn't die; he can see it, still growing on his face. Changing seasons, approaching joy. 'If you want me to be,' he says, 'I can be your spoiled brat.' There is another groan of pleasure and heavy breathing. Seems like the hiking didn't help that much after all, he thinks. 'Take off your shirt,' the client says, 'slowly, like a spoiled brat would do.' He raises his shirt without unbuttoning it; the shirt slides easily off his shoulders. He is watching himself; he can see the shirt then, a heap on the floor, and then another body, unfamiliar, standing where he stood a few instances ago. He turns quickly around to see if there is somebody else with him on the stage but there's nobody there. He looks again at the foreign body, muscular but frail, thin lowered shoulders, he looks down and notices that his jeans might be one size too big. 'Your belt now,' the voice says, 'slowly.' He unlatches the belt and then pulls it out slowly. It feels natural, he thinks, like being touched by a foreign body, great stuff Mother Theatür, you've invented invisible hands that could grope someone else's body from a distance. He can almost see the hands coming out of the speakers as they turn from sound to rubber hands, prosthetic hands that grow longer and longer until they reach to where he stands, unbuttoning his jeans, pulling at them to reveal his white boxer briefs, the clothes themselves are running away from his skin, he is on fire, and one of the hands has eyes and ears on it, and a nose, a whole human face. And then he can feel a whole body leaning against him, embracing him from behind, pulling him back, and he it feels like his body is clicking into place like a missing puzzle piece, and it feels like such completeness couldn't have been fathomed before.

He turns around and sees Milo taking his cardigan off, and then his t-shirt, and all he wants is to touch that body and through that touch make it his own, a body to own. He watches Milo, his, Milo's, body, too falling into place, piece by piece, first the head, the muscular neck, the Adam's apple slightly out, visible veins, the black hair, his elegant stubble that balances his face making it vaguely rounded, then the whole upper body as his t-shirt peels off with an inviting whisper, the belly button. And then his bare feet, muscular legs, and finally his black boxer briefs, everything falls into place, and there is no turning back, this body does not return, the body falls into beauty like it would fall into a tomb, the body is a failed Lazarus, unable to stand up once he is called out of his tomb. You shouldn't have been born, he thinks, your mother shouldn't have thrown you into this revolving world, you shouldn't have set out on this course, because once you were born your body started rotting, vigilant, expectant, sleeping with its eyes opened wide, restless, all the time thinking: don't waste the spark to light the fire. Milo reaches out and he moves forward pushed by the groping hands, yielding to their push.

My body would not return either; he thinks, it will continue to desire to remain in the presence of this body, to observe its movements, the changes that it suffers, to be a witness of its decay so that nothing will go unnoticed. He reaches out and takes Milo's hand in his hand and then kisses it. 'Let us forgive our similarities, let us step over them like children would step over broken toys,' Milo says, 'let us move on by using our differences as weapons.'

Bodies fall into categories, he thinks, like corpses they drop dead, one by one, in tombs tunnelling the red dirt of our desires. In the morning, as we both wake up, we wonder whether by chance, overnight, our room was invaded by armies of ants, their tiny legs carrying the smell of earth back to our unaccustomed sense of smell. Only moments later we discover our dirty feet and realize that it had been us all along, and not the ants, that we've been crossing the night barefoot in search of justification. How long before they find the tracks we've left behind in the immense fields of the night? The dirt we have stepped into, hand in hand, was a trap and now we carry clay on our feet as a reminder of our

escape. In this game I will be [*body number two*]. You will be [*body number one*]. In those two numbers we'll fall like corpses, one by one, in tombs tunnelling the red dirt of their desires. We'll carry that deep smell for the remainder of our lives, somewhere in between our ribs and we'll keep blaming the ants each morning. Only then [*our love*] shall cross, undisturbed, the night once again.

The constant hum, but now not the hum of machines, but the hum of dragonflies, and hummingbirds, of approaching superheroes, silent airplanes coming down, watched from the outside, the watchful reproach of two alpha males ready to fight, and in between them, a field of red dirt, if only the distance could be covered rapidly. Dirt, and bare feet accelerating, red dust rising.

He pulls Milo closer and puts his arm around his waist, two substances meeting, watchful, aware of each other's presence, careful enough not to consume their effervescence too fast, this reaction must burn slowly, dancing along the edges of the abyss, that final pleasure that goes down the hill, unaware of its destructive force, destroying everything that dares to step into its path. But their bodies unite, first in the middle, then their upper bodies curve to meet each other, their feet come together, all of these movements regulated by an internal rhythm.

The bodies are speaking, and one of the two falls under the spell of the other, seduced by its unending call. Carnivorous flower with wetted lips.

He kisses Milo, at first their lips barely touching, as if to test the ground, to make sure that at the end of this road there is some sort of promise for more. You'll never be able to know that, he thinks, so just let go, and forget about the promise. Milo's skin smells of red dirt. He looks down, their feet are dirty, as if they've been running barefoot through fields of red dirt, the blood of the earth, the guts, and they are the culprits, they have went down into the guts of the earth, and this is the scarlet letter that they have to wear in the sight of everyone else.

He pulls Milo even closer wanting to crush Milo's body against his, fuse somehow until they become one. Milo's body feels hard and present, warm and cold against his own skin, making him aware of every part of his own body. Who is this Milo? The

question slips by, and the reply comes by itself as Milo presses harder against his lips, pulling his head closer, his grip full of intent. The abyss seems even more alluring but they have to dance on the edge of it. We are beings-toward the abyss, the abyss defines us, let us dance. He can feel Milo's cock hardening against his hip. 'Is this all right?' Milo is looking at him, his hands still on his neck. 'Yes,' he says, 'please don't stop.' He thinks he hears 'I can't stop, I won't stop' in between their lips meeting, but he isn't sure. He feels Milo's hands descending slowly as if to make their presence go unnoticed. A slip of the tongue, the word in the sentence that needs to go unnoticed. He surrenders like an inexperienced child. I am the virgin, take good care of me, because every wrong movement shall remain imprinted like a scar on the map of my skin, careful not to break the silence of the flesh, its perfect symmetry. Milo takes a step back and takes off his boxer briefs. He doesn't do anything; he just stands there staring at Milo. He, Milo, moves closer and pulls him into his embrace again. Milo's hand is moving along his spine, going slowly down, pulling at his own boxer briefs. The fabric feels soft and warm as they slip off his skin. It feels cold now that they're off, and he feels ashamed of his naked body. Milo's body reacts to that and pulls him closer, shielding him. Milo's body is speaking, there's a word in every gesture like a child in the womb. Milo's body is saying lie down and he follows the orders, and then Milo's body lies down too, on top of him, pressing against him, it's not gravitational pull, it's two bodies desiring each other, two bodies dancing on the edge of the abyss, one of them saying follow me, let's fall into the abyss together, let's forget about the fear of falling. And they both let go. Milo goes first, and then him, afraid, trying to push the world out, the shame most of all.

As Milo's body lies next to him he can see the groping hands retreating into the speakers eyeing one last time the two bodies now consumed, lying on the floor, the two substances that have united and turned into a third substance, unknown, not yet discovered, not yet explained, purposeless. The lights are dimmed and the familiar voice comes through the speakers: 'the user has left the show. Please refer to your section supervisor.'

Milo sits upright and looks around as if woken up from a bad dream. He stands up and starts dressing without looking at him,

furious almost. He stands up too dressing, slowly, watching Milo. He's definitely, furious, he thinks and he wonders whether he did something wrong. 'What is it?' Milo doesn't look at him, doesn't acknowledge him either. 'We made a big mistake,' he says, 'a really big mistake, we could even get suspended.' He doesn't understand. 'Did we do something wrong?' Look, I think the client really liked it, I'm sure we'll get full credit for that.' 'Fuck', Milo says, furiously, 'it's not about the credit or the client, it's about us.' So Milo did think about him, he was not the only one obsessing over the other. Something had happened inside the booth the first time they went in together. He hopes with all his heart that it is about that. But Milo doesn't say anything else; he dresses furiously, pulling his pants and t-shirt, and then follows the blue guiding lights leading him into the antechamber and then the hallway, outside the booth. He follows Milo, not knowing what else to do or say. They have to go and check with the section supervisor, divide their credit.

They take a right, and then again right into another corridor, and then left until they reach the winding stairs. They don't stop and he's soon out of breath because he's the only one who seems to be struggling with walking. Milo is right into his element, going up the stairs, no effort recorded, just the frowning face that seems to be brooding upon something. 'Just tell me what I did wrong,' he says, 'I really don't get you. For fuck's sake, will you tell me what's going on?' Milo is angry now, he suddenly stops and turns toward him, and then grabs his jacket and pulls him closer with a swift movement. 'We did not use the costume,' Milo says, 'we did not use the fucking costume.' So it was only that, he thinks, just the costumes, not the thinking, not the obsessing over each other, their relationship stops there, in the antechamber. In the frenzy of desire they had forgotten the one thing that they should have done before engaging in any activity that might hurt the performers, expose them to risks that might even endanger their life. 'I'm sure it's not going to be a problem,' he says, but Milo doesn't let go. It feels like one of those games, he thinks, Milo is the client now, and he's holding me down. His face registers a smile and Milo pushes him back furiously, against the wall. He starts walking again. 'Of course it's going to be a problem,' Milo says, 'we can get suspended for it, for at least a

month, if we're lucky that is, and I doubt it.' Anger, walking, he sees the other Milo, il Magnifico, the one man who doesn't have to make up for anything, all the things he desires are within his reach, and all he has to do is just reach out and grab them, minimal effort, he's so strong in his personality that he only needs to say it and everyone else would bow to him, just to come into his favours, like servants to a king.

As they reach the top of the stairs he can already hear the general hum coming from the offices, voices repeating numbers and inserting them into a system that is awfully cruel to these particular people, he thinks. Milo doesn't mind them, he just keeps on walking, doesn't even look at the way the clerks are tied to their chairs, unable to move too much. In passing he takes a look at the many TV screens displaying performers and empty booths. He can't find the one he is looking for though, the images of the hanging man, the glass coffin, or the client with the glossy feet and the nervous twitch, none of that. Other performers and other acts have taken their place. He bumps against one of the desks just to see if the guy working at it notices anything. The guy keeps repeating the numbers, and then inserting them into the system, his face illuminated strangely by the blue light of the screen.

They get to the point where the office divides and get into the same room with the round table and the talking computer, still narrating the history of the Theatür. There's nobody there. 'Just like we did the last time,' Milo says, calmer now, 'you went in first so you need to insert the card first.' He takes his ID card and inserts it into one of the crevices of the plastic box, a click and a beep, and then Milo inserts his. 'Your credit has been successfully updated,' the machine says, 'please stand by, you have one unread notice.' He looks at Milo but Milo doesn't look back, he is staring at the plastic box, waiting, no emotion on his face. Apathy, torpor? Do you ever show your emotions when you are outside your performance? Does Milo the magnificent show his emotions when he no longer has to perform? They wait. Is there any impatience building up inside? It doesn't show, he thinks, you must be trained in this sort of thing, saving your emotions for when you are paid to show them. 'I'm really sorry about what happened,' he, Remy, says, 'I should've done

something about it.' Milo checks his watch. 'Well, it is too late now,' Milo says, 'there's no point in discussing it further, we'll wait and see what our punishment will be.'

He's suddenly so disappointed in the whole affair, as if the fault was only his, as if Milo was somewhere else, lost like a naive child who's been cajoled into doing something without his consent. Did he not let go? As if Milo was only body at that time, his capacity of reasoning absent, somewhere else. Where was the mind, Milo? Was it left behind in the antechamber?

The plastic box clicks again and there's another beep and a slip of paper is printed out slowly, and then brusquely. Milo takes a look at it. 'What does it say?' Milo doesn't say anything, but keeps staring at the slip of paper, still no emotion registering on his face, the same blank stare. He gives the slip of paper to him. He scans it for any info that might stand out from the wall of text that is printed on it. 'In accordance with the regulations of the Theatür', the slip of paper says, 'regarding the safety of our performers both users mentioned above will be suspended for thirty days. Nonetheless, both users can make an appeal and ask the safety committee to reconsider their decision. Both users have to be present, and the appeal can only be made in the next three hours. After that any form of appeal shall not be taken into consideration. Please insert the code that you find printed below into the nearest computer.'

He looks at Milo but he is absent. He feels alone in this. It looks like Milo has already made up his mind. 'Do we file the appeal or not?' Milo finally reacts and gives him a quick look in the eye. 'Of course we file an appeal,' Milo says, 'what choice do we have? They may decrease the period of suspension. It means thirty days without credit.' He's right, but then, he thinks, where does this credit go? Is there a bank account they have? Or is it just a set of numbers that they can spend inside the Theatür?

Milo takes the slip of paper from him and goes to the talking computer since that's the nearest computer they can see. He presses the space bar and the computer comes to life. It stops narrating the history of the Theatür and another voice comes through its speakers: 'welcome, please insert the code of your request.' Milo inserts the code and there's a moment of silence, and then the voice comes to life again. 'Do you wish to file an

appeal? Press Y if you agree,' pause, 'or N if you do not agree.' Milo presses Y swiftly. The machine responds after a short pause: 'your request has been successfully registered, please insert any comments that you think might help the safety committee take a decision in your favour.' Milo types something quickly without looking at him, and then presses enter. The machine reacts again. 'Please refer to the medical center as soon as possible for a complete health check up in the next three hours. Failure to do this will have serious repercussions for both users. Thank you for your cooperation.'

Everything has to happen within three hours, he thinks, don't waste too much time doing things that might harm the internal economy of the Theatür. Even here, he thinks, in this godforsaken place time means money, or credits, or whatever currency they use to measure their users' efficiency during working hours. 'What do they mean by serious repercussions?' Milo stands up and puts the slip of paper in his pocket next to his ID card. 'It means we could get suspended for an indeterminate period,' he says and starts walking toward the exit.

He follows Milo, running almost. He's used to this, he thinks, this endless walking from one part of the Theatür to the other, he doesn't run but manages to cover huge distances just by walking normally, he doesn't seem to put too much effort into it. The sound of his steps is swallowed by the ceaseless clatter of people repeating numbers and fingers pushing buttons, computers blinking. He takes another quick look at the wall of screens to see whether he could find that booth with the hanging man again. No luck, clients change, he thinks, they try something different every day, make life fuller and more exciting than it actually is on the outside, if there really is life outside the Theatür, he's starting to doubt that. Up to this point he has not managed to gather sufficient evidence to prove the existence of something outside the walls of the Theatür. Do these walls ever end? Is there a final exit sign? Where the fluorescent figure, the traveller, the warrior might finally rest for a moment before stepping out?

Milo doesn't look back, as if he's walking by himself and has forgotten all about him. He's afraid to say anything fearing that it might ruin the volatile balance and calmness in which Milo seems to have fallen for the moment, so he keeps on walking trying not

to think about anything. It's a difficult quest, because he can't stop thinking about what he and Milo just did in the booth earlier. The way Milo yielded to his touch, and the way his own body responded to everything Milo did. There was a silent symbiosis between their bodies, and Milo's body was the commander, and his own body was listening like a servant doing whatever he was asked to do. Milo's body was also brutal, he recalls, like all commanders are, but that was the beautiful part of it, being able to surrender to another body, assist it in its ascension toward pleasure and then come back with it, level the sense of solitude that comes after.

Most of all he remembers the taste of Milo's mouth and the way Milo's lips pushed against his own, the salty taste and the slightly off-putting smell of his mouth. It's what makes him human, he thinks, he didn't mind it at the time but now, as he recollects the moment, he thinks of it as of a secret, something that he knows about Milo, something that he won't disclose or share with anyone else. Or maybe Elaina already knows, he thinks, disappointment seeping quietly in, maybe she already knows every inch of his skin, the smell of his armpits the way he breathes when he gets turned on, and the way his body trembles when he is close to finishing. Maybe she already knows all that, and maybe even more than that, they seemed really close last time they met. True, there might be a sensitive line between the two of them, and Milo's words do seem to strike a chord with Elaina, but that doesn't mean that they are not close, closer than they should, at least for his taste. He's suddenly jealous of Elaina, not because of her charm or the way she walks but rather because she seems to know something about Milo, something that he has not yet managed to decipher.

The body is a very secretive machine, burying its secrets deep down, under layers of skin and flesh, and blood pumping, and organs moving. The most important memories, he thinks, do not show up on the outside unless in silent coded messages, in the choice of favourite colors, in the way one holds the fork and the knife while eating, in the way one smiles. It's not the smile, he thinks, it's not the fact that one smiles that becomes significant, it's the moment in which that smile comes to the surface, the choice of that moment, the way the muscles react and twitch to

create something emotionally meaningful. The meaning of that short moment in which muscles enter a sort of harmony becomes the ultimate meaning, he thinks and he smiles to himself. It is never ultimate, it cannot be, it must be an instance of meaning, one of the many instances of meaning that cross one's face. Every person is the sum of those meanings. And then there are other meanings, of course, the ones that come from the outside. Up to this point Milo will be defined as the man who rarely smiles. It's not the ultimate meaning. Only after Milo's death there will be the ultimate meaning. What a terrible thing to be thinking about that, he thinks and quickly dismisses the thought.

He looks at Milo's shoulders to lure his mind away from that, because even though they both might face suspension he cannot dismiss the thought that he has made love to Milo, that for a couple of minutes Milo's boyish beauty was his own to behold and cherish, and touch. He looks at Milo's shoulders and thinks that only moments earlier he held to them while Milo seemed to be floating above him, breathing heavily, letting go of himself, hiding, a part of him hiding, while some other part, at this moment not visible, gets out like an animal released from a cage, the animal hiding behind the moving shoulders. He feels the need to touch those shoulders again but he fears that Milo might not like it and say something that would ruin the pleasure of that memory or even the remains of whatever friendship they have left after they've seen each other naked and turned on.

Because something happens, he thinks, the moment you see one of your friends naked, it's the point of no return because you cannot unsee it. There's a sort of intimacy in that gesture, a sacredness that, once violated, it turns into something else, first an unwanted desire, still slightly sacred, untouchable, and then, in solitude, in the absence of that other body, it further turns into something else, a desired desire, the wish to touch that nakedness and be a part of it somehow, participate in its unfolding, in its climax. He can't deny the fact that after meeting Milo for the first time he felt the pangs of that desire, but it was still unwanted, still a foetus in a mother's womb. It's still like that, he thinks, it is still unwanted, but he can feel it growing into something else. Still not there yet, he thinks, and that may be because of Milo's reluctance, his absence outside the booth and

the performance. The absence itself is a promise of presence, the promise of changing pleasure into pain, and pain into pleasure, or at least of living one's life in the constant presence of somebody else, because love, he thinks, or at least friendship, will change any absence into a presence that is both imagined and real. No, he thinks again, not both imagined and real, but real even if imagined. Because if you don't walk in your lover's physical presence you will walk, for sure, in his imagined presence. And he imagines Milo walking around his mind, a walk from the frontal lobe of his brain to the occipital lobe and back, a stroll, no chance of rain or atmospheric disturbances, doing that walk of his, ferocious, full of intent, moving his shoulders the way he moves them now. I should have counted the doors, he thinks, I've lost track of where I am, the corridors look the same anyway, and somehow he finds it difficult to stay focused in Milo's presence. It's even more difficult to follow him around. Milo seems to have an incredible sense of space, which he lacks entirely. There's no memory of a beginning, he thinks, no learning path and no movement from not knowing to knowing.

They take a left and there's a sudden recognition of difference as if the Theatür is preparing them psychologically for the next things they would find inside its walls. The corridor is no longer flanked on both sides by red doors, there are no doors at all and the walls look significantly whiter than the rest. Neon lighting heavily illuminates the corridors and the walls are covered with paintings of naked bodies being prepared for medical examination. He finds them disturbing; the way nakedness is treated with no sense of poeticism in them. There are no hidden spots, no shadows, no invitation to ponder upon the condition of those bodies, and almost no sense of perspective. He tries to look at as many of them as he can, take all that visual information in, without losing track of Milo's moving shoulders. All of the subjects are looked at from above as if they were displayed for dissection and the artist seems to have taken a peculiar pleasure in painting beautiful lines, perfect bodies, both of men and women, headless corpses as if the presence of a head would make no difference to the eye of the onlooker. It seems, he thinks, as if the absence of their heads is the actual cause of their death. He wonders: did they die because they were beheaded, or did they

die of natural causes? What was the artist thinking when he unravelled tissue and muscle to uncover the hearts of his subjects? Nonetheless, his sense of reasoning kicks in, they are paintings, and paintings do not necessarily imply the presence of a subject. There must have been one subject, one that the artist had seen and then imagined it in hundreds of possibilities. One heart imagined in thousands of bodies. The heart is the same. It is as if the artist wanted to say something about that. That the heart is the same and that it doesn't matter how the rest of the body is made as long as there is a heart in it to make it work. The heart stands at the center, the body is but an ode, a temple built to favour the heart, to worship it. That's why the artist probably painted those perfect bodies. There are no irregularities on the skin, no wrinkles, no signs of age, the bodies seem ethereal in their perfection, out of this world almost, a heightening of the human flesh to the point of religion. But there's no reasoning here, the paintings seem to be saying, he thinks, there's no head in it, no logical steps to be taken in order to understand whatever is going on inside the body, or, at least, there's no rational control to the inner machinations of the body, there's always something coming from the outside, the very perspective of the painter, that disturbs the inner balance by dissecting the bodies, deconstructing the body, piece by piece, layer by layer. It is as if, he thinks, the painter desired that, wanted to disturb that balance inside the body just to show that the evil-minded gesture is coming from the outside, that in trying to understand something one can and will only disrupt an innocent balance. There's nothing more than that. Look at us, the painter is saying, don't let your rationality fool you, we are only bodies.

They quickly move through the maze of displayed bodies until they reach another small corridor that ends in three offices, and all of them seem to have no doors and no windows. Nobody seems to be there. Except, again, for a round table, a computer on it and the well-known plastic case with crevices carved into it. As opposed to the other plastic case he had seen in the other control room this one has a sort of scanner attached to it. 'They're made to scare you,' Milo says stopping and turning toward him. He doesn't understand and looks back at Milo puzzled, not expecting the sudden burst of words coming from

Milo. It's not much, but it's something, always better than complete silence. 'The paintings,' Milo says, 'they're made to scare you.' In response he says 'oh.' A spark of disappointment maybe, of unsatisfied curiosity, flashes through him. Is this the public that the painter had in mind when he painted those paintings? Somehow he was more than sure that the paintings, in fact, meant more than just scaring their viewers. He thought more of an act of subversion rather than scaring the shit out of their viewers. He does not want to express his disagreement with Milo; it's not the place or the time to do that. Milo, he noticed, is easily infuriated and he doesn't want to do that. Milo inserts his ID card in one of the crevices of the plastic box and the machine acknowledges his presence. 'Your turn,' Milo says. He takes his ID card and pushes it inside and the machine makes a click and then a beep. The computer comes to life and starts talking in the same mechanical tone: 'users Remwhy_88 and Milo_Magno86.' There is a pause and the two user names flash on the screen. 'You both face suspension for disrespecting the safety regulations of the Theatür.' He cannot but notice the moralizing tone embedded in the words being used. 'User Remwhy_88 please insert your hand into the hand-scanner that you will find on your left.' He inserts his hand. There is a moment of silence and the machine comes to life. He can feel the heat of the light of the scanner, the way it moves slowly over his palm. It's very soft at the beginning but then it becomes invasive, painful, a heat that is no longer tolerable, commanding to be felt, present. He can barely restrain himself from taking his hand out of the scanner. The scanner stops. A green light lets him know that he can take his hand out now. He takes it out quickly to see whether there was any damage but there is none. The skin of his palm seems perfectly intact. 'Scan complete,' the voice says, 'user Milo_Magno86 please insert your hand into the scanner.' Milo puts his hand inside and waits. The light flashes inside the scanner but Milo doesn't seem to register the discomfort. The green light appears again and Milo takes his hand out.

The computer is silent again, a few clicks and beeps and the voice comes back. 'Thank you for your cooperation, a notification will be sent to you in the next forty-eight hours. Until further notice your suspension remains valid.' In the silence that follows

he watches Milo and he can see traces of hesitation, something new, up to this point Milo has managed to keep everything that was going on inside to himself. He can see the outline of an emotion forming, gaining shape and momentum. He doesn't say anything. He, Remy, feels the need to do something, hold him maybe, try to comfort him, but he doesn't do anything, afraid to overstep the boundaries between the two personas, Milo_Magno86 and Milo, the actor outside the performance. 'What do we do now?' Milo does not reply immediately, as he always does, instead his attention is suddenly drawn to something on his cardigan, a loose end, he removes it, elegantly. 'We, are not doing anything,' he says, still looking at the loose end, 'you can do whatever you want, for all I care.' He turns toward the exit and the corridor with the paintings and starts walking, his usual walk, close to the wall, as if to hide, not to attract any attention, his shoulders bouncing, moving elegantly, like a panther's back. Looking at him from behind he can almost hear the brush of skin against fabric, its whisper and its secretive promise of warmth. And then he is gone, swallowed by one the endless corridors, heading toward something else, someone else, maybe, he thinks and suddenly feels the acute pain of his absence. He's probably going to see Elaina, engage in some dissenting nuptials that the legal system of the Theatür did not foresee or did nothing to prevent. They themselves had engaged in one of those dissenting nuptials, breaking the rules while doing it. He shudders at the thought, but not at the thought of actually engaging in something that goes against the regulations of the Theatür, rather at the thought of having thought of the word sex for whatever happened in there. That's how it works; his mind seems to be gaining momentum in this play of doubt and abjection. That's the word for it, there's no other word for it, and it would be linguistically if not logically impossible to use another word for what happened between him and Milo inside the booth. He weighs the possibilities but refuses to acknowledge the results that come to his mind like sentences of death. It couldn't have been only that. Milo is different. How is he different? In no particular way, he thinks, just different, the voice in his head smiles, laughs like a grown-up at the foolishness of children. He dismisses the thought.

He sits at the computer and presses the space bar. The computer crackles to life and a set of images start zooming in and out smoothly next to a drop down menu. He takes a quick look at the options. More history of the Theatür, he thinks, as if somebody really needs to know about that, more info on Christopher Wyatt and his ground-breaking invention, the Theatür, and then more info about Wyatt's son, Mason, the current holder of Theatür Industries. He clicks on Mason's name and the drop down menu disappears to make space for a photo of Mason and a block of text telling the story of Mason's life, the way he changed the policies of Theatür Industries to accommodate even more clients, even those who did not have too much money to spend on performances.

Mason was well aware, he thinks, that coming to the Theatür was soon to be become an addiction even for those who did not have the financial means to sustain such an expensive vice. He's a player, he thinks and looks at the picture that seems to be breathing on the screen. He stops breathing to see whether it's just a visual illusion. No, he finally decides, the picture is not moving. Mason is sitting on a high-backed chair with green upholstery, everything seems to be made of green and gold around him, including the carpet on the floor and the wallpapers of the room. He is smoking, smiling slightly, attentively, elegantly, as if his smile is just a whisper, a secret that has to be told in a low voice, in someone's ear even. He is dominating the entire room and everything around him seems to be listening to the orders given by the very presence of his body inside the room. He looks like a stain on the whole picture, wearing a dark blue suit and a slim tie, too modern for the whole arrangement of the room. He is smoking, the smoke too moves elegantly around him like a tamed ghost. Even the smoke is submissive, in awe of that presence. The long black hair is shining, pulled to the back of his head. He must have been a performer too at one point, his body indicates that, there's an aura of theatricality in his manner, the way he holds the cigarette and the way his feet stand on the ground.

He can almost imagine Mason performing, the son making the father proud by working in his father's business, just to have a taste of it before becoming the master of them all, of all the

performers and clients to ever set foot inside the Theatür. The father, Wyatt, thinks it's a bad idea to have his son engage do such a menial job, but then, he thinks, the father thinks, let him do it, let him find his way in the industry, feel the difficulty with which credit is earned, later he'll learn to respect the performer and assess their performance better, a patron is a patron only because he is the best at whatever his employees do. He is wearing gloves, black leather gloves that further enhance his sense of authority. Yet, why would he be wearing gloves inside the room, posing for a photo that would later become a static representation of himself in the history of his family, and finally, in the history of the Theatür itself? He tries to read it in Mason's face but the question remains unanswered except for a recurring thought, wakefulness at the brims of his brain, the ghost of a thought rather: he has something to hide, that's why.

Dream Three

I'm a moth.

I'm at the house of a fatherless friend, that is, his father is still alive. He just doesn't show up that often. And the mother is gone too. She's at work. In fact, it's not the house of the fatherless friend. It's his grandmother's house. The walls inside the house are covered with wool carpets his grandmother had made. The house is full of wool. There's wool all over the place. There's wool on the floor, wool on the walls, wool on the ceiling, wool on the bed. Wool is coming out of the windows in waves. When his grandmother talks wool is coming out of her mouth, there's wool stuck to her knees.

Me and my friend, we've been playing mom and dad for a while, and we always went too far with the game.

There's an insect on the wool-covered wall under the ugly painting with the rich ladies being painted by a poor painter. The rich ladies are looking at him, smiling, pretending to be playing the violin. There's a painting inside the painting. But this painting is not a painting; it's a reproduction of a painting that probably never existed. What about the painting inside the painting? Is that a reproduction too?

We are watching it closely not knowing what it is exactly. The insect that is.

It is a very ugly insect.

I reach out and try to touch it and its head suddenly withdraws inside the body. This ugly insect terrifies me, and my friend's grandmother intervenes.

It's a moth, she says, fucking moths eating away my wool. And as she said that wool kept coming out of her mouth.

It's such a beautiful name for an ugly insect, I say and the grandmother spits wool at me while screaming ughughugh at me. It was rather a burp than a scream. The grandmother was always eating homemade yogurt and corn bread.

The front yard of my high school, I'm trying to make conversation with a girl I do not know and who is supposed to be my colleague for the next four years. She's fat, like me, wearing

glasses, which makes her pretty cool. Wish I wore glasses. But that will come later.

This older guy comes closer because he knows her and starts laughing at me, pointing at me, saying things. Look at you, you fat little shit, your head like a watermelon, soon you'll have no eyes, they'll be swimming in fat. I want to kick your ass you little shit. And then he starts telling her that she shouldn't be seen with guys like me. Are you hanging out with this kind of guys now?

I'm a moth, my head retracts, hides inside the body, and I can't hear him anymore. I'm covering my head with the blanket hoping that the monsters will go away. I'm an insect. Buried deep under my chitin shell there's a human. But they don't know that. They don't want to know that, they're ignoring that side of me. So I pull my head back and try not to listen to them. The words will stay there, beside my human side, they'll chat with my human side, ask my human side out for a drink, have lunch together.

I'm going home, I'm still a moth. I'm just outside the front gates of my high school and a car is trying to pull out of the parking lot. I'm with my lab partner. Her mouth smells like an open sewer but I try to ignore it, afraid to tell her about it. And her clothes smell like she's been out on a date with a cow. She smells like she's been working in a stable. Maybe she is working in a stable during weekends, I have no idea what she does during weekends. She is a cow.

We both stop to let the car pull out of the parking lot and a guy pushes into me as if by accident, and he's really pissed because apparently it was my fault because I stopped and I've stepped over his manly pride. He's really pissed off because he starts throwing things at me, textbooks, notebooks, school stuff, and they all hit me in the head, and the cow doesn't say anything. We keep walking until the guy disappears. I'm happy he's gone because this was just a misunderstanding. I stopped because of the car.

When we turn the corner he's there and he's brought friends to witness his revenge against me and a fist is already in the air swirling around my nose without touching me. In the commotion I run away.

We killed the moth that day. The grandmother spitting wool killed it with her bare hands. The wool was safe. Retractable head or not the moth was there and the bare hands could not deny that presence.

I try to avoid the guy. I even try to talk to some of the professors to let me leave early. I invent some sort of problem telling them that father needs the key because he had lost his and so on. And for a while they believe me. Until one day one of the teachers asks me whether I'm in trouble with one of the older students. I deny it till the end because in fact the guy is not older; on the contrary he's younger. I can't say that.

That boy is a sissy. That boy is a girl.

What's wrong with you? I just want to kick your ass. What is that you're holding? Is that the Holy Bible? [*Laugh, laugh, laugh, everybody is laughing except me.*] Do you have pubic hair in your pants?

My head descends like an elevator inside my body and from there it looks up at the sky. It's not the Bible it's a diary. I don't say that to avoid further ridicule. I'm a sissy. There's something wrong with me. There's nothing in between my legs, except big dark nothingness.

I'm sitting at the front desk, reading something for the next class and the door is open. People are having their breaks in between classes. I'm a moth; I don't get to have a break. And the guy is just outside the door with his friends. He's telling them that he once turned me into a boxing bag.

I'm a boxing bag. I do not fight back because I can't fight back. I'm hanging from the ceiling. I move only when I'm hit. I move only when it hurts.

I move to the back of the class where he couldn't see me through the open door and I do my best never to go out of the room. I don't eat, I don't drink water, I don't go to the bathroom, and everyday I pray our schedules won't overlap.

The moth is so fragile.

The moth can easily be killed even when its head is hidden inside the body. The head cannot save itself. So the moth flew away, moved to another city where woolly grandmothers do not exist and turning people into punching bags is frowned upon.

The Remnants of a Man

There's a cadaver in the room, at least, he assumes it's a cadaver because half of it is missing and living bodies don't go around like that. There's no blood on the floor and the half-body is naked.

Cut in half with surgical precision. A monument.

Soon families will be having picnics around it on sunny Sunday afternoons.

He kneels beside it. Bow to the artist.

The body is swimming in a sea of whiteness, tranquil, sleeping beauty awaiting its knight in shining armour. He touches its shoulder, it's cold and it feels like plastic, quickly the image of the glossy feet of the client twitching nervously slips by, the ghost of an emotion, fear, curiosity maybe, the curiosity that one may have for touching a foreign body, to discover it by feeling the fabric of its skin.

He tries to imagine the other half of the body, submerged in that sea of white, the other half is bathing in a sea of milk. The arm of the half-body suddenly twitches, comes to life, machinelike, a soldier awakened from his dream of death, and he can hear it breathing, slowly but full of decision, like it has suddenly decided to live even if deprived by its other half. One long breath, not the kind one has when awakened from deep sleep.

Don't you know, it seems to be saying, don't you know that a touch can bring a body to life, it can send shivers through its epidermis, make the hairs stand up, make it move, ignite the heart, the blood, the fire that keeps it moving, that keeps it alive.

He moves to the other side to face the half body.

Its eye is opened and it locks on him as he comes into view. Don't go away, don't leave me alone it seems to be saying. He kneels and then stretches next to it and he can feel the other half of his body sinking into the sea of whiteness and stops halfway.

We are the same, he doesn't say it but somehow the meaning of that sentence disturbs the smooth surface of the white floor like a stone thrown in a puddle. Ripples that travel beyond. The

half-body reaches out stretching its hand and touches his face. He closes his eye as if the touch must be performed in some sort of absence. We turn blind when we touch; we turn blind when our lips meet halfway, mortified and humbled by the gesture, as if the other body is a thief trying to steal something that we own, yet something that we desire to lose. And sometimes it's the most precious thing that we own, our own soul maybe, or some sort of entity residing somewhere under the many layers of flesh we call our bodies. Still, we want it stolen, because we have fallen in love with the thief. And then the thief is gone and you are left with an absence, longing for that next touch. The skin goes mad once its surface is disturbed. The touch is a disease, a virus; its symptoms disappear once that touch is forgotten.

Let me tell you a story, the half-body says without moving its mouth, the story that you watch being narrated every day on the streets, on buses and trains. It's the story of a woman that uses too much makeup, it's the story of the youngster who carries his guitar over his shoulder, the story of the guy who seems drunk but isn't really drunk. Why does the woman use too much make-up?

The half-body closes its eye but the eye trembles underneath until the eyelid trembles too and the eye opens again.

In her solitude, the half-body goes on narrating without moving its mouth, the woman creates a different version of herself, one that would be accepted by the world she encounters on the outside. A protective coat is needed in such cases, because people are like bad weather, it's raining with people; their eyes are like drops of rain. So the woman, standing alone in front of her mirror applies a coat of powder, diamonds on her face, and then while she is on the bus she sees this young man looking at her, and she thinks, he must like me because he is checking me out. And suddenly the effort of putting all that makeup on is rewarded right there, on the spot. What she doesn't know is that the young man is not checking her out, on the contrary, he pities her, please don't jump to conclusions, he does not pity her because of the makeup or because he is too young and arrogant, he pities her because of the solitude, because he knows about the solitude, and the dejection that comes with it, and about the protective coat, and maybe because he knows that the woman is

trying to impress somebody and that that somebody will never notice and he sees the despair of wanting to be noticed. It's in that layer of powder, the coat of diamonds. The young man might see his divorced mother in that woman, a woman who is too old to hope for someone better than her former husband. The woman looks away and then she has to get off the bus and the young man will just sit there and think of all those things because he too, in solitude, creates a version of himself.

It's in the way he showers every morning, in the way he brushes his teeth three times a day, in the way he uses his deodorant, in the way he holds his guitar over the shoulder. Precious thing, that guitar. Because it is a precious thing, he has the talent for it, for playing it that is, and people have seen his talent in the way his fingers move until they too become sounds, not just fingers, and the young man will start believing them, thinking that he truly has a talent for it.

What he doesn't know is that he was led to believe all those things, just like a puppy he was told he needs to do this one extra thing, practice until his fingers fused with the strings, until his mind went numb. It was all about the fingers. He did that and they laughed and said oh, he has a talent for it, and at one point he started to laugh too, short smiles squeezed in between the strings of the guitar. And you know what? While he is looking at that woman he goes back in time. Click, and slap, and boom, and he's back. Just like a dog he is told that he has to do this one thing, practice piano this time, until his fingers become one with the keyboard, the black and white array of figures and symbols that stand for foetal versions of emotions, combined they explode into full-blooded emotions that can do harm or good. Just like people do, you know. And the young man trusts them, he goes to practice every day after school, and other people see him play and they say he has talent, and he believes them and keeps playing thinking that his own future and happiness stands in that combination of black and white. And he plays for the rest of his life, all that time thinking that he was ultimately created for that. He doesn't know, he doesn't know, because he is not the only one who doesn't know.

The man is drunk but he is not actually drunk, the half-body murmurs, because he doesn't realize that with each drop of

alcohol he is closer to drunkenness, the memory of those other drops is lost and every drop is a new fresh drop, the first drop. But the body remembers and then gets it's revenge. The mind thinks, just one more step, they won't notice.

The half body stops closes its eye then swallows.

The sound of tubes filling with fuel, picking up speed.

The work of art that needs heat in order to work.

The artist takes a vial and he fills it with his own breath. With his body's own liquids, sweat, and saliva. Sperm. Lure. Bait. And then puts a cap over that vile so that its contents stay inside. The artist forgets about it for a long period of time. Hidden somewhere. The artist pretends to have forgotten about it. But it's in there. Zoom in, zoom in, into the artist's mind, which is no mind at all, actually, but the ghost of a mind that is both eye and lump of flesh. Not eye, but function, of seeing, not hand, but function of change. In between object and function, that's where the vial is hidden. No, not in the flesh.

What do you see when you look at me? I see a half-body, he replies then thinks it might have been too harsh to say something like that. It's not too harsh, the half-body says.

Where is your other half?

There is no other half, the half-body replies, you see, that's the mistake that you do, you think there must be another half just because your past experience is telling you that there must be another half in order to survive, that the body is a balanced entity made out of two halves one supporting the other, one carrying the weight of the other, like Sisyphus pushing his boulder up the mountain.

Sisyphus and the boulder are one and the same thing.

Sisyphus is a limb, the boulder is the function.

The limb that pushes the mind.

In between them the vial of the artist. Its venom.

The body can exist without the other half, it can walk too, tell stories, and other things too; it can do many things. What other things? It can, for instance, invent its other half, you see, just like the other bodies do, in its solitude it invents the other half because it knows that that is what people will want to see, the other half is an ideal self, the one whom we think other people will desire in their beds, naked.

But it doesn't exist, right?

The other half, no, it doesn't exist.

But it does, the half-body replies, you need to learn that, it's the noblest part of our bodies. Why is it our noblest? Physical bodies are capable of noble deeds. The half-body laughs, its muscles shaking vigorously.

Exhaust fumes. The artist hasn't yet figured out a way to make his art autonomous. Tubes filling with fuel. No, it doesn't feel like drowning.

It is not noble because of that, the half-body says, it is noble because we create it for other people, so that others might fall in love with it, cherish it, that's our biggest act of love directed toward the world. We have never hated the other; we have offered him the best part of ourselves. And the worst. He laughs, covering his mouth as if to diminish the magnitude of his laugh. That's probably the stupidest thing I have ever heard.

The half-body closes its eye and it becomes rigid again, its skin glossy, plastic. He reaches out to touch it, still smiling, but the half-body doesn't respond. He tries to stand up but finds it difficult since his own body is cut in half. It's impossible to move, the only movement he can perform is that of stretching his arm and touch the other half-body. He tries to roll over but his body doesn't react in any way, the only change being the despair silently building inside his chest. He wants to scream for help but there's no one in sight besides the glossy body lying next to him. This cannot be, he thinks, this is impossible, a body cannot possibly be so incoherent with itself, the body is balance.

He stands upright stretching his legs, he feels something on his legs, a light pressure, he pushes it off furiously as if it's a dead body that he wants to get rid of. It doesn't show any resistance so he pushes it easily away. He looks around but it's too dark and he cannot see where he is. The pillows, yes, the pillows at his back, and the sheets, that was only the blanket. He pulls it back over his feet. It feels warm and pleasant against his skin. He pushes it away again and gets out of bed, switches on the lights, a familiar but still strange room, he'll never get used to it. The bathroom door is half opened and he goes in to check. He switches the lights on and takes a look inside. Everything seems to be in its place, including the red and yellow bottle of Pit of Passion.

The pit of passion puts you in peril.

They never say what kind of peril. There must be some sort of assumption he thinks, buyers and producers alike, they must assume that everyone will think of some sort of sexual peril, women losing control in the presence of men wearing a drop of the perfume. Strangely, he doesn't remember leaving the bathroom door opened when he went to bed. He doesn't even remember going to bed. He only remembers the picture he was looking at during his visit at the medical center, Mason's picture, the way he stood in his chair, the authority that oozed out of every pore of his skin, the way the cigarette smoke danced around his hand. The image slips by to leave room for the half-body and his odd discussion. It was just a dream, but sometimes dreams are so real that they soon turn into memories. That's true, he thinks, sometimes dreams satisfy desires, and satisfied desires are soon turned into memories. The life that we'd like to have, he thinks, comes up in dreams like oil on water. He'd like to dream of Milo. He quickly dismisses the thought trying to convince himself that nothing will ever happen between him and Milo, might as well stop thinking about it, it will only make him feel bad anyway, turn him into a jealous animal. Yet, as he does that, he can see a figure hiding behind this thought, the yellow eyes of hope, hope itself eyeing him behind the urge of letting go. Although he can see it clearly he doesn't want to acknowledge its presence, doesn't want to let it out of control fearing he might get caught up with it and be very disappointed in the end. So he dismisses it saying to himself that he is not hopeful in any way.

Milo is out of his league, save the energy for something else, memory space, or whatever the thought of Milo might use to exist. He closes the bathroom door and sits at the desk. He doesn't remember writing anything in his diary but he checks anyway. There's an entry for the previous day. There is no date written down, just a horizontal line drawn between the previous entry and this one. He reads it still not recalling any memory of it actually having written it. Let me read, he thinks, let me read the words written by another with the use of my hand. Mentally, he draws a line between himself and whoever might have written the entry in his diary, if it really was his diary.

The body, his hand wrote, is the prosthetic limb of our desires, and extension to our lust, the nerve endings programmed to touch and lead us into despair. Humble yet powerful, the body lets you know there's a limit to our love. Every touch is an ending in progress, the entropy, the heat and the cold. Love is a sequence of evil-minded angels descending from heavens hand in hand like barrel toy monkeys. The body unfolds, makes itself visible as the years go by. One of the angels looks back in fear knowing this is no good. But things are now settled. The leader of the pack of angels is no animal. The leader of the pack is an idea. We must love, he says. Hand in hand the evil-minded angels descend. The one at the beginning of the stream holds all the weight. We make love and hold on to a cloud. The act of our creation was not blessed. It does not matter. The way we hold each other, my muscles tightening around your waist, is a blessing. Our love is fury, revenge, happening at the end of that stream of angels hand in hand like barrel toy monkeys.

The entry ends there, and there's a line drawn under it as if whoever wrote the entry thought that there was nothing else to add about the events of the previous day. However, at a closer look he notices that the handwriting is slightly different from the previous entry. The letters are longer going elegantly up and down. The person who wrote the entry, he thinks, must be very arrogant full of himself, or herself, he's not sure.

At an earlier stage of his life he had believed for a long period of time that he could clearly make a difference between a woman's handwriting and a man's handwriting. But then things got really blurry and he started to believe that his insight into the souls of writers worked only in retrospect. He became sure of the origin of the writing hand only after having some insight into the personality of the writer. Some sort of charlatan he was, thinking to be different from the others. The realization that came after that disillusionment was very painful simply because he had believed in it, believed he had some sort of talent for it. People do not have talents; he remembers his discussion with the half-body. That's what the moving mannequin seemed to be saying. Talent comes only with practice and propensity; it is the result of those two things, not the cause. There goes everything, he thinks, everything we believe, everything we have fought for, everything

gets flushed down the toilet because some demon in the flesh decides to appear on a night like this, uncontrollable codes of meaning that form under the epidermis without the knowledge of the host, like symbiotic parasites they move along the bloodstream, silently, with the elegance of illnesses without symptoms, and then they meet at a juncture, and they start talking, sending electric impulses to the brain, and then we dream and think that those dreams are inspired by some demon let loose, short glances at our future.

He takes a pen and starts writing in the diary under the line drawn by his unknown collaborator.

Whoever you are, he writes, please stop this nonsense.

This is not your diary.

He looks up and there, in the ceiling there is an opening, chunks of concrete all over the place, and plaster, and pieces of wood. A world without a sky, an empty tunnel opening to a piece sky that doesn't want to be seen. And the words descending through the opening, and then settling on the page. It always feels like you're not the one who's writing.

And in the opening he sees me looking at him, sitting at my desk in some remote country, writing this as we speak.

Once the words have settled he reads them out loud.

Whoever you are, it says, please stop this nonsense.

This is not your diary.

He closes the diary and the hole in the ceiling closes too.

And then somebody else dreams of you, while you dream of them, and the two dreams are so different, so contrasting that you suddenly lose faith.

There is a knock at the door, so soft he thinks it's just an illusion, he has started hearing things. He doesn't do anything except watching the door for any movement or sound. A few moments pass and then he hears it again, stronger this time. He stands up and goes toward the door. He stretches his hand to open the door but then realizes that he's wearing only a pair of boxer shorts, so he quickly goes into the bathroom and puts his jeans and a shirt on.

The door clicks and he pulls it toward him, slowly, sticking his head in the doorway. Elaina is already walking away, thinking maybe that there was nobody in his small apartment. 'Elaina,' he

says. She stops and turns toward him, a big smirk on her face. 'I thought you might be sleeping,' she says, 'or out. I thought you might be out.'

He opens the door wider and makes an inviting gesture. She hesitates then steps in, makes another step, and then stops, leaning against the handle as if to stop him from closing the door. He takes a small step back feeling threatened by Elaina's presence in the doorway. 'No, I just woke up,' he says, 'a couple of minutes ago. I don't even know what time it is.' She doesn't say anything, just stares at him, as if she doesn't understand what he's talking about. She shrugs. He remembers that shrug, the one from the supervisor's office, childish yet with a matureness to it that makes one wonder. The kind of matureness that adults use when they don't want to agree they have no clue about something, so they just falter, mutter something, half-words, until that moment's pressure passes and they feel safe again. 'I heard you were suspended,' she says, 'Milo told me.' So they did meet, he thinks, when Milo went away from the medical center he went to meet her, tell her about the incident, and maybe give her a detailed account of what happened in the booth. He searches for it in her eyes, the knowledge of that moment, a moment that he recalls with a sort of brightness to it, a brightness that is both warm and reassuring but also disturbing and painful. He doesn't see it no matter how hard he tries to see it in her eyes. Maybe Milo didn't tell her after all, but then it means he had to invent another reason for their suspension. He decides to play it safe, to avoid incriminating both of them, keep that moment special, a part of both of them, him and Milo. 'I'm sorry to hear that,' she says, 'it means you won't be working today.' He looks away because he doesn't want to look her in the face. 'Yeah, we are still waiting for the final decision,' he says, 'we made an appeal, and we had to go to the medical center.'

She is still standing in the doorway her hand hanging on the handle. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other as if she's dancing. She looks nervous, her other hand clutching apprehensively at her shoulder bag. She doesn't want to be seen here, he thinks, that's why she's keeping the door open, so that she won't be liable to any accusation. Is it some internal law of the Theatür? He doesn't remember reading it in the Theatür

Handbook of Conduct. He's not a criminal, he didn't murder anyone; he just made a small mistake, slept with one of the performers. And then her tone, the way she said it, you won't be working today, which means no credit, and huge amounts of shame, as if she was glad.

She takes one small step back her hand still hanging onto the handle. 'Milo didn't tell me why,' she says, her voice now unsteady, 'he didn't want to tell me about it. It's not against regulations to be talking about these things, but he didn't want to tell me.' He doesn't say anything hoping that his silence would be interpreted as an assent, an acceptance of whatever Milo might be planning by keeping his silence about the whole matter. And then he sees it in her eyes, the moment she lets go of the hope of finding something out, and she is almost crying, her hands moving anxiously around her body, circling her hips. She looks away, her right foot leaning back against the heel of the shoe. 'Ehm,' she says, trying desperately to maintain an even tone of voice, 'good luck with your appeal, and let me know how it works out, I need to go, I have some stuff to do.'

She moves to the right but then changes her mind and goes in the opposite direction without looking at him. He looks after her until she disappears behind the corner. He can hear the sound of her convincing walk, the way her heels dig into the concrete floor. He stands in the doorway for a few moments, listening, and then takes a step back and closes the door.

It feels like victory, he thinks, his and Milo's victory, as if, though cold and distant, Milo is sending him messages through the bodies of other people, making his presence felt even if he is physically absent. One body is the echo of another body. And then that body will appear again, or at least a copy of it will appear, a blueprint, as if to remind him of the source of that echo, but only to remind him, not to actually interact with him. That other body will move along another trajectory, separate from his own, and the moment he sees it is the moment in which two trajectories meet, a juncture. And it will happen again, and again, every time he thinks that he has forgotten. Milo is the source, all the other bodies are just echoes of his body. Milo sends messages through all the other bodies as if they are part of some sort of network of bodies. There's a joy to that thought, he

thinks, knowing that Milo has kept something hidden from Elaina and her confident walk, a pleasure even, and he feels like letting that hope in, no longer leaving it aside, and the hope smiles, lightly, assured of his inviting look.

He takes his shirt off and goes into the bathroom intent on taking a shower before getting out of his apartment to walk along the endless corridors of the Theatür, corridors that he has now come to regard as streets. When did that happen? When did that thought slip in and take roots? He cannot trace it back. The corridors of the Theatür have never resembled streets in his imagination, he had never thought of it, never in a million years, and now everything is his mind in pointing in that direction, toward that change of thought, as if, by some reason unknown to him, the resemblance between streets and corridors has been implanted overnight in his brain. He just knows, by some unknown force, that it isn't his thought, just like the handwriting in the diary seemed familiar but never his own. He cannot do anything about it, so he just leaves it there, lingering, hoping his mind will grow less alert in the presence of that foreign thought.

He turns on the hot water and unbuttons his jeans revealing the white boxer jeans. He takes them off and suddenly he feels very cold. He steps into the shower cabin and closes the glass door behind him. The water feels pleasant against his skin, liberating almost, as if it manages to go beyond the epidermis and into his body, inside his guts, warming him from the inside. He suddenly feels better, his momentary alarm at the intruding thought slowly receding, and hiding behind other thoughts it becomes a whisper compared to the louder discourses that are occurring inside his mind. Among all, the image of Milo's shoulders moving, and the way Milo's naked body felt leaning against his own body, come to the fore, the image and the sensation that comes with it split into thousands of other images, replicas, a multiplication of that feeling of completion. It's not like coming home, he thinks, we don't know what home actually is, we have inherited that feeling and we have taken it for granted in our evolution. This feels nothing like it, he thinks, this feels like falling and flying at the same time, a body caught in between solid and liquid state, it feels like a promise, a glimpse at the future, the past forgotten, the present no longer imagined but

lived, sun without shadow, bodies moving at the speed of light, touching, further creating energy and heat. Let our united bodies live on that energy alone, let us consume ourselves, and even if that happens for one second only let it happen, because that one second will feel like an eternity for the both of us. It has to be like that, he thinks, otherwise it wouldn't make sense, all the effort that we put in building this amalgamation of flesh and emotion.

He opens the glass door to reach for his towel his body protesting against the sudden cold. He takes the towel and goes back inside the shower cabin closing the glass door behind him. Maybe it will feel less cold once he is dried and ready to take his clothes back on. It doesn't help too much because once he is out again his muscles shiver vigorously. He goes back into the room and takes another pair of boxers from the trunk next to his bed, a pair of jeans, and a grey-blue t-shirt. He finally stops shivering and his clothes feel very pleasant against his skin. He goes back into the bathroom for his dose of Pit of Passion. He doesn't apply it directly on the skin fearing that it might have side effects again. A pair of clean socks, and his shoes and coat, and he's off.

He gets out of the apartment and closes the door behind him. He takes a right and then turns into a corridor that seems to be descending, and he tries to look at each and every door to see if he could establish some sort of algorithm that might help him get around the Theatür. They all look the same, no number, the same colour, the same type of handle, and that same crevice like an open mouth used for identification. He tries opening one of them without inserting his ID card inside the small crevice. The door doesn't move an inch. He goes to the next one and does the same, but again the door feels rigid as if a part of the wall itself. He pushes harder at the same time pressing the handle. The door is still rigid, unresponsive. He moves to the next one and does the same. When he reaches the fourth door he inserts his ID card inside and waits for a response but the card is immediately ejected and the door remains locked. So you can't just enter any room, he thinks, there is some sort of order to it, an outline of meaning. He decides to let it go and take a walk along the corridors, deep down hoping to meet Milo and his boyish beauty. Then the thought drops like a brick through a glass window. He

can't go in because he's suspended, Milo too, that's why the doors keep refusing to open, maybe he should have stayed inside, wait for the final decision of the safety department.

He turns back trying to recognize the doors but all of them look the same and he didn't count the doors, he should have done that. He goes back along the same corridor and starts running thinking that somebody might have already come looking for him and he wasn't there to receive the news. He can't find his door so he decides to try all of them. One of them should let him in; they would know that it is his room, and that he needs to get back in. One by one the doors keep rejecting him, his ID card being ejected the moment he is pushing it in. He finally gets to his door, at least he presumes it's his door because the card gets accepted and the door clicks. He gets inside and closes the door without turning the lights on and takes his coat off. He takes a step forward then turns toward where the light switch should be. He fumbles with it suddenly seized by the horror that there might be somebody else in the room with him, expecting him. The lights turn on but there's nobody there. The room is just as he left it, the bed unmade, some clothes thrown on top of the blanket and a faint smell of Pit of Passion. He checks the bathroom just to make sure that there's nobody else inside. Despite that sudden fit of horror he did expect to find somebody there, Milo maybe, or just somebody else, someone to share his solitude.

He can hear steps outside his door, must be Elaina again, he thinks, but then an envelope slides under his door. He picks it up and opens it, his hands trembling:

Dear user,

The safety commission of the Theatür has taken into consideration your appeal and the results of the medical check up that was performed at our request, and we have decided to maintain our initial decision. Your access to our corpus of entertainment services shall be restricted for thirty days starting today. Please refer to your supervisor if you have any further questions regarding the restrictions that have been coded into your access card. In the meantime feel free to engage in other activities that might make this period more pleasurable.

*Best regards,
Theatür Industries.*

He imagines Mason writing it personally, signing it, his hand moving elegantly along the page, thinking of him, of Remy, that poor bastard who can't even stick to a couple of rules, and then sending it to him with a look of disgust on his face. He too feels disgusted by his lack of control. He should have followed the rule, one simple rule, some words written on a piece of paper, a warning that was created for his own good and for the good of the other performers, a system that was created with people like him in mind. But all he did was succumb to the chemical reaction that was going on at that particular time in his body, he became a slave to his own instincts, and now the Theatür, not to mention Milo himself, was blaming him for it, for that one slip of the body. He smiles to himself and repeats the phrase in his mind, that one slip of the body, as if the body is some sort of tongue, part of a bigger body, more important that this little body of his, a tongue that speaks some sort of language, different from his own language, a bigger language, the language that completes his own language, that language that his ancestors have pushed into some sort of meaning.

What kind of language is that, he wonders, the bigger language?

It must speak of beauty for sure, he thinks, of standards of beauty, just like the other, smaller language has been twisted along the years to mean other things. Standards of beauty change and consequently that bigger language must change too, according to its users, according to the meanings that we want to fit in. He tries to imagine it, his own body as a tongue moving inside some foreign mouth, his own body trying to articulate some sort of language, tongue twisters become body twisters, his body twists like a worm suddenly brought to light and air, making love turn into kissing, two tongues, two bodies rubbing against each other to recall some other meanings. Kissing is a question of meaning, the beginning of a question, the first word in a sentence, and that initial word wouldn't make sense without the rest. But of course it would, some voice in his head says, it is full

of meaning, the meaning is in itself, you must see it as an end and not as a means toward something else. But there is always something else, he thinks, something that is not stated or stays behind, we underestimate the desire of self-completion that others have, their desire to take away furtively something that we own, not necessarily cherish, something that would add one more drop to their sense of completion.

There's a slight knock at his door. He doesn't react immediately, but waits for something to happen, thinking that it might be some other performer who has lost his way among the many corridors and doors of the Theatür. But there is another knock on the door, stronger this time, full of intent. He jumps and hurries toward the door to open it. The door clicks and he pulls it slowly to reveal Milo's boyish beauty. He freezes not knowing what else to do, not expecting his visit, at the same time rejoicing in his presence. It's this duplicity he hates.

The body doesn't know what it wants, it forgets, then it remembers, and then it forgets again and makes you feel sorry for it. Milo is not smiling, must be some sort of rebelliousness, against common sense, that's what Milo would do, he thinks, rebel against common sense, rebel against anything that might come against him. So he doesn't smile either, doesn't say hello, just stands there, staring at him and his boyish beauty. Milo shifts his weight from one foot to the other but still doesn't say anything. 'Hi,' he, Remy, says, 'I didn't expect you. Did you get your envelope?' Milo frowns. 'What envelope?' He shows the plastic envelope that had slid inside his room through the small crack under his door. 'The decision of the safety committee,' he says, 'they did not accept our appeal, and we are still suspended for the next thirty days.'

Milo looks at him as if he doesn't understand, as if there was an initial understanding between the two of them and no further explanation was needed. It felt like going back on an issue that was already resolved a very long time ago and consensus had settled on the matter. 'I know,' Milo says, 'I told you we were going to get suspended. The appeal was just a formality, something that we had to do just in case.' So he knew, Milo knew, he thinks, he knew from the very beginning that their appeal is going to be rejected, and yet he insisted on filing it. His

stubbornness, he thinks, is disarming, but he also finds it sexy. He quickly dismisses the thought; Milo's presence commands some sort of bearing that is serious and official, no time for playing foolish games.

He leans against the doorframe. 'Are you going to let me in?' He fumbles with the doorknob, and then pulls the door open wide. 'Sure, sorry,' he says, 'I completely forgot about it, yeah, sorry.' Milo takes a shy step toward his room, and then another one. He stops at the door not knowing what he should do. He, Remy, observes the childlike pride playing in Milo's eyes and he suddenly feels warmed by it. There's a glint of hope, like the glint one sees in a menacing knife that might or might not strike. The very fact that he came here is a sign. He came from who knows where just to be with him, or rather ask for something, a favour, something that would indicate some sort of preference. You are getting ahead of things again, he thinks, hold your horses, Milo is a difficult one. 'Have a seat,' he says and pushes the blanket against the wall to make some space on the bed. Milo hesitates again, puts his hands in his pockets. 'Would you like to take off your coat?' Milo looks at his coat thinking for a moment, and then takes it off and gives it to him. He is wearing a white t-shirt, and a pair of dark-blue jeans, no Pit of Passion this time, just him, pure Milo scent, clean body, a slight hint of sweat, just enough to make him more attractive, to make his presence noted. Nothing else is needed, he thinks, it's enough, for him at least, he can't imagine someone who might ask more from Milo, more than what he already has, or is, except Elaina maybe, she would ask for his attention, her walking commands everyone's attention actually, even his own.

Maybe it was about that, the thought slips by, maybe that is why Elaina stopped by, because she might have been interested in him and not in Milo? He finds it difficult to believe. He just assumed it was Milo because Milo seemed the best choice. She might have showed up to know what was happening with him. Because Milo's charm was undeniable she wanted to see whether he too had fallen for that charm like a leaf in the arms of running water, too weak to oppose the muscular stream, and that is true, he fell for it, and now he was struggling for air, trying to swim upwards, toward the sun. But there was no sun to swim to,

because Milo was the sun and the water at the same time, the muscular stream that pulled him downwards and the light that called him from above the water like a warning. And he did drown, he was lost in Milo's body, because Milo's body was like a labyrinth, it still is, a labyrinth of emotion and layers of meat, and it that maze he felt lost and he let go, and he forgot about that ridiculous costume and it's purpose, he felt so safe within the solemn walls of that labyrinth that he didn't feel the need to ask for help, for some sort of protection. And he should have never done that because it wasn't safe.

It seems gloomy only in retrospect, he thinks, and that's the trick, it should seem gloomy all the time. However, this abandonment was right at that particular moment, he felt as if he was letting go of his fears, the fear of remaining untouched for the rest of his life, the consequences of that, being blamed for rigidity, stiffness, and all those things that would make him seem a body ready to be discarded, the first choice when it comes to throwing somebody out of the boat for the sake of the others, yes, a body to be dismissed immediately. So he felt like he was letting go of all that, as if life was suddenly clicking into place and all those fears vanished.

But other fears came to the fore, like discarded toys, yet potent in their force and presence. This was one of them, that Milo might turn in some stranger, and they would meet again, in one of those booths, or on the corridors of the Theatür, and they would act as strangers. Even with knowing that one essential thing about the other, they would still act like strangers because showing your body to another person does not act like knowledge, he finds it funny, burst-into-incontrollable-laughter funny, because we have taught ourselves to think that the body is not an accurate reflection of what is going on inside, that there is some deeper meaning involved, a meaning that is hidden and metaphysical even for the one who wears it on his sleeve. The many layers of flesh that we wear on our bones do not make us who we are. But if they don't make us who we are, he thinks, they, at least, impose some sort of limit on what we are capable of doing, and that sort of doing plays a major part in what defines us. If one doesn't know how to swim then one won't be able to save someone from drowning, simply because the body won't

permit that, its lack of knowledge won't permit that. The body is both permissive and limiting. He notices Milo's uneasiness in the way in which he plays with his phone, not really doing anything, just rotating it swiftly between his fingers. He sits down next to Milo, keeping his distance from him, but then he gets closer thinking that Milo would think he's avoiding being too close to him. It's always difficult to be in the presence of Milo Magnifico, his presence, just like the one that Mason showcases, is one that commands attention, Milo cannot be denied.

He can hear Milo's breathing and the shy sounds his body makes and it almost feels like he's trespassing a secret boundary to steal a glimpse of Milo's other identity, the one built around his body. He feels as if this meeting has the illusory identity of a film that is being shot in his presence and he's just a member of the crew. He's telling Milo he should sit like this, breathe like this, use some sort of faked emotion, it is the character that feels like that not the actor, and you must get inside the skin of your character just like you get inside one of those costumes that you use in your performances. If the character feels free then you too must feel free despite the oppressiveness that you might find when you get back home. Home, the word sounds bizarre and distant, as if it is a word that one encounters by mistake while talking to a person that speaks a different dialect.

'Is there something you wanted to tell me?' Milo almost jumps, his gesture exaggerated, he's on the stage, performing, the audience in the back too must see that he looks surprised and what better way to show that than to use your body as a tongue inside of a bigger body, the stage, the stage that has the mortifying appearance of a skull. You have to cross the stage, the skull, to show that in between your moving and stopping your character has grown old and decrepit. 'Do you want me to go?' It's his turn to have a reaction, one that must be exaggerated, one more time for those in the back, they're playing tennis, and now the ball is furiously eyeing him as it comes closer and he must move before it is too late to move, so he grabs Milo's arm, lightly, and begs him to stay. 'No, I don't want you to leave. Please don't leave.'

Trail, move on, the rest of that thought comes out invisible.

And Milo doesn't see it, doesn't hear it.

Because if you leave, the thought continues invisibly, this won't make sense anymore, and I'll get out of this room and I won't know how to come back, and I'll get lost and who knows what horrors I might discover about myself, and about the Theatür. And somehow I do not want that, I want to stay here, limit myself to the knowledge your presence conveys, and get lost into that knowledge like a kid who gets lost in a crowded marketplace. Milo smiles, for the first time, and that smile is full of knowledge, it's a stream of information, flooding his senses, so he smiles back as if to say that his smile has reached its destination and is now safe and sound, the lost child has been found.

Milo is also making it very difficult for him, he thinks, there is some sort of resistance, a shield, because only moments later the smile fades, teeth hide behind full lips, the eyes fall pensively downwards and up again to seize his eyes, to hold them there. It's almost like a threat. He doesn't let go of Milo's hand and he can feel Milo's body coming to life again, pulsing inside his hand, muscles twitching and his arm moving to meet his thigh. Milo's body is substance again and the moment his hand touches his thigh becomes chemical reaction because his body jumps inside first scared to death and then submissively it comes out of its chitin shell. It's impossible to turn back, dreams and fantasies have prepared him for this, some inner voice giving him orders, telling him that he should do this and that, be brave, and then the voice says 'you shouldn't' and laughs, and then it urges him to let go, because his body can no longer be his body if he doesn't let go. 'Is this safe for the both of us?' Milo stops moving, freezes next to him, as if woken up from a beautiful dream. 'Our test results came out negative.' Milo can see his hesitation, he too can see his hesitation before he even feels it growing inside his guts, and he can see it reflected in Milo eyes and in Milo's sudden rigidity. Milo pulls him closer and his senses fire up again. 'Trust me, he says, will you trust me?' He doesn't say anything but his hands start to caress Milo's jawline. Milo takes it as a yes and pulls him even closer.

So he lets go, and Milo probably lets go too, because his body feels soft against his own as they are trying to reach for each other leaning over the chasm that opens in front of them, and he's watching Milo, and Milo is saying stay with me, let us hold

hands, let our bodies know each other, it's the kind of knowledge that I will never impart to anyone else, the rest of the world is just caught in our love affair.

But he just wishes to stay silent, watch Milo move along the margins of his body, and he tries hard to suppress the urge to make him stop because he is afraid, afraid that Milo might get bored with this new meaning his body has acquired since they first met, the urge to tell him that his own body has never been touched by somebody else in that way, that another body has never made this same promise to his body, that no other body has talked to him in this way.

The body moves driven by a centrifugal force that means run, along an orbit that is always different because the body moves along rational lines and codes that are always external, never internal, but when two bodies meet, celestial bodies, one of them is saying come with me, and the other follows driven by an equally strong force, the centripetal force that means stay for a few more minutes and let me explain what this is all about, because when two bodies meet they will inevitably try to explain their limits to each other. And he says, there is no explanation to be given because I already know, our bodies have met before and my body has watched yours without saying anything, and it has recorded every movement, dissected every gesture to find a grain of meaning, and it has arrived at a conclusion.

The body is a phantom limb. It hurts when desire should hurt. The body is the orphaned child coming back to us; tied at the end of string we name our love. It comes back to us at the end of every fear. The body is the child that sleeps silently at the feet of our bed on stormy nights. Once we reach the end of that string the body climbs into our bed, like a serpent, and settles, eyes half-closed, in between the sheets. We embrace it like parents embrace a new-born.

Later on, as the night draws to a close, we can hear it whisper: I am the end of the string. And we desperately cling to each other knowing that the end of the string is not only the end of our love, but also the end of other things. Life itself, smiling, the life lived under a tree. So we make love again to forget about the other ends. And we forget about the body that hurts when desire should hurt, and think of how unfair this world is, and how the

body sits unalarmed, at the end of everything, how this defines my love for you, my longing. Our love goes as far as the body goes.

And at the end of the body there's Milo, half asleep. And Milo says, have you ever thought of going out, go beyond the corridors of the Theatür, even beyond the point where the corridors stop and become something else? Where the strongly visible line becomes a dotted line, where the dotted line opens up a void that desires to be filled in with somebody else's name?

Dream Four

I hide in the bushes making friends with the discarded cigarette packs still smelling of tobacco, hoping that, just like in their case, the damp dirt will soon claim my texture too, fill my pores with the smell of ants and dead leaves.

I'm having dinner with my shame tonight.

Mother is sitting beside me at the table and I have just finished eating. The plate is empty but the hunger has been stirred and it is squirming in my guts, violently, up and down it goes like a rubber ball. I stand up and my mother's face suddenly swells to gigantic proportions. She doesn't say anything for now she's just staring at me and my empty plate. I walk to the stove and fill my plate with beans then go back to the table. My mother's face has swelled beyond recognition. My mother's face covers the earth. I sit beside her and she looks at the plate. She doesn't agree with the plate and the plate doesn't agree with her either, but while the plate is silent and submissive under the weight of the green beans and the gravy, mother starts talking her swollen face furious. You'll turn into an obese little boy, that's what's going to happen.

I shrug and start eating and the beans are acrid. They must have gone bad in the meantime. While mother's face was swelling, the gravy has gone bad, and the bread is dry and it refuses to go down my throat.

Grandmother says, let him be.

My shame has yellow eyes, like none of my perpetrators.

No, my perpetrators resemble me in many ways, they are not aliens, they have limbs just like mine, and eyes too, blue, green, hazel, fury, despair. And figuring out a way to kill them essentially translates into figuring out ways to kill myself and what I have become in their eyes.

Is mother one of my perpetrators?

Hey, pumpkin, what are you doing, pumpkin, playing with girls, are you?

Not like the girl on the swing who refuses to show me her new wristwatch, or the boy whom I thought to be an agreeable

acquaintance, and then accused me of having pushed him while we were playing outside. Nobody stood up for me then as nobody will stand up for me now. Those were not people on the playground but eyeless creatures. And they come back to me. Even as I speak.

My shame comes with the sense of hunger.

Hunger has yellow eyes. He can see me, he doesn't forgive me as much as I try not to trespass his rules at least in his presence. He comes by the swing in the evening when the sun has gone down from view and the sky is undecided. He's a very nice man, very mannered, he hangs around all day long, saying nothing, but staring at me ceaselessly. I'm his child by the looks of his silent stare, and I can't run because I'm too fat and it hurts and Shame comes along and I don't like Shame at all. Shame has never been my friend.

My Shame becomes my mother sometimes or my mother becomes Shame, the difference is kind of fuzzy right now. When I see mother I think of Shame and when I see Shame I think of mother, and grandmother, too, comes to mind. Because both have caught me masturbating when I didn't even know what masturbating was or whether it was shameful.

The discarded packs of cigarettes are very silent. That's what I like them about them. They're not fault-finding. And they don't talk back.

It's poetry I'm thinking of. All the time.

Sometimes I hide in the trees, the ones I manage to climb.

You can't climb that tree, melon head. Stick to the things you can do, like being unable to catch up with the rest of us when we're running away from home. We're running from you, in fact, you weak link in the chain of boys and girls holding hands, running, playing. Go back into the house, it's too hot outside for you, you'll start bleeding through your nose again. Mother makes me smell vinegar when that happens. And then everything smells like vinegar.

I go into grandfather's hut and take out his wooden boxes despite his threats of slapping me whenever I had the nerve to look through his things. His wooden boxes were off limits, the one thing I could not touch. The only time I was allowed was when I was sick.

If sickness were the one condition for loving you I would pretend to be sick for the rest of my life.

Grandfather has a porcelain squirrel in one of his wooden boxes and I take it out and look at it for hours on end. Until I become the porcelain squirrel. We're both made of porcelain, you, unknown friend who never runs away from me, who never runs away from home, who never bleeds through the nose.

Your hands are so cold, porcelain friend.

I drop the porcelain squirrel [*laugh*] it's flying, and it's so beautiful doing that almost as if it is in love with the approaching ground. Two lovers approaching, one faster than the other, and the faster one is always the most fragile. I'm watching the two lovers approach elegantly until they touch and that touch is fatal. The squirrel breaks and I put the pieces back into the wooden box hoping that my grandfather won't notice the difference. Beautiful porcelain friend, you are the kind of person I wouldn't want to become.

The Scarlet Body

Milo is still fast asleep; he's been counting his breaths as if to check whether he is still alive. Milo is alive, Milo is here, next to me, his body is warm, his skin feels real, he keeps repeating this like a mantra, and it calms him down, his consciousness anchored into the undeniable presence of that body next to him. He doesn't resemble the mannequin that's been haunting his dreams lately. Milo doesn't resemble the client with the twitching glossy foot.

There's turmoil at the door. Beyond the wooden frame he can hear people whispering, some of those whispers desperate, some of them submissive like those of a parent telling bedtime stories to a child already half asleep. He stands upright, trying not to wake Milo, lost in another land. The floor feels cold, is it winter? He doesn't know, the cold suddenly feels like a foreign presence in the room, as if somebody's been watching them all along and they didn't even notice it. He dismisses the thought and goes slowly toward the door. The whispers are stronger now, some of them no longer seem whispers, men and women talking, and he can swear one of those voices is Elaina's, her decisive tone full of confidence.

They are shameless; the voice is saying, they should be punished for that, their conduct goes against everything we have fought for, everything we believe in, suspension is not enough, we should be tougher. He stops and puts his ear against the door to hear it better. The voices come clearer now.

In the whole history of the Theatür, Elaina's voice goes on, I have never heard of such preposterous behaviour, Mason himself should take care of this, they should be banished from the Theatür, hanged even, this is not a place for this kind of deviants.

Another voice, unknown to him, comes through the door, stronger than Elaina's, we totally agree, they should be punished they have gone too far. What are they talking about? He looks back at the bed where Milo should be sleeping but there's nobody there. He goes back to it and pushes the blanket against the wall. There's nobody there and only one of the pillows seems

to have been used, no sign of Milo. He goes inside the bathroom thinking that Milo might have gone in there while he was listening to the voices on the other side the door. There's nobody in the bathroom. He checks the shower cabin, there's no sign of Milo.

He is suddenly furious, desperate, enraged by the voices outside his door and what they were saying, they did nothing wrong, he and Milo, and now they took him away, the voices took him away, to hang him or do something terrible to him. Lynch him. Horrified, the thought itself looks back at him. He sits on the bathroom floor, agitated, trying to think of a rule from the *Theatür Handbook* that might forbid two performers living together, or doing things together, but he cannot recall any that might remotely hint at that. He stands up and goes toward the door intent on confronting the people standing outside. Brusquely, he opens it wide but there's nobody there, there's only air and the lights of a distant city laying its beauties at his feet. He can hear the sound of cars and people, high apartment buildings, and other people, he can see them through the small windows, shadows moving aimlessly around their apartments, some of them talking to each other, quarrelling even, one of them is reading, somebody else is taking a shower, all that music of purposelessness, too individual to have a meaning.

He looks down and realizes that the door is opening in mid-air; there is no floor beneath the door. Close the door, somebody says, it's cold, come back. He turns back and closes the door but as he does that he feels that his hands are sticky, as if the door was freshly painted and the paint stuck to his fingers. He looks at his hands and sees that they are actually dirty with red paint. He tries to rub his hands against each other to take the paint off. But the paint won't come off; instead it spreads on his arms and body.

There's somebody in his bed but the voice seems to be coming from somewhere else, from the walls? He goes back to his bed, lays down and pulls the blanket over his body, it feels warm under it, and he's suddenly very sleepy, but the voice, that voice goes on, coming from the walls, from the bed, everywhere, begging him to come back, the voice is a hand pulling him back, it caresses his face, it begs him to stay, and he stays, he's no

longer thinking about the city at his feet just outside the door, he's over that, because the voice so mellifluous, and alluring like a song, because he wants that voice inside him, he wants to own it, to hold it. He closes his eyes and then he opens them and he can see Milo's figure floating just above his face, kissing him, his hand caressing his face, saying, stay here with me, I'm here, don't let them take you away from me.

The right story or the wrong story. One of the two.

Wrong story. He pushes Milo's hands away, his body progressing violently against the wall and the pillow, the sheets are burning not with desire but with fire, real fire, the kind that melts metal and sears the flesh of visionaries. Milo slumps back and almost falls off the bed. His, Remy's, feet galloping against him, moving like the fists of a fighter. Milo fights back pinning him against the pillows. Leave me alone, we shouldn't be doing this. This is wrong, you shouldn't be here. An iceberg moving above the water hitting against the land, and they're in between, in between the wrongness and the rightness of their story. The iceberg hits the land violently carried forward by the waves, then retreats and hits again, cracking, pieces falling off, until it stops. It swings and then stops. Steam is coming out of their mouths.

The clank of metal, jagged wheels embracing, moving backwards, crablike. The iceberg retreats uncovering the sun and the sky.

Not the right story, but our story.

He quickly looks at his hands, no sign of the red paint. He kisses Milo back once, then stops to look at him, and then kisses him again, as if to make sure that he is real. Milo is real, he repeats it like a mantra, and Milo is here. 'You were having a nightmare,' Milo says, 'you were saying something, but I didn't quite get it, some sort of foreign language.' He smiles and gets out of bed, the floor is cold, is it winter? He doesn't say it out loud, instead he goes to the door and opens it. There's nobody outside, no angry mob, no distant city, just the endless corridors of the Theatür. He closes the door and looks at Milo. He doesn't say anything, gets back in bed, and pulls Milo closer. Milo's body responds, submissive, to his call, and moves to accommodate his. Sometimes one body is like a shell for another, breakable body. 'Is it winter?' Milo looks at him surprised, and then he looks at

the ceiling. 'Maybe,' Milo says, 'on the outside.' Outside, the word bounces against the walls of his brain making bizarre noises. 'Have you ever been on the outside?' Milo chuckles and then quickly adds, 'no, I've never been on the outside, but I've heard it's very beautiful, a guy told me, a guy who went out and came back to tell the story.'

This outside, he thinks, sounds like a promise, the promise of something better, he laughs at the thought, because he finds it pathetic. 'Why did he come back then?' Milo looks at him and makes a face that appears to be saying 'isn't it obvious?' He tries to imagine the guy, the one who went to see this outside, but somehow he can't, his figure still vague and distant. 'He came back to tell us that there is another world outside, that we are caught inside the Theatür.' Why did he come back then?

The question looms over them like the belly of the ceiling but he's afraid to bring it up again, afraid it might make Milo mad and he might want to leave, and he doesn't want him to leave. So he chooses to ignore the question entirely by asking another question that might divert their discussion from the uncomfortable outside. 'What are we going to do today?' Milo is silent again. 'Considering the fact that we are both suspended for the next thirty days, we should make plans to fill all this wasted time.' Milo looks at him and caresses his face, and then his hair, and kisses him on the lips. 'You are so beautiful,' he says, 'when I saw you that first time in the booth I thought you were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my entire life.' He, Remy, bursts into laughter, he would have never thought of that. 'I'm serious,' Milo says, 'but I didn't have the courage to tell you that. I'm very shy, you know.' You've made this very difficult for me, he thinks, playing the silence and mystery card, seeming distracted by other things, and acting like a tough guy. 'Milo Magnifico is shy,' he says, 'that's almost outrageous. There's no reason for you to be shy, I will grant you that, because when I first saw you I thought you will never talk to me again.'

Milo laughs and he laughs too because he had never heard Milo laughing in this way and it's the most beautiful thing in the world to see him laugh, it's as if a whole new person has been uncovered in that particular instant and he just couldn't go back to that other Milo, that taciturn, silent, and arrogant Milo. 'That's

not true,' Milo says, 'I'm always like that, trying to push other people away, it's more like a defence mechanism. I push them away so that they won't feel disappointed when they know me better, lower their expectations, you know how that works.' He smiles and pushes Milo's body even harder against his. Again, there is a response as Milo's body hardens and pulls him closer, crushing him. Milo grunts like a sleepy dog and kisses his forehead.

'Can I ask you something?' Milo's body relaxes. He doesn't say anything, just nods as if to say go ahead. 'It's about Elaina,' he says, 'is there something going on between the two of you?' Milo keeps his silence, his body moves, as if uncomfortable, but he doesn't let go of him, he maintains the contact. 'I don't know, does that bother you?' He looks away to hide whatever emotion might come across his face.

He cannot deny it does bother him because he sees Elaina as a threat to both of them. I'm such an idiot, he thinks, I'm exaggerating things again. 'Just forget it,' he says, 'forget I even asked that, I have no right to do that.' But Milo's body grows hard again and crushes him. The body used as a tongue again, he thinks, articulating emotions and words. He's saying, don't worry; don't think about it, everything will be fine. His own body responds to that language, a torrent of emotions explodes inside his chest and the body forgets about itself. The body sometimes forgets it is a body, for a very short moment it turns into something else.

'So, what are we going to do for the rest of the day?' Milo seems to have fallen asleep because he doesn't say anything. He puts his head on Milo's shoulder and Milo's arm, almost unconsciously, goes around him, hugging him. Milo's breathing slows down, until it becomes almost imperceptible. And then it becomes loud again, the air entering his body in chunks, Milo is snoring, but his body descends into the silence of resting. They both descend into silence, but his body is still listening, its pores open like elephant ears, they're listening to what Milo's body is saying, the knowledge that it imparts while he sleeps.

Listen to me, Milo's body is whispering, come closer and listen to me, so he puts his head to Milo's chest.

The absence, Milo's body is saying, is the most important thing because absences have been misunderstood up to this point, up to this very moment, the one in which we find ourselves right now. There are no degrees of absences, you cannot be less absent or more absent, the presence of an absence can only be measured by the presence of touch, absence is the absence of touch, our sense of sight or smell is not to be trusted, only the skin can be trusted.

Trust this body you are leaning against now only in its presence, only when you can touch it. Other instances are not to be trusted. And his body replies to that call saying, I trust you, I'm going to trust this body only in its presence and dismiss the things that might come up in its absence. Absence is only the absence of touch; there are no degrees of absence. He repeats it like a prayer and with that he descends even deeper into sleep. I let go of my consciousness at this very instant because I trust this other body that is beside me, I trust its touch, and the presence of this touch tells me that it is present and nothing can go wrong in its presence. Even in my dreams I shall seek this touch because it means safety, and home, and outside, and future plans.

Hand in hand we dream together, we step onto common ground, and we both bring something of our own to this place, an emotional baggage in which we have stored the remnants of our dreams, and the carcasses of past emotions.

Aren't we beautiful?

This is still the wrong story, one that others have told for us.

Stories are like nests and we are born and bred in them, and even though over the years we grow feathers and wings, and fly away, the body will carry those stories unconsciously in the form of shape, in the way our legs move, the way our hands hold onto each other.

We are wooden boxes made by grandfathers for their grandchildren. With trembling hands the grandfather sticks the wooden parts together and then lets them dry in the sun while he does other things. He feeds the pigs and the chickens, and the cow. The wooden boxes must be given to somebody while the grandfather is still alive because the absence of the working hand takes away essential parts of the meaning that have been carefully stored inside. There's meaning in craft, like there's meaning in

our bodies. Once the boxes are taken away by other hands they suddenly feel empty and they need to be filled with something. And so the child stores important things in them just like people store things in the bodies of other people. People build spider webs and we, like solitary insects, fall into them and for an instant we become part of them, until we are devoured and our bodies have once again a sense of meaning. What meaning have you given to my body, Milo?

The words are no longer words, they turn into rivulets of humming resemble language, the words come one after the other in a stream that feels meaningful, like a radio host gone out of focus, its voice metallic, resembling the tone and cadence of human speech. He knows it is human simply because it couldn't be something else. And his mind is begging him to stop because he needs to rest, and yet he needs to know, see if there is some meaning in it, it could be a revelation.

He thinks of a black and white television set, the quality of the voices that comes out of its speakers. There's a man standing upright but his back is curved and it looks like he is not actually standing, but sitting in a very uncomfortable position. His body makes a U shape bending over the chair next to him. His body is so curved that it looks like the chair's aura. And the chair is so inviting that it is irresistible so he sits down on it.

Please, the man says, let me show you something un-for-ge-ttable. There's coarseness in his voice but the way the words come out of his mouth, as if he has a few missing teeth, makes it lose its coarseness. The man is wearing a long white coat as doctors would wear, and underneath he can see a turquoise shirt and a dark blue tie. The middle of the tie is secured with a pin. He recalls that this is what doctors should do if they are wearing a tie, it should always be secure so that it won't interfere with their work. Yet, considering the shape of the man's body even this official look appears shabby and mismanaged. He's also wearing a pair of dark jeans that do not seem to fit in with the whole scene.

He sits comfortably in the chair and sees that there is a big screen in front of him. The man watches him as he settles in his chair. Are you comfortable enough? Here we care a lot about the way our patients feel. Do not hesitate to let us know if you feel there's something wrong with the chair or the screen. He nods

toward the man as if to let him know that everything is fine. Both the chair and the screen are fine, no complaints about that.

The man makes a solemn nod and takes a remote control from one of his pockets. He presses a button on the remote control and the screen comes to life. Ah, the man says, the wonderful city just outside the walls of the Theatür. But what he sees is just a collection of city plans in which streets are simple two-dimensional lines drawn across a piece of paper, and buildings are little squares drawn by children.

Let me introduce you, the man says, to a couple of sensations you have been kept away from. Let me introduce you to the city. This right here, the man continues pointing to a small dot in the right upper corner of the screen, is the Theatür, where you are right now. Can you see it? He nods; yes he can see it clearly. The small dot was in red and it kept blinking, it was impossible not to notice it since nothing else on the screen was either blinking or marked in red. Just imagine the immensity of this city, since the Theatür is so small in relation to the rest of the city. And we all know that the Theatür is immense, if not endless. The man laughs, then snorts, and laughs again, and then bursts in a fit of coughing. Once his coughing comes to a stop he resumes his composure and continues talking. For many years the Theatür has tried to keep this secret hidden, forcing its performers to believe that there was nothing outside its walls, that there was no life beyond its borders. Thanks to our many explorers we have managed to make a map of this uncharted territory and bring to light the lie that stands at the very base of the Theatür. Uncovering this lie and exposing it would mean the end for the Theatür and its dictator Mr Mason Wyatt, not to mention his cohorts of bureaucrats. Even though out of the many explorers we have sent out only one came back, we believe that future efforts can only be successful since we have enough information to explore other parts of the city.

Somehow he understands that this man is the explorer that came back and brought the plans of the city. Your guess is right, the man says, I was the one who came back from the expedition. It was our third time out and I just couldn't refuse the chance of getting back inside and telling the other performers the lies the Theatür feeds to them every single day of their miserable life. All

of the other explorers stayed behind, indulged irrevocably in the pleasures and beauties that the city offers. What pleasures and beauties? The man bursts again into a nervous fit of laughter and coughing. You see, that's the thing; the city offers huge amounts of pleasures and beauties. The city, just like the Theatür, is populated by people, men and women like us, but the difference is, the main difference is, yes, the essential difference is, um, yes, yes, yes, the main difference is they do not have to perform.

He falls silent for a second and mumbles something to himself, an inaudible commentary. No, yes, no, they do not perform, you see, but they do perform actually, the only difference being that they can see their clients, who are not actually clients, but other performers, who have to perform too at one point, everyone is the audience of everyone else. And that changes everything, because you can look into the eyes of your alleged client, and you can react to his reactions and so on and so forth, there's no time for long explanations, you get the idea. And you can walk through this city, just like you walk through the Theatür, and see other people, people who have tattoos and earrings, and piercings, and you can see them taking their dogs for a walk, and you can see them kissing, and doing other interesting things. And you don't have to talk to them if you have no reasons to talk to them. And they don't have to talk to you unless one of them likes you and they want to take you out for a coffee. Yes, they drink coffee; I imagine you don't know what coffee is. It is this dark-coloured drink that keeps them awake and alive during the day. Some of them call it the essence of life, but that is not true, there have been cases in which performers survived without this drink they call coffee.

The man moves closer to him now.

You need to understand these things if you desire to understand this big lie that is being told to other performers as we speak. The city is beautiful at night, the man adds, it is the most beautiful thing that I have ever seen, lights turning on the streets, and people going out to celebrate the end of another day. There is no night inside the Theatür. There's a sort of joy that explodes during the night, and you can see solitary figures all over the place, and you don't have to talk to them because you don't know who they are and they don't know who you are. So

you can ignore them and they will ignore you, this is one of the unwritten rules of the city. Some of them lose themselves in this intricate maze of the city, maddened by the huge quantities of sensations that the city offers. They use intricate mixtures of substances to make the pain go away, and the pain goes away, momentarily, and then this thing they call unhappiness returns. The substances cannot make it go away forever. They have not yet figured that out, but they're working on it. What do you think, huh? It's pretty awesome. And if we could find some new explorers who would be willing to come back we could tear down the Theatür and its lies. They have the answers, we don't, the people in the city, they know that what we're doing here is wrong, that it is against our nature, and that we're being held against our will, and they want to save us, they do, they have tried to attack the Theatür, but it was all to no avail. And they can save us. They can, they can save us.

What if we don't want to be saved?

The sentence spills out.

The man bursts into a fit of laughter and coughing.

Nonsense, he says, why would you want to do something that goes against your own nature? It's wrong, and it will destroy your body, tilt the balance against you, and hold you down and away from your talents and your destiny.

Why did come back then? You should have stayed there and saved yourself along with the other performers who had the chance to get out. Does this mean that you know a safe way out? Does this mean you can go back into the city at your heart's desire?

The man is moving his arms around furiously, not knowing what else to do.

How dare you say something like this? I have risked my own life to come back and tell you about the wonders of the city and you just can't appreciate that, you don't know what I've been through, you have no idea.

Of course, he says, I have no idea what you've been through, but I did not ask for it, I did not ask to be saved, we did not ask for you to go out there, you're not our ambassador, nobody is for that matter. Maybe some of us want to remain here, he says, have

you thought about that? Or is it just a matter of negligible weight for you?

Staying here, the man says, is a mistake, and you know that. Your minds will descend into darkness and then there won't be a way out. You won't be able to find a way out.

The man is furious now, spitting out words and saliva, hissing, spitting, his body turning, spinning like a plastic ring revolving around the hips of a little girl.

And then his body turns into a snake.

This can't be real, his mind seems to reply, and his senses suddenly come into focus, objects he wasn't aware of, the chair is not actually a chair, the man is not wearing a white coat, only a white shirt. This isn't real, it can't be real, his body is moving nervously, he opens his eyes and reaches out to the other side of the bed, there's somebody there, and even before he feels the actual body he feels the heat. He must have fallen asleep again. Milo's body is facing the wall, his shoulders silent now. He touches Milo's shoulder lightly but he doesn't react. He then comes closer and puts his right arm around Milo's middle. Milo's body suddenly becomes conscious of his touch and hardens, cradling against his chest, then falls silent again.

Trust this body only in its physical presence.

I trust it, he thinks, because I can feel it on my flesh, your body climbing, then stopping and climbing again like in a game of chess. 'We really need to get out of bed,' he says, 'otherwise we'll keep sleeping. The more you sleep, the more you want to sleep.' Milo's body doesn't move, it only grunts, and then it says something that he cannot quite catch. He kisses Milo's shoulder lightly. For a moment he feels left out, and bad about himself, but just for a second, just for a split second, the smallest part of a second, but enough to ruin the whole thing. It's always been like this, he thinks, always in an out, he finds that he cannot be constant in the way he's feeling about himself, an emotional rollercoaster. His eyes remain stuck on the wall, his hand slowly caressing Milo shoulder. Yes, it's always been like that, and he hates himself for that, because he cannot be constant. What kind of spark has ignited this fire? And again, what fire are we talking about? Of course, he knows the fault is all his, and Milo probably thinks about it in the same way. The second time they went

inside the booth he fell for it, fell for the whole Milo Magnifico charm, and in a split second he was all over him, kissing him, and making love to him. That was certainly something, at least for him it was, but it was only the outline of something that was still empty inside, and his mistake was to fill in the blanks that outline left behind. Milo's body still feels real under his hand, his, on the other hand, feels utterly stupid. Things are no different now, now that Milo is in his room and in his bed, he's still busy with filling in the blanks, the drop that floods an entire country. And Milo was the drop, and he was the country, and he fell in the trap again. Seeing Milo's body inert in front of him, so unresponsive, so silent, doesn't help. How could he have trusted the silent Milo Magnifico when his reputation, as Elaina called it, clearly indicated something fishy in the middle?

Thought and hate of that thought, thought and attitude about that thought, the endless loop that blood goes through every single day, no memory of it. He is not blood, he is history, the record of thoughts about thoughts.

So he turns away from Milo with his back against him. He feels as if this is a gesture of rebellion, two bodies that are not talking to each other, their physical contact lost momentarily in between the sheets. He can no longer trust that body, and all those other moments, those moments of contact and desire for more contact, seem to fade away and fall under the shadow of this distrust that looms menacingly above the events of the past days.

But despite the shadows and the feelings of despair suddenly clutching his emotional center all his body does is expect something, a touch of some sort, because that is what bodies want in their solitude and reverie. An unexpected touch that is never unexpected. So he cradles his body in between the sheets and the blanket. This, and only this feels like going home, this virgin and unconditional warmth that dead sheets will always offer you, the body returning in between your folds like a prodigal son. No other thing will be this constant, bodies will change, they will turn into something else, but the objects that you find when you go back home will always be loyal to you.

The thought always makes him laugh: it's a trick he's been playing with himself. Yes, objects will be loyal because they are simply incapable of not being loyal, their submissiveness

translates into loyalty. Every thought of this kind is just another step away from Milo's body, he's doing it on purpose, but his own body will drag him back to that, to the body sleeping next to him under the same sheets. The body is like a boulder tied to the tiny feet of his thoughts. So his body stays vigilant, waiting for that touch that would make the hairs on his hands stand up, the touch that would send shivers through his spine. He turns on the other side, but Milo's body is still silent, and he feels sorry for himself, because he's practically begging for a touch and it feels pathetic. He stands up and gets out of bed, and then goes to the bathroom hoping that this would make Milo do something, thinking that it might wake him up.

He looks at himself in the mirror, there's no change, but the thought slips by because he quickly dismisses it. Not that he was expecting any change. Old fears come to life. He remembers that there was a time when he wanted to be somebody else. But he cannot trace back that memory; he can't recall the source of it, or the time when it actually occurred to him that it would be better to be somebody else. Every time he looks back there a dark veil falls over his thoughts as if his body is telling him that he shouldn't go back there because it's not a pretty place. However, it's not like he doesn't want to go there, he wants to know the source of all those thoughts. It's practically impossible to go back there, especially when different, converging thoughts happen at the same time. That's how gods must feel, he thinks, the thoughts of all those people occurring at the same time, with the speed of light and knowledge. I'm the god of my thoughts, he thinks, but his body laughs at him, internally, he can feel the laughter building up inside his chest. But anyways, there was a time when he wanted to be somebody else, and he used to pray every day to a god that he afterwards dismissed as foolish and boring, and relentless. And with every handsome guy he saw he wished to be one of them, all of them, and he imagined making a sort of pact with a devil, and ask that devil to make him perfect, the sum of all that beauty that came visiting his thoughts. And the devil would accept the deal because then he, the devil, would get his soul in return at the end of the deal. But then his majestic god came back and told him, no, you can't have that, because in life things don't come that easy. You'll have to go through all of it, feel the

pain and the despair and then come out as somebody else, a better person. You'll burn at a slow pace and then you'll understand everything.

He did understand certain things in the end, and one of the most important things was to understand you don't have to change for anyone, or at least you don't have to change to please someone. And so he got over that burning pain of wanting to be somebody else.

He takes a hot shower; let the water run all over his body, wash away the sins? He smiles to himself, endless preaching, that's a good way to go up. But then he plays along with this whole fantasy and imagines this shower being a sort of baptism, some sort of Holy Spirit descending upon him to tell him that he's the chosen one, to perform the ultimate sacrifice, to save humankind from the sins it has committed. And then the world is saved. And he can't see it. Saving other people, he thinks, obscure matters, especially when it comes to people that do not want to be saved from whatever they're doing. But other people have always had this talent, of thinking that whatever other people are doing is wrong, and that they hold some sort of authority in the field of how to live your life. And maybe some of them do, he thinks, but they should keep it as a secret, keep it to themselves. Make your own life better and then shut up about it, the others won't listen anyway. There's a sort of stubbornness to that, holding on to principles that are never ours.

He opens the shower door and remembers that he had forgotten to take out a clean towel. But he reaches out anyway to find out that a clean towel was already there, right where it was supposed to be. Milo might have put it there, he thinks, he might have heard the shower running, got out of bed and put the towel there. He dries himself, puts on a clean pair of boxer briefs and applies a few drops of Pit of Passion, directly on the skin. He goes back into the room to find that Milo is still fast asleep, his body unturned. For a second the thought of him being dead crosses his mind like the passing of a familiar figure in a crowd of people. He dismisses it quickly, what a terrible thing to think of, but he hurries to the bed anyway, pulls the blanket over his body. Still no reaction from Milo, so he embraces his body again and listens to his breathing, watching as his chest goes up and down.

He is still alive, he thinks, I believe this body only in its physical presence, only when I can touch it. Milo's body stirs, he is finally aware of his presence. Give me sunshine, he smiles to himself and kisses Milo's shoulder. The word, sunshine, what is it? It has a very strange ring to it, one of those words that come to mind and you don't know exactly if it's a word or just the fragment of a word, or no word at all. He can recall something about it, a sort of warmth that warms the guts. Such as the warmth of the sheets, the warmth of Milo's body? No, not like the sheets, he thinks, more like Milo's body, and the association with Milo's body comes naturally, smoothly. He pulls Milo's body closer to him and cradles it against his body as if to have a better sample of what sunshine might feel like. Milo's body responds and adjusts its position to fit his own body. There's the difference, he thinks, but then he loses it, a small piece of paper that slides off the desk, and then it's gone. The difference between here and there? The difference between sunshine and non-sunshine, and this. He kisses Milo's shoulder again, repeatedly, moving his lips along it, pulling Milo's body against him harder. Milo turns toward him and puts his head on his shoulder, eyes still closed. 'I need to show you something,' he, Milo, says, 'but we need to go out.'

Milo gets off the bed and pulls his boxer briefs off. In the middle of the room he stops and turns toward him. 'Have you already taken a shower?' He nods, he already did. Milo looks disappointed. 'You could take another one,' he says, 'with me, you know you can never be clean enough, you know, after everything.' He points to the bed. He, Remy, frowns and then quickly smiles not knowing what Milo meant by that. 'I'm good,' he says, still smiling, 'it doesn't make sense to take another shower after you've already taken one.' Milo smiles broadly. 'You could always come and watch.' He bursts into laughter while walking into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He can hear the shower cabin door close and then water running. What did he mean by that? What have we done that would require such thorough cleansing? He feels helpless, furious almost, angry because he doesn't know Milo enough, and because he has fallen into this trap. He has been so charmed by Milo that he wasn't even able to build any defences. He didn't have the time to do that. There's a lack of energy and will inside him, one he cannot

explain. He had naively let Milo into his bed simply because he thought he knew him, when in fact he didn't, he doesn't know him now. And he doesn't know how to react to Milo's earlier comment about cleanliness. Was that some sort of religious comment meant to make him feel guilty about the fact that they went to bed together?

He remembers his earlier thought about taking a shower and being baptized. It felt ludicrous just moments ago but it now feels appropriate. He must have fallen for that solitude, he thinks, the aura of solitude that seems to surround Milo every step of the way. People are incapable of complete solitude, but Milo possesses that power, he's wearing it on his sleeve. And he liked that, because he too was that kind of person, or at least he thinks he is. There's some kind of romanticism attached to it, like a fleeting glimpse into Milo's soul. Not soul, he thinks, we don't have the luxury of a soul, the luxury of being more than body. Our life is a continuum of decisions our body makes, a stream of decisions taken in our absence. There's no soul to take our side because there is no side to take, once we are born we already are on the other side, the side of the body, before we begin and even after we stop breathing, we are always on the side of the body. The life running through our veins is the life of the body, once the body stops we stop, and the body is a door, openness, an invitation to control, a thing to conquer, to let go off in the throes of passion. One by one bodies are placed one next to the other in endless rows until the earth opens wide to show its guts. A body is a hole dug into the ground, peepholes for giants, and gods, failed experiments in consciousness and affection, bodies are made and remade. Bodies overlap; one is placed a little to the left, the other a little to the right, their feet overlapping, and their hands too. In this intricate structure two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Lovers never become one and the same body, there will always be this division between one side and the other, yes, and their touch is a reminder of that unity but also a reminder of the impossibility of being united again. There's nothing beyond the skin but a shallow image of the guts of the earth, the natural order, the rebelliousness of the unnatural order. You and I embrace the unnatural order. No, not the unnatural order. Is there a word for what is between

naturalness and unnaturalness? A grey area, something that is neither natural nor unnatural, there we build our house, there we live, me and you, and fear, our child.

The water stops running, he can hear the shower cabin door opening, and then closing, Milo's wet feet on the floor, then silence again. Then Milo's wet hair, his head emerges through the bathroom door. 'Do you happen to have some extra clothes? Some clean boxer briefs would be great.' He hurries to the clothes rack and takes out a pair of white boxer briefs. 'Do you like black or white? I don't know which colour you prefer when it comes to boxer briefs.' He adds this to the list of things he doesn't yet know about Milo, just another item on the list. Milo waves his hand, dismissing the sudden conundrum; it doesn't matter as long as they're clean. A grin on his face, saying I'll be wearing your underwear, and when I'll give them back to you you'll be wearing a pair of underwear I wore. Maybe I won't even wash them. He smiles back then sticks his tongue out at Milo. Milo echoes the gesture by doing the same. Milo closes the door and he emerges from the bathroom a while later wearing only the boxer briefs and a big smile on his face. 'I borrowed some PoP from you, I hope you don't mind.' He tries to recall what PoP might stand for but falls short. 'Pit of Passion,' Milo says, 'I saw you have a big bottle of it.' 'No problem,' he says, 'don't worry about it, there's plenty of it.' Milo comes closer still smiling, watching him, and measuring him from head to toes. 'I like how it smells on you,' he says, 'makes me want to take your clothes off.' He is now in bed next to him, kissing him lightly on the lips, and then on his jaw and neck, his chest and abdomen. 'You can always do it,' he, Remy, says, 'I won't oppose it.' He pulls Milo up since he was descending slowly downwards, and it only turned him on, and it embarrassed him, the movement unexpectedly too intimate. And they had to get out of the room, do something, they couldn't spend their whole time inside, it was unhealthy.

Milo lets his body fall inertly on his, with all its weight and he pulls him closer, pushing him harder against his body until the weight of Milo's body becomes too much for his breathing. Milo grunts with pleasure and kisses him on the neck. He pulls Milo's head to his chest and cradles it there until Milo's own breathing

turns soft and regular, until his body relaxes and falls into torpor. Milo grunts again as he caresses his hair and kisses his forehead.

I am the father and you are the child. He smiles at the thought. I must take care of you because your silence means not only solitude but also fragility. Right now, he thinks, Milo's body is as fragile as it can be, a lump of flesh that has given itself up to another lump of flesh, and in that giving up it is communicating, saying things about itself. It is saying that it is only a lump of flesh, and that once you get a hold of that you also get a hold of something else, whatever lies beneath the many layers of flesh. You know how things go, it says, most of us believe that one can have somebody else's body, but they can't have their thoughts, they can't have their imagination and so on and so forth. But that's bullshit, you know, it's bullshit because both the flesh and what's inside come as a sort of wrapped item, once you get the wrapping you also get what's inside. You can't touch what's inside without having to touch the wrapping. And then you throw away the wrapping and keep what's inside, but once you do that it's the end of it. In the case of the body, once the wrapping is discarded, everything else just stops existing. It sounds ridiculous, he thinks, to see things in this way. But it's true, the body is the most precious part, it defines whatever is nurtured inside. But it's not only about Milo's fragile body; it's also about his own fragility, and his own surrender in this war that has been going on between their bodies.

His body too is fragile under the weight of Milo's body. His own body has ceded, submissive, listening to the master narrative that Milo's body has been narrating all along, and especially while they were making love. Now it's going to be very difficult, he thinks, it will be very difficult to let go of Milo's body, and with each foot added to the growing distance between the two of them his despair will grow proportionately, and that will make his chitin shell grow rigid, sturdier than it has ever been, and there won't be an exit, that pain will subside only in Milo's presence. 'We really need to get out,' he tells Milo. He tells it to his hair and forehead while kissing them, and Milo grunts with pleasure as if to say, five more minutes, father, five more minutes and I'm up. There is time; there will be time for this and other

things. We will find time, he thinks, just like we have found each other.

Milo raises his head. 'A credit for your thoughts,' he says and kisses him on the lips. A kiss for your lips would have been a more appropriate expression, he thinks. 'I'm not thinking,' he replies, 'I'm just staring at the ceiling.' Milo chuckles. 'I know when you're thinking,' he says, 'you do this thing with your breathing, it slows down until it becomes imperceptible, it's like you're not even breathing, and I need to check up on you.' He bursts into laughter. 'Maybe I'm just sleeping when I do that thing with my breath,' he replies, 'people usually do that. You did it when I was in the shower earlier. When I came back you weren't moving, and so I got scared, freaked out for a moment.' 'There's no reason to freak out,' Milo replies, 'I'm still here, and I'll be here for a very long time.' Milo puts his fingers under his chin and pushes it up to meet his lips. 'I need to ask you something,' he, Remy, says, 'about a remark you made earlier, about the shower and the fact that we'll never be clean enough.' Milo puts his head back on his chest and moves it around a bit to find a more comfortable position. 'That's why you need to see what I'm going to show you. You'll understand it once you have a look at it, once you hear it actually.' He stands up and pulls his jeans on. 'We need to go, to make it in time.' He then puts his shirt on. The other Milo, he thinks, the official Theatür Milo, a bridge made of stone, everything else is just water under that bridge. He is the child that grows too fast for his parents, he is the body that transforms and turns into something else. The parents are too busy doing something else to notice it until the child does something that comes as a surprise and the parents have to notice it. A child commands attention; it forces the parents to notice. And it comes as a shock for the parents. He tries to imagine Milo as a child. It's difficult to think of him as an innocent child. He must have been like this since the very beginning. He must have been the cool kid, the one who was always around the cool guys, and the overly mature teenage girls. The boy goes out, and the parents don't know, they just think it's something kids do, they set an objective, and they make schemes, and plans, and put the child inside those schemes, hiding him. Then they compare that scheme to their own expectations and

their own experience, and the child comes out perfect, no place for rebelliousness. But once the child is gone, once their view of the body is blurred, once its physical presence turns into physical absence they lose their control over him. When you no longer control the body you no longer have control over its inhabitant, or inhabitants, depending on the case. And that will be the end of it; the parents will grieve over the loss of their baby boy even though they know that that is going to happen, it is inevitable.

The body of the grown man will sprout from the body of the little boy, first like a tumour, the mind of the grown man corrupting the body of the baby boy, the mind that tells the body that it's time to grow up and that some things cannot be undone. But then the body of the baby boy gets accustomed to that tumour and the symbiosis becomes beneficial for both of them, until, one night, a night full of expectations and accumulated desires, the body of the baby boy will fully accept that of the grown man. The body of the fully developed man will become an organ, no longer a tumour, and day-by-day, as time passes, that organ will learn the functions of the baby boy, and it will take over, forever. When that happens there will still be traces of the baby boy, ghosts of meaning that come to life in moments of despair and in moments of solitude.

He looks at Milo and thinks, here is the grown man who has not forgotten the baby boy, who sometimes longs for that pristine past when his body was too afraid to let go, to surrender to another body, because it did not need to surrender or because he did not know how to surrender. But the body of the baby boy is already surrendered, he thinks, without knowing it. The body of the baby boy surrenders to that of his parents. And the parents know it is not an innocent surrender, that the body is just a body irrespective of its age, and that every type of surrender is the same kind of surrender that the body of the baby boy goes through with every touch.

'Do we need to wear something special?' Milo smiles. 'No,' he says, 'just bring yourself, you don't need to bring anything else.' He, Milo, laughs, his boyish beauty suddenly mature and unforgiving like that of an adult who doesn't have time for the foolishness of the child.

They are both ready now. They get out of the room and lock the door. They take a left and then turn into another corridor very much like the previous one. At the end of it there is a door with a big Exit sign on it, behind it, endless flights of stairs. They go down instead of going up, not the usual drill, he thinks, he can only remember going up. This is definitely easier than going up, but then, as they keep going down, he can only think of the fact that they'll have to go back up at one point, and with every flight of stairs the prospect of going back up is even more dreadful. Milo is silent again, back at his other persona. It feels like they don't even know each other. But his body is still speaking to him, his shoulders still moving in that way. The walls of solitude that we build around us, he thinks, they're strong enough to keep out those that we desire to keep out. Yet, once that wall is pierced they will draw people in. The chunks of solitude that we share with the others, like breadcrumbs, we feed them to the birds, so that others will become acquainted with it. And they will smile at us, and say that we too deserve happiness, their kind of happiness maybe, and their kind of perfection. Just one more step to the left and you'll be in the right place. And then you start asking yourself; will I ever be able to be like you without being you? Because two bodies cannot be in the same place at the same time, bodies overlap; two bodies cannot be one and the same.

They get into another corridor, much like the others, but they keep descending, going down into the guts of the Theatür, and as they go down, the light gets stronger somehow, the corridors lacking the shadows of the upper ones. You cannot hide in the Theatür, he thinks. The corridor divides into two other corridors and they take the one on the left. The light is stronger here, painful to the eye. When they get to the end of it they stop in front of a door. Milo opens it without knocking or using his ID card.

At first he doesn't see anyone inside because it's too dark and his eyes need to get accustomed to this new kind of light. As they get inside the room he realizes that it is packed with people, the air filled with their tired breathing, their eyes fixed on them, on the two guys who have just entered the room, their looks uncanny, like the eyes of hundreds of cats suddenly aware of a

presence that threatens them. This is the kind of situation that he likes to avoid at all costs, he thinks, it makes him aware of his own self, aware of every fault, of every defect in the way that he looks. The silent gaze of the crowd dissecting him makes him feel himself for the first time. The scrutinizing stare of the crowd turns him into something he wouldn't like to be, just one of the other performers unaware of his own position in the Theatür, a precarious condition, he thinks. In the crowd he is a part of them, a condition that he couldn't have fathomed only moments earlier when he was in bed with Milo or when he was showering alone. And he suddenly starts hating himself for being a part of this crowd, one of its faceless members; he is being himself and somebody else at the same time. The thought slips by, a note he made to himself while thinking about other things; it is one of those things that gets suddenly turned into an artful moment of thinking. Things thought while the body mechanically does other things are artful moments of thinking, just because they have lost their utility to the present moment. Those thoughts pertain to a future, imaginary moment of thinking, and a glimpse at a future version of him.

But the staring loses its intensity as everyone else loses his or her interest in the newcomers. Only one figure in the crowd stays fixed on them, on him especially, because he is the true newcomer, he thinks, Milo has been here before, and they must know him, they must know him because of his notorious behaviour, or whatever that means. 'Welcome, Milo,' the figure says still looking at him, 'I see you have brought your friend, Remy, is that right?' He wants to say something but Milo stops him. 'Yes, this is Remy,' he, Milo, looks at him, 'my friend.' And his look is saying something else. Just like I taught you, just like we do it in the cabin, we need to pretend, wear the mask that we have weaved in our solitude. The make-up that the old mother uses, the bitterness of the son learning to play the guitar, we need that in here. And his body responds to that nodding, agreeing, just like you taught me. Trust the body only in its physical presence. We are all just friends here, irrespective of what we feel under other circumstances. 'Please, join us,' the figure says, 'we haven't started yet. We were still discussing some administrative matters that have come to our attention since our

last meeting.' He can hear other voices in the crowd, dissenting voices, as if the matter that had come to their attention has not yet been settled among them. A crowd is always ambivalent, he thinks, until some sort of middle-way is found, which will be, as expected, a compromise between two parties. 'We have not yet managed,' the figure adds inexpressively, 'as you might have guessed, to find volunteers for our next mission outside the walls of the Theatür.' He cannot see the figure quite well for, at the moment, it is just a shadow in the many shadows spread around the room. The voice seems to be coming out of the dark itself. 'Sit down,' the figure says, 'make yourselves comfortable.' Milo points to a spot on the floor and so they both sit down next to each other their knees touching lightly. Milo is keeping his distance as usual, playing the Milo Magnifico card. That's very considerate of you, he thinks, to be protecting yourself only. We are here separated, Milo's body is saying, and we need to stay this way, but only here. He smiles at the thought. All those other people present in the room wouldn't care anyway since they are people that we're not going to meet every day for the rest of our lives. But he needs to play this game, because Milo's body commands it, and his body wants to obey because back in the room their bodies have made some sort of pact, that one will submit its physical presence to the physical presence of the other. It's the unwritten law that two bodies write in their shared solitude.

'Hopefully,' the figure in the dark says, 'by the end of our next time unit we shall be able to find volunteers capable of taking the oath and returning safely back to the Theatür. As you all know, our map of the outside city is not yet complete, and we need that if we want to cajole other uses into even considering our cause.' A light is suddenly turned on somewhere inside the room and more figures suddenly come into focus. But in the center of the room stands a figure very different from everybody else's. He cannot take his eyes off it and he can feel Milo's knee digging into his own, urging him to stop staring. The figure has its eyes fixed on him and he suddenly forgets the rest, the performers waiting to be cajoled into taking up their cause as a coat of arms, the future explorers, the incomplete map of the city, because the figure standing in the center of the room resembles a demon, its

skin scarlet, the white of its eyes and its teeth in utter contrast with the reddish skin. The figure smiles to him.

'You must be wondering,' the figure says, 'why my skin is like this.' Milo wants to say something but the figure dismisses him with a quick gesture of the hand. The figure nods despite the fact that for a very short moment he perceives it as a rude remark on his side. 'There's a simple answer to that,' the figure adds, almost arrogantly, 'I have chosen to do this to myself. Consider it an act of mutiny against the Theatür and its unforgiving laws, its lack of humanity.' He can hear silent approvals coming from the crowd. They trust this man, he thinks, they think this man is the embodiment of their cries for justice, a version of their truth. 'I have chosen this look,' the figure adds, 'simply to set myself apart from the rest of you and the rest of the performers that live and work in the Theatür. A sign, a signature that showcases the fact that I am different from the rest of you, because I am very different from you, because I have been outside and returned to show that we are nothing but slaves, that you are just slaves in a system that has learned to exploit you and your bodies.' He can hear other muffled approvals coming from the crowd.

Imagine, he thinks, the reaction the users of the Theatür might have had at the sight of such a disquieting figure, a man of average build, apparently with very long legs, and, most importantly, scarlet skin. On the other hand, there might be users who enjoy that, and are likely to come back and make special requests. He would have gotten furious at the prospect of that, because it would have reduced his rebelliousness to yet another Theatür fetish. He can already see the list of fetishes being enhanced by this new apparition; more variety means more clients, more credits, and yet just another achievement on Mason's list of achievements. He doesn't want to admit it, but he immediately feels like this man is the most ridiculous man he has ever met. Yet, Milo doesn't seem to perceive that. He looks absorbed, swimming in the words that come out of the mouth of this ridiculous man.

'However,' the man behind the figure says, 'let us go back to more important matters, I have not come here to talk about myself or my achievements.' I bet that's exactly what you came here for, he thinks, there are no other important matters other

than yourself. 'Today we're going to talk about the nature of truth and those truths we take for granted without feeling the need to look them up because we simply trust the person who's conveying them to us. I never actually believed in the truth of the existence of a city outside the doors and walls of the Theatür because I believed in the truths conveyed to me by the Theatür and its principles so nicely explained in the Theatür Handbook. I believed in what Mason told us and I believed in the Theatür, because at that time there was nothing else but the Theatür, and it made me happy to be a part of that project meant to keep us safe and healthy, meant to keep us alive. And the Theatür still retains some of those principles even today. We can see that every day. But then I volunteered to become an explorer.

'It took a few painful months of preparation, but I finally did it, I became an explorer. To some of you the concept of month may be unfamiliar, but I trust others will explain it to you in due time. I say painful months not because the preparation was physically demanding. Most of the preparations we did consisted of discussions about building another future for us, the performers. I say painful because it felt like a betrayal, I was doing things that went against the corpus of laws the Theatür maintains as holy. It felt as if I were betraying the bosom of the mother that raised me, and fed me, and so on and so forth, you are familiar with this rhetoric, I'm sure. And I'm sure you've sometimes felt the same pangs.

'The Theatür truly is your mother because it has kept you safe, and it has fed you, it has given you a meaning in life. I think we all agree when it comes to that. And then we went out, and the city felt so real, and out there, that I couldn't help but feel that the Theatür, the mother, was actually betraying many others besides myself. And then the disgust I felt toward my own sense of guilt before getting out turned the other way around. It is the Theatür that should feel guilty. It is the Theatür that has kept me away from the beauties of the city telling me that there is nothing else outside, cajoling me into believing that it stood at the center of the universe. But then I found out that the universe is not at all that small and that the Theatür had been telling me lies and that it didn't even have the guts to admit that there is something

better out there. It did not feel like a betrayal on my part anymore, that's what I want to emphasize at this point.'

There is a moment of silence and he can hear silent comments, murmurs, whispers he cannot understand, the sound of bodies moving, the shuffle of feet, others coughing silently trying to disturb the silence as little as possible. Milo's knee is still digging into his as if his body has gotten heavier in the meantime. It must be because everyone's attention is directed somewhere else, he thinks, otherwise he wouldn't do it; the contact is too evident, too pregnant with meaning.

'What I want you to understand is that with every hour you spend inside the Theatür you are only betraying yourselves and the world that exists outside the walls of the Theatür. Because there is a completely different world out there, a world that is full of possibilities, there is a world where deviant behaviour is frowned upon and ultimately punished if it endangers the other performers, I'm sorry, people, they are no longer performers, they are people. And you could be a part of that group of people, you can feel normal again, I promise, because then you could get married, and have kids, build a family, you can study and become somebody. You become the creators of your own self. You are no longer forced to enter certain categories like you do in the Theatür. There are categories even out there, there's no doubt about that, but they are not so overtly stated. They are simply choices you make at one point in your life, and no one is going to blame you for that. The Theatür has done exactly the opposite; it has forced you into a category and you had no say into it. That is what we all refuse to acknowledge. What we desire most is to understand this lack of justice toward our own decisions. We have trusted it, but it has turned against us, we were made to believe that the world the Theatür created for us was perfect, when in fact there are other perfect worlds out there. We were made to believe that this was a healthy society, with healthy performers, but now the time has come to refuse this unhealthy truth inflicted upon us like a wound. Let me use another metaphor to make you understand better. We believed that this man, Mason, who was telling us that we will be safer here, was a healthy man, and we went to bed with him, and slept with him, only to find out later that he was very sick, and that he has

infected us with that disease, and that there's no cure for it.' He stops talking and it looks like he is looking in the eyes of all of those present because everybody seems to be nodding as if the 'truth' being revealed to them is the ultimate truth, the truth they need to stand for and reinforce on those who do not yet know it. And then he starts talking again, his voice louder, his body trembling with the force of the words, drops of saliva flying out of his mouth.

'There is a cure,' the figure says, 'I promise you there is a cure and it is now in our hands, there's no doubt about that, and most important of all, we can use it, we can let the others know, and we can go out and tell all those others that they should refuse enrolment, and that the Theatür is possibly the worse thing that can happen to them. We will help them find alternatives, other means of leading a decent life. It is our duty to let them know. The truth that we've been fed up to this point is none other than the truth of the Theatür, the kind of truth this institution has created to perpetuate its tyranny, their version of the truth. But there is another truth, our truth. Imagine what you could do on the outside. There's no point in wondering why all the other explorers have never returned to the Theatür. Let me tell you now a story that will make you want to leave the Theatür this very moment. A friend of mine, who was also an explorer, got married and now he has a beautiful baby boy, and he's the happiest man on the planet, and he's never planning to come back, because he has a family now, and that gives his life a sense of purpose. In here he was just like we are. He went to bed with both men and women, indulged in the pleasures of the body, he even fell in love with the man he went to bed with, they sodomized each other, and did all the abominable things he could think of. But he knew it was wrong, that there can be no love between two men, simply because it is purposeless and wrong, and that almost drove him mad.

'Luckily we came along and helped him get out of this madhouse. Once he was out he found himself a job, and a couple of weeks later he met the love of his life, and they are now married and lead a happy and purposeful life, a life that gives them meaning. This is the truth the Theatür doesn't want us to know; yet this is the truth that we should have known all along.'

He stops talking and then nods toward the audience as if to say that he's done. Everyone applauds, some are actually standing up cheering for him, and Milo's knee is gone, he's standing up, clapping his hands, a silent fury on his face, and he cannot stand up, he cannot make himself cheer or applaud because he is lost and afraid, and for a moment he thinks that he has lost Milo not to another man or woman but to another idea that is more powerful than him, more powerful than the physical presence of his own body. Just like I taught you, he thinks and closes his eyes while the crowd is still cheering and the scarlet figure is taking a bow in front of his avid listeners. He closes his eyes and pretends that Milo's body is no longer next to him but somewhere else, and he cannot trust his senses, he will believe Milo only when he can touch him, he will know whether he's gone or not the next time they touch, whenever that touch will come. He will only trust him then.

Dream Five

We wake up to light, every pillow has a red lining, not at the end of a passionate night, our sheets foreign bodies, heated by a distant and unknowable sun, we are on the moon, our love has brought us here.

Another morning and every morning I ask you whether I survived the night, and you, you wake up with a quizzical, mocking look on your face. Shouldn't I be asking about you? Yet, all I want to know is whether I'm still where I'm supposed to be, close to your heart.

As we rise from our pillows, a pair of undead, a house is burning in the distance, coal black silhouettes waving at us from the flames.

You inhale furiously the air filled with sudden recognition.

The house is not unknown to you, and through you it becomes known to me, osmosis, it is not only our bodies that go hand in hand. There is no time for the usual morning kiss under the circumstances, a house is burning in the distance, what would the moral consensus of the rest of the world say?

My house, you say, my house is burning, is my face reflecting the flames?

You look beautiful under the flames.

Under the flames you are the forbidden apple.

It is not your house, I reply, it has never been your house, and it never will be considering the fire and the coal black silhouettes. I wonder why they are waving.

We zoom in with the speed of light, our sheets are almost burning, and the heat is unbearable, and yet there's a cosiness to it that reminds me of cold winter nights and the smell of hot cocoa by the Christmas tree.

Parents and grandparents are waving from the flames like biblical brothers. The yellow curtains turn to black and then to ashes, and then to nothing.

Parents and grandparents are waving, other relatives too, great-grandmother too, her tiny spidery hands moving left then right, swinging, she's dancing, and you smile and almost laugh.

Mother is not waving; she is the only one not moving, her static attire in stark contrast with the moving flames. Except for her face, mother is smiling, mother of all mothers, she knew all along. We wonder: did she have that talk with father at night before going to sleep? When solitude and darkness ask for conversation, father in his underwear and mother wearing her pink pyjama, father puts his right arm behind his head and mother starts eating crackers. The television screen throws a veil of blue light over their features and they talk about their days.

I've noticed something strange about our youngest, mother says, he keeps looking at pictures with men.

And he doesn't have a girlfriend, father says, he should get married at one point, he can't go on living like this.

They fall silent afraid to give voice to a thought that has been lingering around the house for a very long while, in every corner of the house, everywhere they turn there is that nagging thought, and all they want is to throw it out of the house, or sweep it under the rug, ignore the lump. They must know, mother must know, and through her father must have felt it too. In mother's smile I can see it, the thought finally let loose around the house, the demon exorcised, the flame ignited, the flame that is now consuming the house. Grandmother knows too, she is dancing too, through her dance she is telling us to go away.

Can you see it?

I look at you and realize you can't possibly see it, you couldn't possibly understand, I have never told you about the ways of men and women, about the way they look around and see only themselves. Not like in a mirror, no, not like that at all, they look at the carpet and see themselves, they look at the wooden frame of the window and they see themselves, the door, the chair, the armchair, the trees, the streets, and the wasteland. All they can see is their own selves scattered like the leaves in autumn. Not tiny but huge, bigger than life, bigger than the illness that consumes one's body until its resources are depleted and the body gives up as the soldier who finally accepts his execution without flinching. The others are just swimmers swimming in the thick molasses of their own projected selves.

We should get marshmallows, you say and turn quickly to get out of bed.

I smile and tell you all of these things and your eyes are moving to and fro, from my eyes to my lips and back tracing some imaginary line, then to my ears and nose, and teeth. Just listen to me please. I take your hand and put it into mine. You have very cold hands.

Listen to me please.

I'm not like those men and women. You are not the handsome swimmer swimming in the thick molasses of my own projections. Your beautiful body does not shyly catch glimpses of sunlight as you move through the carefully weaved tapestry I turned my life into, because you are the light, a body that has light and life of its own, because everywhere I turn I see only you, and every object around me takes shape because of you.

Stop talking like that, you're scaring me, and have some marshmallows.

We cook the marshmallows in the quieting fire of the burning house. The silhouettes have disappeared too. We haven't said goodbye. There was no need for that.

For years I have been writing imaginary letters to my parents, telling them about my looming leave, the storm of solitude that would follow in their case. My reasons were many, but most importantly I had to leave because my life would have made a decisive turn toward happiness and despair, my happiness and their despair. I hoped this departure would just leave things in an altered state not a terminal one. I hoped they would forget or at least that nobody would ask questions.

And we left, hand in hand, consciousness in consciousness.

Eubstance

There is a glass door but the glass is opaque and he can't see what's on the other side. He can only see shadows, greenery almost, as if there is a garden hidden behind it. He doesn't have the courage to open it because it's so different from all the other doors he's seen inside the Theatür. There's an aura of peacefulness around it and opening it would mean disrupting that peacefulness, and somehow he doesn't want that, only the prospect of it feels terrifying. But there's somebody else in the room with him, he cannot see who it is exactly but he assumes it's him. He doesn't trust the thought though because he can't touch him, can't feel him, just like he taught him: trust me only in my physical presence.

The figure that is supposed to be him moves around the room and then stops in front of the glass door. He wants to tell him that he shouldn't open it but he can't do it. Every time he tries to say something his mouth opens but nothing comes out, and he can feel the heaviness of untold words piling up inside his chest, a long wall of untold things. He raises his hand and takes hold of the handle. The door then clicks and opens slightly. He is making the gesture look dramatic like an older child who tries to show the younger child there is nothing to fear. The body of the figure that is supposed to be him is urging him to follow. He moves forward and reaches the door. There is a strong smell of grass and water. It's truly a garden, he thinks, there is a garden in the Theatür but we didn't know anything about it. The smell is even stronger inside the room and the sudden moisture of the garden makes him sweat. The room they enter seems endless, with walls made of glass and stone, and foliage everywhere. He doesn't look at him, he wants him to look at him but he doesn't, his attention hypnotized by other things present in the garden. Actually, he is not moving his head to see what he is doing, he's just here to show him around, he's been there plenty of times, enough to become acquainted with everything that can be found in the room. At least that is what he thinks, he has to assume that is what he is thinking. He has no access to his thoughts. He is

playing the part of the handsome guide showing tourists around the place. He knows every corner of this place, the plants and the trees are so familiar to him that they have become parts of his mind, negligible presences that appear on his way to work for instance.

Nothing ever changes, he says, yesterday it was the same, and the day before yesterday it was the same, and ten years ago it was the same, nothing ever changes, I am the only one who has changed since yesterday, and tomorrow I may change again, go back, or I might never go back because we can't look back anymore. Because now we know the truth, and the truth has changed us in irreparable ways. We must move forward, he says and starts walking again flanked on both sides by a multitude of bushes and small trees, plants growing wildly, gradually taking over the path that, apparently, they have to follow. So he follows him, watching his shoulders moving, their bodies sending signals to each other, talking in the language of their unconscious presence. At the end of the path, there is a long flight of stairs going downward, a vast valley at their feet. They both go down the stairs and reach the valley. This one too seems endless, populated by the sound of cicadas. The heat is unbearable and he starts wiping his forehead, the sweat trickling down his face. He is still walking as if unaware of his presence. They are both walking at a very slow pace, but the space around them seems to be moving at much greater speed, trees, bushes, grass, everything is moving faster than them, and the source of it all is another door amid the trees and bushes, another glass door, wide open, darker, hiding other wonders. All that vegetation seems to be coming out of that door, oozing, groping like the hands of an unknown green monster desperately trying to get out of that other room. They need to get inside the other room, that is their purpose, what they went there for. He is heading that way so he follows him, hesitant in his steps. And then he disappears behind the other door and closes the door behind him to leave him out. He pushes against the handle and the door clicks to life. When he opens it he discovers that there is no more vegetation inside the room but cold stone and concrete, and rows of glass coffins just like the one he had seen on the screens in the offices

upstairs. This must be another show, he thinks, in which hundreds of glass coffins are arranged in endless rows.

He is standing next to one of the glass coffins. He follows the tall figure amid the lifeless coffins. Is this a cemetery of some sort? It's not a cemetery, he says without looking at him. This is where we were born, you and me, sons of Mother Theatür. Watch closely and you shall see, and maybe you'll understand. If you do not understand then I will explain it to you, because it is important that you understand these things. He looks at the coffin that is in front of him and as his eyes get accustomed to the light he can see that there are people inside the coffins, and that these are not coffins at all but incubators. But the people inside the coffins are not human beings; at least, they don't appear to be human beings because their body is transparent and he can see their organs, the beating heart, lungs moving up and down, eyes moving under transparent eyelids, muscles touching here and there. But all of their organs are made out of the very greenery they have just seen outside the incubators' room.

All of the coffins have something written on them, words resembling those written on tombstones. Our beloved sister lies here, our beloved mother, our beloved father, words that acquire a different meaning once they are written after the death of somebody. Before death they weren't beloved, before that they were just people. The words seem to them an extension of their affection beyond the rupture inflicted by death. Tombstones too are prosthetic limbs, a reminder that there is somebody sleeping under the covers of the earth, they are like the barefoot that refuses to remain under the covers at night. He looks at the inscription on the glass coffin in front of them. It's difficult to read because the outer shell is transparent and the words keep mingling with the image of the body that is inside.

We cultivate the body, the inscription says, because there is no space between the body and the soul, the body is the soul as the soul is the body, there is no difference between the two, one cannot survive without the other. In cultivating the body we cultivate the soul. Control over the body means control over the soul, and in this equation the body always comes first, the body is a manifestation of the soul. The body is the helping hand, and in touching the body one is touching the soul. The soul is always in

control; there is no other force that could come in control of the body. Only one soul can be in control of one body. One soul cannot control more than one body. If the body moves slightly to the left the soul does too. The body obeys the soul's will, and the soul obeys the physical force of the body. By hurting the body one hurts the soul. There are no deferrals. The laws that control this obedience are strong as laws of gravity are strong. If the body falls the soul falls too. In saying this we refute any dichotomies, the body and the soul are one. We refute the use of two words to name ourselves. We are not body and soul, we are eubstance, and we are complete like the dough that is ready to be baked. We are matter carefully laid in the furnace of existence. We are eubstance.

We are eubstance, he repeats again and again as if the words were a phone number or a name he needed to remember. I am eubstance.

You too were in one of these coffins, he says, I have seen you, even before you entered my booth that day when we first met. That was not our first meeting, in fact I had seen you many times before but I was afraid to tell you, I was afraid you would run away from me and never return. And so I kept it as a secret all this time. I hope you'll forgive me, I have been very selfish. He opens his mouth and tries to say something but nothing comes out, and words, words, words are piling again silently into his chest and there's no way he could let them out. Words would swallow his body and his plea for forgiveness, they would drown him, and kiss him, and hold him in their arms, and they would tell him that it's all right, that he has been forgiven even before committing his error, that no error could change the love that he feels for him, and that nothing could take away what they've had and maybe still have.

I would come here every day, he says, and watch as you slept into creation, I would count your breaths, and marvel at the way your heart moved inside your fragile body, and I would listen to the sounds it made because somehow, somehow, somehow, you were like a distant thought, or a distant memory I had not completely forgotten and wanted to remember at all costs, because it was a beautiful memory. I don't know what it was exactly, I only know it was beautiful and that I wanted to

remember it. You weren't part of that memory, I'm sure of it now, but you somehow resembled that memory, your face has the shape of that memory, it still retains some of that beauty. And that day, when I saw you enter my booth it felt like that memory came back to me as if it wanted to be remembered, it had come all that way by itself, out of the darkness of my mind, it had come to life. And I didn't know how to react because you were so real and everything else faded away. And I felt anger because I was there, and, and, and, no, we were there, and we were inside that booth and there was somebody else watching us and I just couldn't say how angry I was because I had wanted something else, I imagined that moment a thousand different times in a thousand different ways. I had never imagined seeing you for the first time in a booth with that pervert watching us. That is why I need to make things right. I'm going to change the future for you.

He then puts his hand on the coffin next to them and the glass cover clicks and opens swiftly pulled away by a mechanism hidden inside. Once the cover is removed the body inside starts to gain colour, the glass protecting the internal organs gradually turns pink until it acquires that reddish brownish quality the colour of the skin has. The hair too gains colour. The body of a woman comes into focus, a familiar face, that of a memory, a real memory, a not so distant memory, that of a woman with a distinguishable trait, it's her. His mind finds the inconsistency and suddenly all of its attention is focused on that particular inconsistency, a slip of the tongue, too many details can give away too much, it can show that somebody is trying too hard. This is just a mental construct he thinks, nothing more, this is not real, this is not real, just like I taught you, trust the body only in its physical presence. The mantra that he taught him, his mind repeats it, like a shield, like a prayer, and they are gone.

There's only Milo, he thinks as he extends his arm to find Milo's warm body sleeping silently next to him. It's cold, his feet are cold, and he realizes that the blanket no longer covers him because Milo must have pulled the blanket off him in his sleep. But his body follows the warmth and it comes as a relief. He pulls the blanket over him and settles closer to Milo embracing him. Milo doesn't move, apparently unaware of his presence. So he pulls him closer and kisses his shoulder and tries to move his

body so as to cradle Milo's. He can hear Milo's breath changing rhythm, his muscles twitching, his body coming to life awakened, found and pulled out from the land of dreams. Milo grunts and pulls him closer then kisses his hand. 'Why are you so cold?' He rubs his hands trying to bring his cold skin back to life. 'You pulled the blankets off of me,' he says, 'you must move a lot when you sleep.' Milo chuckles. 'I'm sorry,' he says, 'I wasn't aware of it. I didn't do it on purpose.' He, Remy, bursts into a soft laughter. 'Of course you didn't do it on purpose, you were sleeping.' Milo turns his body to face him and he kisses him on the corner of his mouth. 'Turn around,' he says, 'I want to hold you.' He turns around and Milo's hand travels along his abdomen and then pulls him closer. The heat and the closeness are reassuring. I believe in this body, he thinks, I trust its closeness and will continue to do that as long as you are close. There is no force threatening this closeness at this very moment. 'Do you really believe what the scarlet guy says?' He can feel Milo's reaction to the question; he can feel Milo's body turning rigid. Milo Magnifico is back, he thinks, he shouldn't have asked that question.

'You don't believe him?' he turns toward Milo and touches his face, his thumb tracing the corner of his mouth. 'You seemed mesmerized,' he says, 'by the words of that man. You were giving him a standing ovation. I have never seen you so hypnotized by somebody.' Under his thumb Milo's mouth is smiling and his body suddenly electrifies with this emotion. Milo kisses his thumb. 'I have always been hypnotized by you,' he says, 'you never seemed to notice that. And then when Elaina appeared I thought you liked her.' He caresses Milo's hair; it's slightly damp around the ears and his forehead feels warm, too warm maybe. 'I never liked Elaina,' he, Remy, says, 'she's nice, and gorgeous, but she's not my type. I think you know what I mean.' Milo chuckles and pulls his palm over his face and kisses it, then the wrist, going slowly up the arm. He, Remy, pulls Milo's head to his chest and kisses his forehead. 'I think you have a fever,' he says, 'your skin is too warm.' Milo kisses his chest. 'Don't worry,' he says, 'it's hot under the blanket, and it must be that.' He has successfully avoided the subject, he thinks, he still hasn't answered my question about the guy with the scarlet body. But

Milo feels his unease in the embrace. 'I think he's right,' he says, 'I do believe we deserve a better future than the one the Theatür has fathomed for us. We had no say in it, that's the most disturbing thing for me. I wish I could have had the possibility to do something else. I wish I had had choices.' Suddenly Milo feels so far away from him because he associates this lack of choices as the cause of the fact that they are together now. They wouldn't have met otherwise. Milo would be somewhere else, and he would be somewhere else too, doing something else, not even knowing of the existence of somebody like Milo. They could have even been very close on the outside too but they wouldn't know about each other, and they would gravitate, go round the same sun and never meet. Mother Theatür has been kind to him; at least it had offered him that opportunity, of meeting Milo, and that of holding him right now, let go of his own body in the arms of Milo. At this point he cannot see him wanting another choice, because Milo is his ultimate choice. But then a darker thought slips by, another moving figure in the crowd, the uncanny stranger.

He wants to volunteer to go on that expedition, he wants to become an explorer. And then he will never come back.

'Milo, are you going to volunteer?' Milo's body turns rigid again, and he shifts his head on his chest as if to adjust his position, but he doesn't say anything, hoping maybe that his silence would offer him an answer. And it does offer him an answer. 'You really want to do that. You want to go out there and risk your life, risk this, for the sake of a madman who has no idea about what is happening out there, or what is happening here for that matter. Why did he come back anyway, he should have stayed there.' He is furious. Milo's hand is caressing his face trying to calm him down. But it is just an attempt at a momentary forgetfulness, this will not hold forever; this caress is but a small offering, too small to calm the hurricane unleashed inside him. He sees monsters, and words, lots of words piling up in his chest because he knows that Milo is already gone, Milo is lost and nothing will bring him back. Somehow he knew it from the very beginning, he knew that if Milo strayed he would never come back no matter how ardent his pleas would be. Milo is not the

kind of person who would hold back when facing such abstract forces.

There's nothing more certain, he thinks, nothing more certain than one's desire to leave and never return.

The undefined and the unknown are but a challenge to Milo, and he will not stop until the undefined becomes defined and the unknown turns into knowledge. Milo will keep on going, keep on marching no matter how feeble the ideals that guide him might be. The silence of his body tells him that, there is no riposte returning from that body, and he hates Milo, hates him for the silence that his body now adopts, hates him because he would sacrifice whatever they had built together for the simple promise of choice. But he won't say that, not to his face, he only needs to get away, push Milo away. And he does that; he lets his body move away hesitantly at first then full of intent, because the cold distance and the silence that settles between their bodies will do the job. That's how two bodies communicate. This is how the body lets go of the other body. And yet Milo knows, Milo understands why, he believes Milo understands because his body goes limp and it does not attempt to get him back. He understands the rupture and his body remains there, lifeless almost, like a plastic bag washed up on the seashore.

He turns his back to Milo and as he does that he wishes it were all just a dream, he wishes to wake up. Yet his mind doesn't seem to react, there's no recognition of false patterns, no sudden revelation. The bed is still that bed. But he turns so as to lose physical contact with Milo's body, because in the absence of that physical body he can distrust whatever he now knows. The certitude of Milo's intention to leave. The certitude that Milo is already gone. Just like you taught me, trust my body only in it's physical presence. And other words are piling up in his chest, or are they just emotions?

I am a body washed up on the shores of your failures. And Milo does come back, his hands trying to embrace him, to comfort him, but his body, Remy's, is somehow bigger and cannot be embraced, his body has swollen up like a balloon and Milo's embrace is too small to embrace the wholeness of his body.

We are substance we reject any dichotomies. The body is the soul as the soul is the body.

'I'm not gone yet,' Milo says, 'I'm still here, with you, and you must understand that I will always be with you no matter where I am.' But that's a paradox, he thinks, because I cannot trust you then, because you will never come back, and that will be the end of it. But another thought slips by, cruel and painful as gratuitous violence inflicted on a defenceless body. This has never happened, this was only in his mind, not a dream but an invented reality. And his body was so ready to accept it that any rational plea was immediately dismissed. His body fell for it immediately and his mind caught up with his body without thinking twice. Desire is so tricky sometimes and he thought Milo was just the end of the rope, the one that he would hold on to. And it still was the end of the rope, except that now it looked more like a noose and less like salvation. He has mistaken the end of the rope, because that end of the rope was only one end. The rope has two ends, and now it feels like this is only the beginning of it. His body will travel along the rope, holding onto it as if it is a helping hand. Milo is just one knot on that rope, a bump that he feels forming in between his fingers, hurting him, and the more it hurts the more he squeezes it in his palm. Somehow he wants it to hurt, because there is no other way, because in order to remember things they need to hurt first, and what's left is just sour taste, a bitter thought that comes and goes, that will come and go in between the shows that he will perform after his suspension period ends. And it will be something that he will remember even during the show, because now Milo has become a constant presence that he will not be able to forget.

Things get smaller and smaller as time passes by, first the memory is the memory of pain felt and savoured, then just the memory of pain felt, then just a feeling, a moment of sympathy with yourself, then you turn that pain into a vice, a vice like smoking or masturbating excessively until it hurts, you bathe into that pain until you feel like you've done enough harm to yourself and an outline of hope for the future forms, shy in the beginning, then stronger and stronger. And then you feel sorry for yourself because you find yourself incapable of moving on, and you invent a mantra. I need to move on, I need to forget, and I have to. And

you repeat it a couple of times until it pops out every time you think of him. And when someone asks you about it, you repeat the mantra, first to yourself and then to the person who is asking.

'What am I to you? What do you feel for me?' Milo's embrace is stronger now; his body is bigger now, strong enough to embrace him. The body hesitates and shifts, squirming like a worm. He can't see Milo's face and he doesn't want to because he couldn't look him in the eye. Because he knows the answer to that question already even without having one word from Milo. The body acts quickly, quicker than language, quicker than the brain; its vocabulary is always prepared like the body of a snake under threat. But he repeats the question on a different tone and Milo's body lets go of him still squirming. The language of the body is made out of patches of skin rubbing against the sheets and the blanket; its whisper is loud enough for him to hear. 'I don't know, okay? I don't know what I feel for you.'

Words, words, words, thousands of words are piling up inside his chest but he keeps them in, and they come out as tears. He lets those go. The paradox of the body, it sheds drops of water when things hurt on the inside. He doesn't do anything, just stays there, his back curved like a bow getting ready to shoot its arrow. Milo doesn't do anything either, his body is still squirming between the sheets as if he's just realized that something terrible has been done and he's the culprit. He is the body that cannot sleep, he's eubstance, yet he, Remy, needs to say something because he knows that Milo is not the culprit, the real culprit is him, because he filled in the blanks that Milo left on his way, breadcrumbs meant to lure him. It was all a game, he thinks, a scenario that he himself had built out of nothing. You can't build a world out of insignificant signs of affection. A hand that lingers in a handshake is nothing more than a hand that lingers in a handshake. There's nothing more to it. A look is just a look, you can't see into somebody else's soul because there is no soul. A handshake is just chemicals and flesh coming together, a ghost of meaning.

'I get it,' he says, 'really, I do. I might have exaggerated a bit, and I apologize for that.' He tries to be calm as he says it though other words are bouncing against his chest from the inside, struggling to get out. I thought there was more, his body is

saying, I believed it was more than not knowing, more than being lost among the many meanings a touch could bring to the fore, but I agree with you, not because I want to but because I need to. Your body is your body and who am I to claim it for the pleasure of my own body? I cannot have you as you cannot have me. It's not a symptom of selfishness; it's how things work. The body is power but it is also limit.

Milo gets out of bed and starts dressing. The shirt he carefully folded and placed on the back of a chair, the jeans thrown on that same chair, the coat placed on top of the jeans. Behold Milo Magnifico in all his glory; behold him following his silent happiness. He puts his shoes on and gets out of the room without saying anything. He won't come back, he thinks, he knows that, because Milo's ego will never permit that.

Yet he expected some last line, some last words thrown at him as a sign of pity, or at least some words thrown at him out of disgust. Milo will not turn back, he thinks, because in his narrow mind he's reached a point in their relationship from where he can't return, because he has let those words out of his mouth. Saying that you don't know is as bad as saying that you have no feelings, because you cannot not know. You always know something. The body always knows, the body is always sure, the body makes up its mind as soon as something happens. Yet, another factor intervenes, a mix of fears and hope, and most important of all, desire. The body will yield to that, it will turn submissive and will follow self-imposed desires. The enemy of it all is the desire for a better future, to believe that there is something better just beyond this hill. There's always something better just around the corner.

He doesn't get up, his body doesn't react, he is listening to the silence of his own body, the way his heart thumps in his ear, and the way air goes in and out of his lungs. It is hypnotic in a way, and it almost sounds like a lullaby. He turns toward the side of the bed where Milo was and he extends his arm to check whether he is still there. Milo is not there and the sheets are already cold, as if he's never been there all along. Even the sheets have forgotten him. This is not a dream, he assures himself. Milo is really gone. And in his absence, in this physical absence he tries to imagine that Milo wasn't even real, that he doesn't even exist,

and that all of this was just a scenario. Milo was just one of those scenarios that suddenly felt too real, a scenario gone bad.

Slow down, sometimes, your body needs to slow down. In its growth the body will run into several bumps, walls that appear out of nowhere to stop the body from growing properly. And most of these walls are self-fashioned, ways through which the body is telling the mind to slow down. And we always desire things to go quicker, when we are children we desire to become adults, and we become adults we long for the pristine innocence we've once had. People grow silently inside our guts too, just as organs do. As children do, inside the womb, until they occupy more and more space. And then there comes a time when their presence inside the body begins to hurt and they have to be removed. Sometimes, after removal, the amputee may experience the presence of a phantom limb where that person stood, the pain depending on the amount of space that particular person occupied inside the body of the patient.

Defeated, I retreat to my books and words.

He must have fallen asleep because his body jerks sideways. He must have dreamt of falling. Or was there a noise at the door just now? He extends his arms again to check whether Milo is there, but there's no one there, he is really gone, and his absence comes with renewed pain. But Milo never existed, Milo was just a wave of endorphins, a ghost of meaning that comes alive and goes through the veins from brain to nerve endings. He must shake it off, it's a good thing he realized it soon enough to try and let go of it before it did any real damage to his sanity. But he gets up and goes to the door to check if somebody was really there earlier. He opens it but there's nobody there, he must have dreamt it. The body turns expectation into touch and taste, into smell. So he goes back to bed and sinks under the blanket, covers himself completely, head to toes. Milo never existed, he was just expectation turned into reality. Where is Elaina? Was she too just a wave of endorphins? Is it winter or is it summer? The warmth of the blanket and the bed feels good to him; it's soothing him, caressing him to sleep.

How could I talk about loss?

There is someone else in the room, watching. A pair of eyes floating in the dark, Milo is back, he thinks, he has come to

apologize. He finds it strange, he is mystified, and he wants to say he is sorry too. So he stands up and wants to say something but as he opens his mouth nothing comes out. And the pair of eyes is telling him to be silent. A gloved hand appears out of the darkness and places a threatening finger just under the pair of eyes, where the lips should be. So he doesn't say anything, maybe Milo wants to be the one talking, the one apologizing. And yet he doesn't say anything. He, Remy, waits, but nothing comes out, so he doesn't know what to do or what to say. He just waits as the threatening hand disappears again into darkness. And as the hand disappears a foot comes out and he can see that its surface is very glossy, and it is twitching nervously. He remembers the gloves now and the glossy feet but the two pertain to two different things. Must be some sort of trick his mind is playing on him. The memory of Milo cedes its place for this new memory. The image of Mason Wyatt and that of the client come united, overlapping in some places. Two bodies can't be in one place at the same time, unless they are in love. He laughs at this thought. What a terrible thing to say. Two bodies cannot be in the same place at the same time irrespective of their feelings toward each other. Yet, why would Mason come to his room? Did he come to mock him for the recent events? Did he come to lecture him about his suspension and following the rules of the Theatür? He doesn't say anything, just waits for the figure to say something. He thinks, something will be said eventually.

There are things people will not understand, the voice behind the figure says, and you, Remy, are one of those people. Your friend, Milo Magnifico, as everyone calls him, was too.

The figure appears clear now; it's eyes bearing the gleam of a knife ready to strike its opponent. It's Mason Wyatt, he thinks, there's that aura of arrogance around him, commanding attention and inflicting authority.

What you don't understand, Mason further explains, is that the Theatür is not some sort of totalitarian institution seeking to subvert the individuality of its workers, or performers, as they are called in the vocabulary of the place. The figure looks around the room admiringly as if inviting him to acknowledge the importance of the place. First of all, the Theatür is not an institution; the Theatür is a way of life. The first aspect that

proves this small yet essential difference is the fact that, contrary to what every performer in the Theatür believes, there are no clients. Well, there are clients, some clients at least, but there are always more performers than clients. Consequently, most of the performers act in front of dummies, and the voices they hear through the speakers while they are inside the booth are just pre-recorded variations of one and the same voice, mine. Computers do the rest. Isn't it fascinating? To have but one voice that can be turned into thousands of voices.

Mason laughs and slaps his knees with his palms heartily as if he is the greatest prankster of all, playing the ultimate prank on such credulous people. And when he moves he can hear the leather of Mason's gloves cracking. Mason then leans back into his chair with ease and tact as if he's on television and he is being watched by millions of people. By now he, Remy, began to feel a considerable amount of disgust toward this man. Yet, the way Mason talked and the way he moved, and the way his voice and his very presence commanded authority, sort of pushed that feeling of disgust away, muffling it like a silencer. Deep down, he was still a man capable of controlling hundreds, or maybe thousands of performers.

The Theatür is a very big place. The men and women that you see, Mason says, the ones you see in the offices upstairs punching endless lists of numbers into computers, they are the ones who insert the variations for the voices that the performers hear while they are performing. They are the ones who create all those profiles you find when you first get in in the booths in order to perform. There are no successful businessmen who come here because of an unhappy life. I assure you, Remy, successful businessmen can feel crappy about their life by other means. He laughs again, slapping his knees. I feel crappy about my life, he continues, but I don't go in one of those booths to let go of my other identities. And I won't pay for that. I mean I would never pay for such a terrible thing. I let go of my other identities by doing other things. But I don't want to talk about that.

He moves forward placing a hand under his chin. I want to talk about weakness, the weakness that you and all the other performers have shown since the creation of the Theatür, and then I would like to talk about pride, and about how the two

come together inside this institution, as you call it. But he, Remy, interrupts him because Mason mystifies him through his discourse and the way the story unfolds. How come I have no memory of coming here? I don't remember coming here, and I don't remember making a conscious decision for coming here. I didn't sign any papers. How can you say this is not a totalitarian institution since we have no access to our supervisors? They are never there.

Mason adjusts his tie. That's because there are no supervisors. There are only the performers and myself; there are no intermediaries, no people who can consider themselves above the performers except myself. As about your lack of memories regarding your arrival here, well, I'm going to answer by asking you another question. Can you remember the time when a colour became your favourite colour? Or can you remember the time when you realized that there is a growth in between your legs that can do more than just peeing? Mason laughs heartily again, but without slapping his knees, and then winks at him. Can you recall the moment in which you decided you like guys instead of girls? He, Remy, raises his arm as if to interrupt him, but Mason dismisses his gesture with a wave. I know about that, I know about you and your friend Magnifico. I've seen the show myself, in person. You should be proud of that. I also know that you and your friend went to that secret meeting on the other side of the Theatür to see that guy painted in red. He thinks he's some sort of Messiah, leading you to salvation. Let me tell you something, he's leading you somewhere, he sure does, but I assure you it's not salvation. It's just another "institution" he's leading you into. But anyways, getting back to the questions that I've asked you. Tell me, do you recall the moment when those things happened? He doesn't expect an answer. It's a rhetorical question, he laughs heartily again. Of course you cannot recall the exact moment. The ways of life you adopt are not things that come to you overnight, they are built into your system, and then they wait there, they wait for the perfect moment, and when you least expect them they come to the surface, like oil on water. They come up in dreams. But you can never know the exact moment. The same happens with those who come into the Theatür either as clients or as performers. It's easy to slip into a habit. And yet I

don't want to compare the Theatür with a habit because it isn't, it's something more than that; it's a mode of life. It is not different from any other mode of life. You wake up in the Theatür in the morning, your body imposes on itself certain rhythms you follow closely without knowing, and you wake up when you need to wake up because your body tells you so. You go to work and you earn credits you can spend, and you interact with other people, you build relationships, and you fall in love. Just like people on the "outside" do.

He laughs heartily again slapping his thighs this time, his leather gloves cracking under the impact.

But it's not a choice, he, Remy, says, we do not chose it, our bodies chose it, we have nothing to do with it. He can feel anger piling up in his chest, and most importantly of all he can suddenly relate to the scarlet figure from the other side of the Theatür. He's taken aback by this sudden change of perspective happening inside his mind. When he first heard the scarlet figure he thought he was a charlatan, but now he feels that he was actually right. Mason notices the change himself and leans against the back of the chair as if to observe him better.

That's the thing, he says, that's how the body works, there's nothing you can do about that, unless you tie yourself to a bed and stay there for the rest of your life. You will eventually die, and other people will make a martyr out of you. Isn't that right, we do like to turn ourselves into martyrs don't we? It's in our blood, to set an example for everybody else, a model everybody else could follow. Ah, he was a genius, a flower of the spring, courageous enough to bloom at such difficult times. That's what they say and that's what they see. What they don't see though is a body that is consumed by an unknown fear, the fear that somebody else will get the bigger prize and that it will be left behind with the consolation prize. Even in sainthood there is a sort of competition. But the body is in command; you cannot deny its requests, because the body demands immediate satisfaction. You must understand this. In depriving the body of its most important juices you do not feed something else because there is nothing else. You cannot feed the soul because there is no soul, there is no string tying you to a higher presence. You are a string made out of flesh and everything you do, everything

other people say and do to you are just vibrations that go through that string, and the string vibrates and hums. And just as an instrument that is well played the body wears out, it learns the music by heart. The life of the body is just preparation, and exercise.

Doesn't this imply that there is an actual performance afterwards? That's what you are implying, that the body is always preparing for something. Isn't it?

No, there is no final performance, Mason says, you are a fool if you think there is such a performance at the end. The body only wants to get acquainted with it and during your miserable life you are only caught within this search for meaning. The body will do everything it can to stop you from stopping it from reaching that final knowledge, the consciousness of limit. There is nothing else except that consciousness of limit, knowing that the physical integrity of the body can go only up to that point. What is the *Theatür* then? If it is not an overt search for that limit then I don't know what it is exactly. That is why you, and the other performers as well, should be proud of being a part of this search. You might say that the *Theatür* is placed somewhere at the margins of that experience, but that's exactly the point. He waits, observant, to see whether he has understood the whole thing. But he doesn't say anything, he too expects the final blow, that last bit of knowledge Mason might share with him before disappearing. But Mason appears to be thinking about something else, distracted by some other thought that has suddenly popped out in his mind.

And the point is?

You see, Mason carries on as if following another thread of thought, the *Theatür* doesn't want to be at the center of the world, it does not seek recognition from anyone simply because it stands at the basis of that search for the ultimate meaning. It's not at the center; it does not claim anything. It stands at the margins because it is looking back upon itself, that's what makes it so special. The *Theatür* is an experiment, and should be treated as such. It can be a failure but it can also be one of the many ways to arrive at that ultimate meaning. We are all performers, out there, on the outside, and yet we hide it saying that that is what the others ask of us. The others are asking us to mask our

true selves because your liberty ends where another man's liberty begins. It's that how they put it? He laughs again at his own joke. Yes that is how they put it, as if there are little circles around you everywhere you go, and you tell the others this is where my freedom ends because that is where your freedom begins. And then everybody thinks you're a very intelligent person because you are so democratic. People are greedy, you know, they always want more, and they will push the boundaries of your liberty toward the center, toward you, until you have no liberty left. You don't even have enough liberty to love because that liberty ends where others are being bothered by the way you love. But that liberty is not your liberty, as it is not my liberty, because that is only the liberty of the mask. That is the liberty of the character and not the liberty of the performer. You are all performers here; you know that your act ends when the client leaves the show, and you are well aware of the fact that it is only an act. You can control the length of that act. There is a stage in every booth isn't there? Is there any other way to say it better? If you really want it you can go on the outside, be my guest, I wouldn't want rebels living under my roof because the Theatür itself is a form of rebelliousness, everyone comes here to look at life from the margins. You can only see the true configuration of something only when you are sitting outside it. You can do the same when you get out and look at the Theatür the other way around. We have no problem with that at all, it is your choice, and we cannot stop you from having it. And you will get out, and maybe marry and have kids, and lead a very happy life until your body learns that final limit when it stops working. And for a moment that will feel like complete happiness. And maybe it is, I suppose it is. But one morning you will wake up and you will no longer be able to make the difference between the character and the performer because the performer will have learned his lines so well that it becomes the character. And you won't be able to turn back because by then it will be too late. Your character will have forgotten who the performer really was. You will have forgotten the characteristics that made you a performer. In the Theatür you are constantly reminded of who the performer really is. The character never takes over because you know you stop being a character the moment the show ends. And you will be always

reminded of that. That is, unless you get suspended and you stay away from the booths and the clients. That is unfortunate for most of the performers, and that is why we are so keen on reinforcing a submissive behaviour among the performers. But you will get over it once you are back in the business. He laughs again, heartily, slapping his thighs.

That's a very odd behaviour, he thinks, for a person like you. Mason is not like he had imagined him the first time he saw that picture on the computer screen. This is a completely different Mason. He did not expect a Mason that laughs heartily and slaps his thighs while doing that. He expected an arrogant Mason that would dismiss him easily and without giving him as much as a word.

Why are you here? Why have you come all this way? To tell me these things or was there something else? I can't imagine you going around the Theatür to explain to you employees how the Theatür works.

I never see my employees, Mason explains, I rarely leave my apartment. However, I wanted to tell you about your friend, Milo Magnifico.

Well, what happened to him? He tries to make it look as if he doesn't care, but only the sound of Milo's name manages to send shivers through his spine.

He left; he was seen this morning going out through the southern gates. He sneaked out, as if we were detaining him here. He was seen with other two performers, one of the two was a girl. I believe you are acquainted with her; you have met her some time ago. She was one of our best.

Elaina, he thinks, it must be her.

And he must be, and then he, that she

Epilogue

The names are immaterial, as words do, they name themselves.

They are wind in the grass, the wisdom of prophetic foolishness.

Eye drift beside the broken window, linger there for a while, watch over you, and then eye point my finger at you, lover.

Eye, patron of pronouns.

Eye imagine a house, windowful of tumbling eyes makes me pause and think.

Eye stand on the balcony, entangled in cigarette smoke, and wonder if I'm the one who's watching or I'm the one who's being watched.

But as one window opens there's only one pair of eyes.

All this time eye have been wondering how to make you see him and instead saw myself as eye would see myself my vision blurred, affected by an illusory bend in one's attitude toward unknown, shamelessly unknown, desired to be left unknown, figure in the sea of eyes.

All this time eye have searched for forgiveness, and all eye did was refabricate the guilt, and all that has made me feel guilty.

My silence now belongs to you.