

Mati Shemoelof

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Translated from Hebrew by Maya Klein / Chaim Rubenstein

Remnants of the Cursed Book

Mati Shemoelof

A fictional character seeks revenge on the writer who got her pregnant and gave her AIDS; a novice writer aiming to promote her book decides to reveal that a famous author habitually sleeps with his students; an artist dies during a routine procedure and tells the story of his life to a dancer who really wanted to become a poet; an ancient Greek philosopher takes to Twitter; a frustrated Israeli writer in post-apocalyptic Berlin finds the protagonist of his former novel seated beside him at a bar; an aging writer sells his soul to the devil...

These are a few of the characters featured in Mati Shemoelof's debut short story collection. They all reside on the outskirts of the literary world, pounding on its door in a desperate plea for acceptance, love and acknowledgment in the face of their flaws. Their voices collide, collapse and endlessly reflect each other, converging momentarily only to shatter to pieces once more.

Love and death, identity and violence, exile and return, all blend together in these stories, which are packed with bone-chilling figures, doubles, twins, gender and identity swaps and varying states of consciousnesses. Using hybrid language, a mix of unrestrained prose and polished poetry, Shemoelof traps his readers in a labyrinth that is simultaneously a post-modern gothic, a poetic nightmare and a haunted romance. He floods the reader with a merciless form of prose that is

demanding, tyrannical and does not aim to please, but at the same time is also irresistible, and one finds it hard to remain indifferent to its wild charm.

Mati Shemoelof is a poet, editor, writer and activist who divide his time between Yaffo, Berlin and Haifa, the settings for the stories. He has published five books of poetry: *Shrinker of Scars* (2001); *Poetry between Hazaz and Shemoelof* (2006); *Why I Don't Write Israeli Love Songs* (2010); *Appetite for Hunger* (2013); *Last Tango in Berlin* (2014). His work has been translated into six languages and has been awarded several prizes, including "Best Debut Poetry Book of the Year" (The National Art Trust of the National Lottery 2001); "Best Poetry Book of the Year (Haifa Cultural Foundation 2006) and he is the recipient of The Acum Prize for Promoting Literature in Israel (2013).

To the Son of a Whore

How do you write about a man who tells you that when he was six he found out his mother was working in prostitution? Should I start with you entering the Japanese restaurant, how you sat at his table, how the others joined in, fueling him until he ultimately blurted out this fact that left your jaw dropped and smashed, sitting on the toilet, waiting for a cleaning man who will never come? Or should I start the story from a subjective point of view of the restaurant assistant manager. A bald man with small gray eyes and a French beard hiding a baby-face? Or perhaps I should use the story as a frame to express how I view his mother? A Tunisian trying to survive in the Northern periphery of a white Ashkenazi country that left her an outcast and helpless, doing anything to feed her child, but when he found out what she did while not at home he was filled with shame: ashamed of his mother, of himself, the city, the country, life, society. A concentration of pure rage released only when he drank, riding his bicycle in the snow and ice, drunkenly falling hard on his face.

I don't know. You should be aware, I usually know the point of view of a story I'm going to write but this particular story has defeated me. First of all,

I've already written a short story about a mother working in the porn industry and her attempt to get her son back after he ran away when he found out about it. Then suddenly, bam! You meet the story's hero in real life. And it's not a LSD hallucination, and it doesn't happen because you're in a dream or floating. It's really happening. The made-up worlds you write about appear before you and simultaneously live inside you.

That night after our friend told us that when he was six he found out his mother was a prostitute everyone kept talking as if nothing had happened. No one asked questions about the new information brought to light. And certainly no one hugged him or pitied him. They just went on arguing about race issues, Ashkenazi bias, Mizrahi cultural assimilation and other petty issues compared to the A-bomb that dropped in the restaurant's back room. I'm not kidding. When a guy sits there and tells you that kind of story, you can't rationalize it by claiming racism in Israel. Dammit, the guy burned all the walls we put between our secrets and us. He remains exposed. So I can't help but to talk to him. I appreciate people who expose themselves emotionally because through their exposure we can see the important things in life. A lot of people talk, but they don't necessarily reveal themselves. In a moment like this, of true exposure, you can hear the bitter

truth. He repeats the scolding line: "I know my mother was a prostitute".

And all I hear is: "But I don't know what to do with the anger, the rage, the hate, the frustration that continues to grow through the years"

Now, believe it or not, that day we were celebrating the birth of his fourth child. The Saki flowed between us like water. We drank and smoked so much we hardly noticed Pandora's box opening. What immense power alcohol has! It can melt any steel door, metal and hard cement, and resurrect deeply suppressed memories. On one hand a new child is born into the world and he takes care of him, on the other there is a child within him, uncared for, unsettled and unkempt. Our human body can split off and help others while we are so unsettled and closed off from ourselves, with the limitations of our inner child. The memory remains like frazzled hair, bursting in all directions after a nightmare filled night, with only saliva stains to cover the devious paths language and speech walked through. Will he tell his son? Or will his son find out about it while he argues with his wife? How will things come out? Wait. I'll choose for you. Let's say the kid finds out. Will he be filled with the same frustration and throw Saki glasses on the wooden floor without looking back to see if he hit the waiter walking

by? Will the madness pass on from generation to generation? Can such an outburst be treated? Why do we even need to control our feelings?

Half a day has passed between this paragraph and the previous one, on one of the coldest in the city in recent months. As if the climate outside listened to the boiling climate in which the story is sculpting its way into the world.

Richard Pryor, the great black comedian came from a similar background and even joked about it, but in a rare stand up performance from the early 70's you can see him quickly turn from laughter to rage. There is no other way. Here I want to tell you that it's not a coincident that this detail came up in the middle of conversation. The true story is that the dishwasher who joined our party that night was one of the most radical activists in the occupied territories. He attended protests in Bil'in - Naali'n and did his best to promote a better future for the two nations all the while standing on the rights of the Palestinians to protect themselves from the continual dispossession. He finished his six-Euro-an-hour shift and joined our celebration. But our joint conversation quickly got worse. The Assistant restaurant manager, trying to fend off allegations that he's an erased Mizrahi, started berating his worker. He told him he's inept and won't get anywhere, and we all ignored the signs of an erupting volcano. Only when

the lava hit my feet did I wake up. And I tried to stop the others, but I was too drunk and kept going back and forth to the restroom, to try to throw up, take a piss and wash my face. And when I got back the deputy manager disclosed his secret, and still they went on. I couldn't stay. I ran as far from there as I can, as close as possible – to my writing.

It's no coincidence that prostitution comes up in connection to the Mizrahi subject because the whores, before the newer immigration, originally came from North African decent. And the Mizrahi story is intertwined with that of prostitution. We were the Ashkenazi's prostitutes, and their sons of whores. Even in Germany, as far away from Israel as possible, you come closest to the trauma. But to that trauma there is no solution and that's what horrifies me so. I'm not just telling a story here. The opposite is true. This story is telling me, us, you. You are the assistant restaurant manager, you are the kid, you are the mother. You are the shitty words trying to spew a thought so close yet so far away within me.

A day later I wake up and don't know what to do with the tale so fresh in my mind. Yet is much more than just a memory. I felt a new story on the horizon of my keyboard. I knew there's something else coming out of this. I called a friend who was with me at the restaurant and I tried to find out

what had happened, what transpired after I went off, and the answer was quick to come, things got worse. That afternoon the activist called me and asked why I didn't stand by his side and defend him. And he was right. Because when I first moved here I kept courting him and he turned me down. But now, that I was in a position of strength, I found myself totally trampling him with my silence. I didn't tell him that of course, instead I apologized and told him he mustn't let drunk people be his mirror, but he was severely depressed and god knows where he ended up that day which was also his birthday.

It's quiet now in the Japanese restaurant, despite the authentic music in the background, despite the arguments and the usual shenanigans of the local weekend. It is absolute silence in my ears. I look at him, he looks defeated, a man whose shoes I wouldn't want to be in. but I'm immersed in examining him. What of me is inside him? What of him is inside me? What do our kids have in common to play with in the sandbox? Why am I fixed only on him? Do we have a chance to survive this night? One is married with children and a job, the other with no wife or kids and a job that could end tomorrow. The glasses continue to get thrown back. I stop holding my girlfriend's knee because she's even drunker than me, and busy arguing. I

look deep into his eyes. Where is my rage coming from? Why am I holding on to his story so much when I didn't grow up in the north or south, and my mom stayed at home with me. Maybe it's because my mother didn't work despite her great talents. Maybe it's because of the time in which she couldn't flourish because the establishment didn't give her the right tools to do so. Maybe it's because I was too late to recognize the system that turned us into servants and slaves-girls of the Jewish society.

My girlfriend holds my knee this time, hearing our silence as if we're on the same LSD / MDMA trip, thrown on the memory's hard sidewalk, ignoring the people walking by looking at us like we're crazy. I'm soothed by her touch, by our senses communicating. She gives me comfort, and from her I notice something that was always in front of me but I couldn't give it a name. There's no father in this whole story. And the character of the mother was ruined for the kid and for the adult. His early awakening is my late awakening. I'm afraid I won't be able to fix the character of my parents who divorced so many times even they stopped believing the fairytale about relationships and love. But that's a lie too. Dammit, I'm 41 years old and not a Child anymore. And I can't keep putting the blame on others. The responsibility is all mine. I'm the one throwing back the glasses and hitting

people, the broken glass, the bleeding feet, the ambulances, the hospital stay, there you can smell the impending smell of death.

I don't know, I totally am here, in the uncharted land of words, with the possibility to leave that child behind. And if I stick to that child and to the adult and to his mother, and to my totally different parents, I have to go on another path. I have to find a special place where for the child, the adult and his mother, me and my story, there is some kind of hope. Our whole life they teach us that being a son of a whore is a curse. But it's not. I mean, it is a curse but I take that curse to heart because without dealing with prostitution I won't be able to understand myself. God gave us love, and we turned it into sex, into barter. But intimacy opposed this and cursed us.

The local tour guide, who teaches us the native tongue, explains to us how to say 'Golden Wedding Anniversary' in the new language. But I joke with the other immigrants who've left their homes because of social reasons, that there's no chance for a golden wedding anniversary these days. So what good is it to hope? To think that here, of all places, despite our cultural differences, we'll find a bridge. And even if we do, will we really be able to overcome the enormous memory lapses, identities and mentality

differences? We either lay them out on the table or we hide them, or both, and sometimes everything together in a Bamboo soup.

The assistant manager got over his ordeal, he woke up with a hangover but helped his wife after she gave birth. And the activist left his job as a dishwasher and married an Italian immigrant. My girlfriend went back to Israel and made an amazing feature film. And only I remained a bachelor unable to break the curse. It's not that I didn't have love or relations, sometimes both, but the fear was too great. I couldn't overcome it. Every time I came close to surviving that endless night, its damned side came back to haunt me. I could never keep up with its promises. That's why I saw generations of women who believed my promises and wouldn't forgive me for not fulfilling them. Only the words were delighted by the excellent material I kept providing for documentation. They won literary awards, progressed and graduated from unfinished drafts to published works.

The Japanese restaurant is noisy again. I never really leave the conversation, I throw up on the table rather, everyone laughs at me, problem solved. My girlfriend takes me to the restroom. The assistant manager yells at his waiters. The activist leaves. We are left by ourselves, the assistant manager and I. And I apologize and tell him that I'm going to write a short story

about the things he's told me, and he says there's no story here. We'll let you decide.

Translated by Chaim Rubenstein

The Black River

by Mati Shemoelof

Translated from Hebrew by Maya Klein

One wintry day I jumped into Berlin's black river. I just didn't care anymore. It's funny that they only put the lifesaver, the white ring with the bright yellow rope, on one side of the bridge. I wondered who would hand me the rope; would anyone want to save me? And if they threw me the lifesaver, would I catch it? I looked back to see if someone was standing on the bridge, which was actually a continuation of the sidewalk, joining the outskirts of the city and its sprawling suburbs. By now the city has probably expanded even more and the black river is at its center and not on the outskirts (as is evident by the cemeteries, which always mark the city limits and are now in its center) but back then it was definitely on the outskirts. A lot of people use the term "taking one's life", which assumes that there is something to take. "Ohhh, He was such a kind young man. I really don't understand Why he went and jumped into the black river, he could've married, had three children, maybe gotten a good job, contributed to the

human race, been part of the healthy fabric of society. But he chose darkness, sickness. He is the problem. He threw it all away in a dumb move.”

This is the story of the heavenly world that lies underneath the black river. It's a story I could only tell after I jumped in; only after my head slowly sunk to the bottom of the river that flowed to the lake, while it was being jostled by the engines of the boats that passed by and gnawed at by fish, crabs, ducks and swans. I wanted a good story. I wanted to get to the moment that the black, filthy, polluted, toxic, freezing terrible waters were penetrating every cavity of my body. Fucking me completely. I really longed for it. And you wouldn't call me a pervert, or obsessive. I'm a regular guy, working a regular job. I had a day job as a creative writing teacher so I could make a living while still having the freedom to write. I always wanted to write. I didn't know that the jump would write the story of the black river within me.

In the movies there's always a guy standing there and deliberating whether to jump. And I admit, I've contemplated suicide several times in my life, but not any more than your average guy would. I was your quintessential average guy. I never excelled at anything. I never had an exceptionally important idea and all of the books I've written have never been published.

I've amassed rejection letters from most publishers. I already considered taking my book to the slaughterhouse: one of those pseudo-publishers that charge lots of money and guide you through the process and in the end doesn't even get the book to the stores and the copies rot in your storage space along with the other items that have been cast out of time (cd's, bags, your mother's power drill, school notebooks, your father's sewing kit and more).

I didn't stand on the sidewalk by the black river. I simply waited for the right time at night, when the moon was hidden. I didn't want to jump on a night with a full moon, because then people would be watching. Suppose they would find me and toss me the lifesaver and then I'd have to take their hand and allow myself to be helped? I know myself fairly well, I'm not the kind of guy who says 'no' easily. If you'd toss a lifesaver at me, I'm pretty sure that I would take it and hang onto it until help arrived. And then just imagine the embarrassment for my mother, my father, my brothers and their friends and all of the sales people in the shops that knew them. They'd have to walk around with the mark of Cain: their son tried to kill himself and failed. Meaning, he's so fucked up; he couldn't even succeed in taking his own soul. But it's me, the middle child in a successful family, where every member holds at least one degree, everyone has a career, family, has

brought children into the world, bought houses and coordinated successful events that they share on social media.

I didn't feel uplifted when I jumped. God did not appear and reach out his hand. The angels didn't dance 'round my ass and I certainly didn't consider myself superior to my surroundings. I even loved teaching creative writing. And the kids loved me back. The girls would hit on me all the time. But the principal warned me about that when I took the job, he said it would be my biggest obstacle and that I couldn't let it ruin me. The black river didn't have any Apostles. No one was sent to me saying, beware of renting an apartment near the black river (or on the contrary: "it sent us to warn you"). What they really wanted to say was: if you live next to it, you'll eventually hump and join the rest of the dead that are buried in its depths. You're better off renting an apartment by the mall, the movie theatre, town hall, the Ferris Wheel and the Museum of the History of Computer Games. I heeded the first warning. I never paid attention when the young women flirted with me and always managed to politely steer clear of them. But I couldn't escape the second warning, the one that was never delivered. Maybe I'm writing this story as a warning. I don't know why I am writing it. That's the truth.

During my short flight in the air over the black river, my life didn't flash before my eyes, I didn't think about my grandmother or my dear love. That's because my grandmother didn't hold on long enough for me to meet her and my love never arrived at all, perhaps because during the final years of my life I stopped believing in love. I must admit that the notion shattered in my face. So I didn't soar in the air in slow motion like some fairy. The only thing I saw before me was the factory that always marked the end of the black river. These days I somewhat regret not being able to fully comprehend the abundance of my final moment of life. Ahhh. I almost forgot, there was no dark tunnel with white light; God did not come down to meet me. The angels Gabriel, Ariel and Raphael or their satanic counterparts Lucifer, Samael and Gader'el never took my soul to heaven or hell. It's important to note that I never regretted the act. Perhaps the entire jump was part of a strong sensation of attraction. Do you know what I mean? Don't answer that. It's a rhetorical question. Of course you know it. Women can discuss passion better than men. Either that or I'm wrong. I felt a longing, a deep primeval urge to touch something so forbidden, like the bottom of the black river. My life was not important. I mean, it was meaningful for my mother and father, who raised me, but I'm sure that they could live with my absence, I mean, of course, they'll mourn me and never

recover from their loss, but that's not my problem, actually, it is my problem. But what could I do, I needed to reach the bottom of the black river. I wanted to touch the abyss. I can't explain why. I wish I knew. I think that halfway to the depths of the black river, or even a third of the way down, I heard a scream or a cry. I'm not certain whether I really did hear it or I just longed for someone to call my name and try and save me, or at least to acknowledge the deep desire that I felt towards the black river on such a dark night. Nowadays, I know that there definitely was some sort of scream. But I'm not sure it was directed at me. It's possible that they were celebrating Christmas on that coldest, darkest night and the revelers were shouting from one of the balconies of the apartments decorated with shiny colored lights, greeting the New Year. Perhaps someone inside was kissing his lover, maybe she even put her tongue deep into his mouth and he squeezed her breasts and she held his dick and he grabbed her ass with one hand.

On the banks of the river, the apartments belong to citizens, residents, refugees and asylum seekers and regardless if they have money, everyone celebrates the fateful moment of transition from the darkest, shortest day towards the lightest, longest one. Wait a minute. Wait. I'm sure I saw someone there and now that I think back, he was a photographer, with

blonde hair, he approached slowly and I could tell he was repelled by me. He could tell how much I feared him. It took me so long to reach this dark decision and now this guy shows up like some human angel, he's probably German. He realized that I was determined and even after I jumped in; he didn't throw me the lifesaver. I saw him reaching for his camera. He probably said to himself, "If I pick up the camera than in effect I am killing him, taking his soul in the most cynical manner possible, stripping him of his humanity. But if I press my stomach just so, I can get a couple of shots and it will be the final photograph, capturing the soul a moment before it flies off." I wonder what he did with those pictures. And you probably sense that I am confused about him too. I don't know whether to be angry with him for not saving me, or get mad at his political correctness, for he could've just pulled out the fucking camera and taken the pictures anyway, I wouldn't have committed suicide because of him. Who does he think he is anyway?

At the bottom of the black river I discovered the inconceivable, because to my great surprise there were many who longed for the black river. Not everyone is a writer like me, not everyone is busy with the same thoughts. And by the way, not everyone was particularly nice to me. But I was pleased to discover that there were so many of them at the bottom of the

river, going about their lives. They lived in ways that the human race cannot explain with its scientific technology. The black river was an entire galaxy of life. Of course, I couldn't know a thing about it, because all I wanted was to become one with the body of the black river and I had no idea that with my own private jump I would turn into such a gigantic flow of entire collectives of the men, women and children who jumped in it. Don't think for a moment that the black river was above or below morality. It was the continuation of the same stories of the people who jumped in it, only with one difference: you needed to be in the black river in order to know the inhabitants of its depths. You couldn't possibly imagine life underneath the nearly frozen river.

I think that I was killed instantaneously upon my enormous body's impact with the sharp waters of the black river. I mean, that is the way I picture my death but it could very well be that I was hit a few times by the reefs at the bottom of the river, or by a passing boat, or I managed to exit to the river banks, or that the toxins spread through my veins and the black swans enticed me, and then later bit me, along with the salmons who loved the red flesh of my chest, as I sank languidly into the heart of watery darkness. I can't seem to make up my mind about how it happened exactly. I only remember that I could open my eyes and swim and hear all of the voices.

Some of them were terribly sad and bummed me out. Others were uplifting, I even met people in the black river who were dancing and they invited me to join them. There were love stories too, disappointments and all of the subsequent ups and downs that come in those simple terms but describe such a complicated process of attachment, of latching on. I only know what I was searching for by jumping in the river: I wanted to know the black river and to understand why I jumped.

The black river didn't succumb to me. Most of its inhabitants ignored me. The ones that did answer me refused to reveal its dark enchanting charm. And I slowly realized that it wasn't them-- it was me. I needed to change my questions in order to get answers. I wasn't crazy, going in full steam ahead with my deliberations inside the veins of the black river. I wasn't perverted, in order to force it to surrender to my perversions and by way of torture confess the mechanism behind its bloody river banks, the red flesh and deep mourning that befell so many families. At first I was looking for the right question to explain its enchantment. But I slowly realized that that wasn't the question. From inside the black river, life above seemed completely different. All those people moving this way and that, going to the supermarket or heading home. All the cars crossing the river without realizing that they are passing above an entirely different planet.

Sometimes I feel sorry for the people who think that the black river is a kind of...I can't think of the right word for it, but maybe I meant those people who think that the black river is superfluous. That it's only beautiful in summertime, when you can go down to its banks and dip your feet inside, with wagging tails and picnic baskets. No. The river doesn't only belong to the people who kayak on it, or to those who think that if they clean it up, it'll be fit for swimming. Ha ha, swimming surely doesn't sum up the rich life that I discovered at its bottom. Suddenly I realize how much I too avoided the black river's desire to be part of me. The innermost longings that it expressed when I passed above it or near it. You could say that the black river actually seduced me. Yes, the black river has a life with form, words and a pulsating heart. But it wasn't considerate of my mother and father. And now, as the dark ice covers the black river, I suddenly think back on my previous life, back in the days when I was busy adapting myself to pay the bills, choose a career and making an effort to stick to my chosen path. Everything seems so pointless and cruel. I never wanted to be on the same boring checkout line at the supermarket, or to write an unbelievably overcharged check to the landlord, or to figure out how much money I made each month, or to promise relatives that I met at family gatherings that we would keep in touch and speak so many words whose meanings I

never considered. You could say that the black river solved most of my problems, but don't think it was riding a high horse. No. It never acted like it was some sort of subterranean redeemer. Maybe because it had no point and it never collected any taxes and there was no police or law in the black river, apart from the fact that you couldn't get out of it. There could be no wars either, because people couldn't kill each other or procreate. You couldn't amass money or property. All you had was the enchanting power of the black river.

One day (I don't know when exactly, because I lost all sense of time) a painter sat down with her easel by the lifesaver on the bank of the black river, right at the spot where my parents, who flew in annually from Greece, would lay a wreath beside a small bilingual memorial. It's time to tell the truth now. I jumped into the black river just three months after arriving to Berlin from Thessaloniki. But come on now, don't believe everything I write about the black river. Not every story is as morbid, gothic and heavy as a Nick Cave song. In any case, I really jumped into the black river, and yes, I lived beneath it. That painter wasn't some cliché you see in the movies, where an artist stands before a blank canvas and then moments later, you see the finished painting. You'll never see a film where all you have are a

million drafts and the work of art remains unfinished, because that would be boring.

At first the black river painter only came once a week. But with time, she began sitting there every morning and what's more, she would place a plastic box with a handful of orange Euros before her and to my surprise, people would give her money to paint the black river. Damn. How come I didn't think of that? I couldn't help but stare at her from below and I wanted to jump out from underneath the black river, like some salmon and ask her a few questions. I could tell by her paintings that she hadn't completely made up her mind about how to depict the black river. Sometimes she came at night too. And then I swear I could see how excited she got when I lit up the river with phosphorescent fish especially for her.

Bad news. My father died. I see my mother's face when she comes to place a wreath on the memorial above the black river, and I can't believe my eyes when I catch a glimpse of the person standing at her side. Come on now, take a guess. It's that blond photographer, he probably contacted her somehow when he saw the memorial. He gave her my last photos. And the news rings in my head. I can't believe that I wasn't at his funeral and didn't say a few words in memory of my father. I'm his only son, after all. And he gave me everything that he could. I remember he used to scrimp on

beer and not go out just so I could study creative writing. I always regretted the fact that we never saw anything good come out of all that writing. I was wallowing in difficult weighty thoughts of my father's disappearance, thinking of my mother's heavy burden of grief. It must've taken her a year of work at the egg factory in order to save up enough money to come to Germany and lay flowers at the site of my jump. Then suddenly, the anonymous painter arrived for her daily session. My mother examined her painting, because she wouldn't just hand over her hard earned money. I could see her staring hard at the painting. She wasn't very enthusiastic about it, but she could tell that the painter was meticulous and therefore gave her ten Euros. She must've mistaken the bill. That's so like my mother. The painter was touched, but refused to accept the offering. The photographer just stood there, not knowing whether to smile or intervene. There he goes again with his deliberations. The painter realized that my mother did not come there to enjoy the black river. She returned the bill. And began to cry. Seriously. She's crying. I can see tears in the eyes of the painter and the photographer, who put his arm around her. I cry too. And my mother started crying as well. It's a real sad serenade. Oh God, why do I need to experience this from underneath the river? What have I done to my mother? I've caused her so much sorrow. Why? Right at this moment,

right now I want to leave the black river, go out and touch my mother and try dating the painter. And maybe hold on to the chance of bringing a child into the world and making my mother happy, but I am deep within an entirely different world, a planet with a sense of time that is beyond your capabilities of understanding. And I haven't stopped crying to this day. So if you pass by the black river, don't jump in it and do not underestimate it. It can give you a wonderful gift, but the nature of gifts is such that we soon discover they do not suffice and that the hole they intend to fill is unfillable. Do not throw coins in the river, give them to the painter that married the photographer, he might be more decisive in her arms and braver when he encounters someone like me. And place a flower on my memorial, because I was wrong and I have brought sorrow and pain to the world instead of trying to help and bringing hope. Weep with me about the wretchedness of the never-ending present in which I have been caught. But I deserve it, because there was a girl at the school. She was my student. I couldn't help it. I had to leave Thessaloniki.

Stakes Without a Tent

by Mati Shemoelof

Translated from Hebrew by Maya Klein

I can't write without my coffee. I go downstairs to get a small carton of milk. And those kids are there, throwing metal poles at each other. Really. They have metal poles that look like tent stakes. And they're laughing as if it's funny but it's not. As I edge closer I realize that they're Jewish. I can smell my sweat. I remember that I didn't put deodorant on because I'm leaving town soon; I'm going far away. And everything is all packed up at my sublet on the third floor of 85 *Jerusalem Blvd*. I don't know why, but I'm disgusted by the scent that God gave me. The kids see me coming closer and stop what they're doing. Things get tense. I slow down. I am trying to figure out the plot, when I need to be written in and how I should write my footsteps. The kids begin to throw the stakes at me and then they suddenly stop, playing on the threat of harm. There's one dark boy and one light boy. One has a cut on his lip, like the Prime Minister, the other has eyes that you can barely make out underneath his brows, like Quentin Tarantino. They surround me. I sweat harder. I practically reek of the sweat that is expressing all of my toxins. The boys surround me and smile; the white one

smiles at the dark one, the dark one returns the gesture with a strange uttering, like a burp or a hiccup or something of the sort. I suspect that he's drunk. They won't let me out of this strange game, one of them takes a stake and thrusts it into my hand. I retreat to the other side and then the other one hurls a stake at my planned route of escape. I mean, I could break into a run and they wouldn't catch me, but they do have stakes. Or to be precise, the stakes are on their backs. They have a backpack loaded with stakes and they reach into it and pull them out like circus knives. And the irritating thing is that they throw the stakes but then they also pick them up, collecting them in the backpack and smiling all the while. They're not in the least nervous or angry. They're just playing a disturbing game with me. But I try to keep calm. For some reason there is nobody on the street. And the people that do pass by simply assume that I am part of the game, playing with these kids.

I don't understand exactly how I can write about an experience in the present, leading everyone to believe that it is unfolding while we stand there with our backs to the past tense. I always grow bored of writers that talk about nostalgic shit in the past tense. Because why the fuck do I care what you did? I care what you are fucking doing now. Still, going out to buy

some milk and running into those two kids, that's an experience that I cannot forget to this day, even if it didn't actually happen and I just wrote about it, in a kind of recurring nightmare, but I have to posit myself in this nightmare and realize that I am always afraid of the very thing that also attracts me. But what's so attractive about standing around with loose change in my pocket on *Jerusalem Blvd*? What's so enticing about being afraid of a couple of kids carrying metal tent stakes and playing a dangerous game in a clean and otherwise pleasant courtyard?

The light one reeks of bad breath, the dark one of perfume and I emit the toxic sweat of fear. I hear Oasis' second album playing in the courtyard.

"Don't look back in anger," sings Liam Gallagher. I promise not to look back in ANNOYANCE but would they just let me go get some milk? I notice that I haven't spoken a word ever since this game began. Let me go, I say, and for the first time I try shoving the dark one with my elbow. He pushes me back into the circle. The white one suddenly grows angry: he approaches me with a furious expression on his face. But the dark one blocks him. I try not to look them in the eye. I'm accustomed to being fearless. And then suddenly I get a full dose of it. I lower my head in submission, even though we're talking about 7th or 8th graders here. My God. If they even go to school. They're acting nervous around me. And I'm trying to understand

why. Are their mothers or fathers unemployed and living off of welfare, while their children take out their frustration on me? But they're not discussing that. They're just carrying on with their stupid game with those moronic stakes. And I have a strong urge to fully apprehend the specimen at hand here, the one that is going to get some milk, rather than try and sit down with the professor that is writing a paper about this story a few floors above head, the one who has shut his windows so that the cool air blowing from the air-conditioner will not escape and interrupt him as he writes yet another article, promoting him at the university, which I am funding with my meaningless taxes. Perhaps the professor even owns the apartment and he doesn't feel like looking the other tenants in the eye and most certainly does not want to see what is taking place outside of the newly renovated balcony. Perhaps he is looking at us and regretting that he hadn't put up some kind of child-proof fence to keep me out as well as the noise that our game, which is beginning to grow tiresome, is making, and it's most likely that the noise is irritating and all of this time is going to waste because the sun has already left the center of the sky. It could be three already (sorry, morning starts at noon for us writers). And it's murderously hot. God has no mercy for the residents of *Jerusalem Blvd.* and certainly not for me, who has forgotten to put deodorant on and I am disgusted with myself and

flanked by two kids who won't let me go. I manage to give a little push to the dark one, who falls, injuring his knee. And he screams. The light one approaches me and hits me on the knee with a stake and I fall on the shiny faux grass plastic green carpeting. My knee is crying out in pain. I keep screaming. But no one notices, with the cover band playing up there. And every so often empty beer bottles fall and crash beside us, practically breaking our heads. Not to mention the noise blasting in my ears. I hate the band that is playing. The kids keep dancing and the darker one is now limping because I've injured him. I notice that I've sat down; I'm not moving. Somehow I've given up on the possibility of fighting them. I try to figure out what's going on here. And how I got involved in this. I feel the urge to cry rolled up and jammed inside my body. I've never been in fights and I have no idea how it's done. I teach creative writing in *Rehovot*. And even there, when the kids jump at me, I can't really seem to shake them off. They're stronger than ever. Either that or I'm more out of shape than ever. I don't take any form of exercise except when I tell people that I write. And then I don't write a word. The kids notice that I've given up hope and they come closer and then back off. As if beckoning me to get up. But I don't want to get up and I don't give a shit if my knee cries out and will deteriorate because I didn't disinfect it. The heat is getting worse, although the sun is

descending from the center of the sky. I'm hot and I'm fed up. I decide to get up and make a tentative effort to walk. The devilish little ones are getting stronger. I want to speak to them. I turn to them, attempting to discern if the two little fiends know any Hebrew, or whether they're deaf. They don't look me in the eye when I talk to them. The music playing from the party upstairs changes back to Oasis again. Maybe the 60's cover band finished its set. They play annoying Britpop that gets on my nerves. But I can't help repeating the revolting chorus. I try helplessly to dance with them and they keep changing the wild ritual, the ceremonial circle, while throwing their stakes like axes. Not a word is uttered from their mouths. They either don't seem to understand what I am saying or they could be purposefully ignoring me. It's too bad I didn't bring my phone. I would turn it on in my pocket and call someone. I picture the way it would happen: the phone would dial my best friend Jacob's number and then while talking to the boys I would casually mention the address and Jacob would hear the entire conversation. But I don't have a phone because it's a Friday. On Fridays I make an effort to write and shut the phone off and leave it at home even if I just go out to get some milk. I curse, take off my shirt and place it on my head like a David Foster Wallace sweatband. We have the same hair, but I don't punch anything out on the keyboard and he has

already committed suicide. I laugh and run around in a circle, even though my knee is shattering and despite the fact that the dark one seems to be limping and in pain. Maybe our kids begin to get violent when they start imitating us. Maybe we shouldn't forget where our social aggression began. There is violence in the word itself, children hide and play inside of it. I can't forget the aggressive kids that beat me all through the morning without moving a single muscle in their faces. And don't tell me I'm a bachelor. I'm not afraid of family. I know all about them. They come in a bad dream, they're on the gray streets. I can smell them every time I go down to the grocery store to get some milk. What is it about milk that bothers them so, what is it about me that drives them mad? Why do they pick on me, dancing like madmen and amusing each other by flailing their arms in some kind of mock Indian dance? A neighbor appears to feed the stray cats and the kids run off. I embrace the surprised neighbor, ask her name and she utters "Sally," then repeats, somewhat artificially "Sally Mordechai," with an emphasis on the "mor". She brushes me off. Probably thinks that I'm harassing the kids or that I might even go after her. She looks around to see if the neighbors spotted me, the serial hugger. Then she takes a picture of me with her phone. For a moment I consider stealing her phone so I have some evidence of the damn kids but then she'd

scream and I'd go through seven rings of hell and even more angels of destruction would be sent my way. Perhaps it's the stink of my sweat that prevents her from communicating with me. I walk back to the street. Look left and right. The kids have been scared off. They are nowhere to be seen. It's like some kind of nightmare descended upon my life. But I always walk in fear. I've never walked the streets proudly. You won't see me with my head held high. The street frightens me, even without those kids. But now I'm truly terrified.

I run home as fast as I can and go upstairs and wrestle with the lock for an hour. I try gently; I try forcefully. I remind myself that the key can open the door. I recall the original tenant explaining how to open it. Beads of sweat are rolling down my back. One after another. My shirt sticks to my back. I wipe the sweat off my head, slicking back my short hair as if taking a neverending lukewarm shower. I'm so nervous that the key bends out of shape. I hear the neighborhood kids and hear metal objects falling to the floor from above and picture the two kids entering neighboring apartments and driving the residents crazy. I try another key and it doesn't work and I go back to the key that had opened the door to the house dozens of times before. It goes in smoothly, but the teeth don't pick up the cylinder. I kick the door and take out a credit card and try to open the lock with the last

piece of advice I got from the original tenant. But it doesn't work. I try a similar key and succeed. I was using the wrong key the whole time. I'm desperate and my nerves are completely shot. I can't believe that this is happening to me of all people. I'm such an idiot and I want to kill myself, even without those kids. The house stinks of sweat, reminding me that I need to shower. I throw my smelly clothes on the living room floor and am relieved that my roommates aren't home. But on the way to the shower I realize that my clothes are probably going to stink up the living room. I return in order to put them in the hamper and remember that I need coffee and decide to drink the instant coffee without milk. I fill the electric kettle with water up to where the maximum line. Whatever. It never hurt. The Palestinian house is huge. What a terrific house. It once belonged to a Jewish-Arab commune. Only there's a star of David downstairs, which changes the notion that the house was only built for Palestinians. Perhaps whoever built it was an industrious Jewish laborer, who placed a Star of David at the entrance. Nowadays there are no Jewish construction workers, because it's only us and the foreigners that need to deal with this shit. But most definitely, the building was built before the war in '48, back when the word 'living room' still meant something. The living room has such a huge space and the ceiling is like a castle. But rather than dwelling on the

architecture, I run naked to the shower. No need to turn on the water heater. I bless every drop of water that descends upon me, cleansing me of the toxic sweat. The smell of soap rises, spreading through the air, and I remember that I didn't close the window and the neighbors can peek inside. And then boom. The power goes out. I try to figure out the cause of the fucking power failure. And then it comes to me. Fuck. It's the electric kettle. I filled it too high so I could drink a cup of instant coffee to calm my nerves. I didn't even get the milk. I walk over, wrapped in a towel. I accidentally stub my toe on the coffee table and scream. The neighbors ignore it, naturally. Because when I can't write, I scream anyhow. I'm a little terribly awfully scared. Really. Darkness is not my thing. It's really not for me. I don't fare well with darkness and I have an irrational fear that something bad will happen.

It's inexplicable, invisible, like the monsters hiding under the beds when I was a child. I manage to reach beyond the door and open the device without electrocuting myself. The light switches on, revealing those two kids dancing in my living room, doing their tribal dance with the stakes, which they have evolved into a kind of Lord of the Flies. Almost mechanically, with no preparation, they must've followed me inside and entered in the darkness. Fuck. Fear again. My nerves are shot. I try to remember if I have

a knife of some sort in my room. And I pick up the red bicycle helmet to use as a blunt object that can drive them out of the gigantic living room.

Why should I enter the living room? I quickly shut myself inside the room with the two white wooden doors that are modeled in an antique Arabesque style, closing one on top of the other. But the kids realize what I am doing and begin pounding on the doors like crazy. I don't open up; I use my body to stop them. But they continue. And this time there's no anger. Only these little pounds, just to indicate to me that they exist, that they are not going to give up. And I'm going through all the possible scenarios in my head, maybe I'll jump out of the third floor into "*Al-Awda*" street, where I can reach the hookah shop, and then we'll see if they have the nerve to mess with my roommates when they return from work. But as soon as the white kid enters, I whack him good with the red bicycle helmet and he lies down on the floor, a bit unconscious. The dark one sees the white one get a whacking and runs to the kitchen. I chase after him, but slip on the trail of water I left behind when I stepped out of the shower and he comes at me, pelting me with the stakes, and one of them strikes me in the chest and I freak out at the thought that he has punctured my lung. It hurts like hell. I double over, hardly breathing. Where did those sadists come from? I

wonder how I should summon the police quickly, I need to get help. I begin to yell and wail. But no one comes. No one gives a damn about these high ceilings. And all the neighbors are busy preparing for the Sabbath or the weekend. I notice that the kids are wearing different clothes. When I first saw them, they wore Adidas tracksuits but now they're wearing 70's t-shirts with Bruce Lee on them and jean shorts. They're not wearing sandals; they're barefoot. And I'm assuming that their feet have turned black from roaming the streets. I'm not bleeding.

But the wound is next to my heart. And every time I take a breath I feel pain. I suppose the stake hit me in the rib. And I'm having trouble breathing. The light kid is still down. The dark one comes over to him, stands above him and wipes his head with his shirt. I notice that his body is covered in scars. I try to speak to him in Arabic and tell him that I'm sorry and that he should get out of my apartment. But he's not listening to me and worse, it seems that he can't even hear me. I try to crawl under the door to call for help from the neighbors. Let them make sense of this mess. Let them realize what I'm up against. But the dark kid, who must have absolute pitch, picks up the dragging noise that my body is making on the floor in the living room, and looks at the door and at my leg and I stop

moving. He goes away. I start dragging my leg again. He returns. This time he has a stake, and he throws it at the door. I realize that he is finally talking to me. I pick up the stake and threaten him with it too. He goes away. I edge closer to the door; he arrives, armed with the backpack. It's filled with stakes. He starts to throw them at me, one after another. I ask, "What do you want from me? What have I done to you? I only wanted to buy milk. Fuck, I didn't bother you on the street. I didn't do anything. Just wanted to get some milk with six measly *shekels* that I barely scraped together this morning." He's not really listening, so I'm talking to myself in desperation. But I decide to fight.

It's going to be a fight to the finish, all or nothing, where I will do blah. Blah. Blah. Right until the suspense returns to the story. But I've had it. Really. I've had it with you getting used to the format so easily. It's supposed to be a completely different contract between us. We're supposed to be doing something different together. Meaning, don't be a pushover and immediately succumb to me. I won't have it that way. And you won't either. We can be more focused. Understand: even these parts are violent. And you don't have to keep watching my trauma and thinking that it recedes when I write down these paragraphs. So please, check every word to see

that there is no silence, or order, or institutionalized conversation about monogamy. On the contrary.

I aim the stakes that were resting in the silence surrounding me straight at him. They remained there from all of the previous attacks. And I hope that the stupid dark kid learns his lesson and doesn't pound me with another round of stakes. I gather them up one after the other and check to see when will be the next time he sticks his nose out. The *muezzin* is calling beautifully, but I can't concentrate. I can't help but hearing him and appreciating his skills either, even in the midst of all this mess that has come about in my life. The dark kid sticks his nose out at looks over at the front door. I throw a stake at him, which barely misses the tip of his nose. The light kid looks at me underneath him, and his eyes are ablaze. I turn the table over the way I've seen done in action movies. To defend from an attack. But then the power goes out again and we can't see a thing. I see the light kid coming out of the kitchen. The little shit understood how the first power failure happened and now he was going to do it again. I'm not prepared to give up on the tens of stakes that are now being thrown at me with mechanical precision. I defend myself behind the perforated table. Every so often I throw a stake back at them. I wonder how they could have

so many stakes. These kids brought a whole stash of weapons to my house. And then I discover that they're also throwing knives and forks and anything sharp that they can get their hands on. All of our kitchen utensils are being hurled at me. And in the process, they're controlling two different positions. That's it. I count to ten and take advantage of the temporary lull in order to throw everything I've got at them: all of the stakes, knives, forks and the rest of the utensils they threw at me. They are hiding in the rooms. I can't hear a peep out of them. Every so often I catch sight of see them peeking, but the weird thing is that they do it in the form of a dance. Meaning, they're not exactly looking at me, but dancing in the room and then stepping out. I manage to hit the light one. I can see the blood squirting out of his hand. But there's no cry or angry exclamation. The dark one rushes to cross the divide between the kitchen and my room, where they are hiding. He probably wants to help the light one. I'm concerned. Because I don't know what they are planning and my knee begins to burn badly, and my chest is pounding hard and hurts with every move of my rib. I decide to take a chance and hide in my roommate's room, because she also has a balcony and I also can lock myself inside. My roommate is a DJ and she probably gets high before going to play a set at the "Homecoming" Bar. I would gladly join her, I can't write anyhow, so at least I could get high

with her. And I drink too, as opposed to her. So I usually make a fool of myself faster than she does. I say a prayer for her return. When the stake hits me in the back, I turn to see that the light one has oddly been resurrected and the dark one is filled with joy, jumping up in the air, I draw the stake out of my back, along with a considerable amount of flesh, and screaming, awake in my bed.

My head aches. I immediately want to look in the mirror to see if I have a stake in my back, but my head is exploding. My head is definitely not ready for any movement and I am dying to take a piss. Shit. I realize that I was out drinking last night and that I had a nightmare about two kids that were chasing me. I allot myself three seconds to get out of bed. One. Two. Three. But then I ask for another five minutes and stop the pee with all of my might. My dick is stuck in between my legs. But I can't. And I start crawling on the floor, which is covered with forks and knives. I reach the bathroom on all fours, like an animal that only God knows why he created. I take a piss. And hold my head in my hands. I bend down to take a sip of water and look in the mirror and behind me are the two kids. I rub my eyes and go back to sleep and decide to completely wake up and go buy some milk at the grocery store. And the kids are behind me dancing with a

backpack full of stakes and I notice that no one can see them apart from me. *Jerusalem Blvd.* is as clean as *Rothschild Blvd.* Not a scrap of dirt to be found. I can't understand who cleaned up *Jaffa* and why did this happen. *Jaffa* is suddenly so clean, it looks like all of the residents of Tel Aviv descended upon it with every cleaning agent in their possession and gave it a pre-wedding scrub. I look back at the kids. I'm scared that they could flare up. I'm disgusted with myself for being so bewildered by the events unfolding. Cars pass by blaring loud music, but it's in Yiddish, it's Yiddish rap and I'm shocked. I've never heard Yiddish rap before. Windows smash, shattering this ideal and a pane of glass descends upon us; I take cover, the kids are behind me as if they were a pair of my angel wings.

I can recognize the kids, but I'm not going to explain how I know them, because that would get me into trouble. Let's just say that they are from somewhere closeby, they are figures of kids that I know and that even know me. I don't succumb to them. I turn to them and ask that they leave me alone, because I just want to buy some milk. But they simply ignore me. I slap one of them and push the other. But they are in tears, they don't want to leave me. I realize exactly what it is they want. But I'm not going to give it to them. They will not be my kids. I refuse to acknowledge them. Their

mother, I have to find their mother. She was the one that got me into this mess in the first place. I fucked her when she asked me to have children with her and here they are, and now I have to acknowledge them and stop trying to write and give up all of my time and money for the sake of their future. But that's not me. Besides, when I fucked their mother, we signed a contract at the lawyer's, clearly stating that I do not need to acknowledge them. I am in no way responsible for them and most certainly do not need to pay alimony. But their bitch of a mother had to bring her own lawyer, because she claimed that I don't see them often enough and that I don't care. What do I care. I'm writing a novel, I tell her. But she screams at me and reprimands me and can't carry on a normal conversation like she used to be able to do and I should consider moving. But I'm not going anywhere. I'm alive. And those kids need to learn to deal with whatever they have to deal with. I'm not their father. But why don't I want to be with them? They look at me with their puppy eyes. I'm their father. And I had a father, so why I am treating them this way? Why? Where is my heart?

I'm mad at myself. I curse this stone-walled piece of shit that calls himself a writer. And I don't know why I don't just go over and acknowledge them, embrace them and give them everything that I possibly can (or can't). And

God knows, I know how to teach children, like the ones I teach at the gifted school in *Rehovot*. I look at my palm and see the 6 NIS and then I realize that I am actually going to the grocery store to get some milk because I haven't even had a cup of instant coffee yet. I am wearing a white tank top, blue Adidas pants with no underwear, I haven't washed my hands after taking a piss, I haven't washed my face and I didn't even brush my teeth. And the kids seem pretty unkempt too. In fact, we are the dirtiest people out on a street packed with clean ones, the men are in suits and the women are wearing formal gowns. It's all so spick and span, the British, Palestinians and Jews must've had some orgy with the architecture of this grocery store, the one where I want to buy a carton of milk. But it's actually not a grocery store. It's a brand new supermarket, containing hundreds or thousands or hundreds of thousands of varieties of milk, the entire place is devoted to milk. Shit, who could've thought up a milk boutique and how come they still haven't opened a milk boutique that has a lone cow perpetually smiling, living a life more comfortable than our own. I can't make heads or tails of the place and meanwhile the kids are busy destroying every bottle they can get their hands on. They whip out stakes and throw them at the supermarket shelves. The manager comes over and he's mad; he thinks it's me making the mess because he can't see the kids.

And I try to calm them down, but they throw stakes at me too. I hide behind Moroccan flavored milk, and Tripolitan flavored milk, and all kinds of sweetened milk. But its futile. I hear the police sirens and decide to go out with my hands covering my head.

I can see them lurking in two corners of the supermarket, waiting for me. I'm glad that the police released them. But I'm starting to fear that they are not my children. They are demonic kids, playing this game as if they were ghosts. And I'm afraid of ghosts. I suddenly recall parts of my dream and now know that they are waiting to take revenge. Perhaps they already have gotten it, and I am merely a thought in a dying mind. Alright, *halas* enough. I go back to my house with a bottle of milk that I don't remember buying. But I'm dying for my first cup of coffee. I can hear them playing by the house. And my hands fall to my sides. *85 Jerusalem Blvd.* The hookah shop is empty, the ficus trees are scrubbed clean enough to befit a French Chateau, they've been sculpted into the suits in a deck of playing cards: spade, clubs, diamond and hearts. Oh Lord, who could've thought up such shapes for those ugly trees. The kids notice that I'm not paying them any attention and they doing that dance, the one I know I'm not going to get out of so easily. Damn, *rabak*, I haven't even had my coffee. I begin to ask the

question I should've asked in the first place. Where is their mother? And what are they doing hanging around following me and not in school? I don't have visitation rights, not after I wouldn't agree to pay alimony. So she couldn't have left them with me. They start throwing stakes at each other, with me caught in the middle. The cold look comes over their faces again, the dullness returns to their eyes. They're not really looking at each other or at me. They're just busy with the stake game. And where did they get the idea to throw those sharp objects? I've never seen such sharp stakes. My knees hurt. Pain is spreading in my chest and back, I double over and find myself lying on the boulevard in between a wide, two way street. This time I don't have to worry about the dirt. I'm only concerned about the madness that has taken hold of them, playing that dangerous game. But I find comfort in the fact that had they wanted to hurt me, they would've done so, so in the meantime they're just making a show of threatening me. I accept their rules and lie there with my arms folded over my chest, although my back is crying out in pain and my knee is undoubtedly inflamed. They come closer in their game. But they don't look at me. They want something and I don't know what it is. They edge nearer and every stake thrown comes close and bounces over my head. I'm scared. I'm scared to death. It's been a while since I've been this scared. But I'm not one to dwell on childhood

memories. I don't have memories. I've never been to a class reunion. I've never gone back in time. I can only go forward, fueled with the faith that writing is somehow beneficial. Although I haven't written a single word ever since I moved to *Jaffa*, due to the high cost of rent. You know, it's the same old story here as in every big city. And now the kids are stepping on me, but I'm not reacting. I'm scared of them. Even though I want to choke them. I want to grab them and snap their necks, the way they'd kill a chicken in *kaparoth* on Yom Kippur. Just crush them. But they are my flesh and blood and I'll let them kill me, before I'd ever touch their little souls. What a mistake that was, sleeping with her. I didn't need that fuck. But I wanted it all. To consummate, to be emptied, to fill, to lick and be licked, to spread and be spread and I felt the abyss after I entered, after I exited and I wanted to run but it was too late and she got pregnant, because that's what we'd agreed upon and that's what the sperm wanted. And I wanted to be a father, because everyone around me were parents, and what good did it bring the kids throwing stakes at me, fastening me to the earth. They would not give up until I was crucified to the sidewalk. And then the dark one lay down beside me on the ground until darkness fell, and I'm dying of thirst with the milk spoiling at my side. And the light one drinks all of the milk and throws the carton next to me so that I'd envy him and my thirst would be

worse. And later on the light one lies down on the other side with his face at my feet as if to show that he can smell my disgusting sweat, while the dark one uses the stakes to etch words onto my stomach. And hours go by like that and no one approaches us on the street. And no one talks to us or asks if we're alright.

The light kid disappears for a few moments and returns with a knife that he hands over to the dark one. I beg for my life. I don't want to die. I want to have more children. I want to be a real father to them. I don't want to just procreate and not take responsibility because I don't have the time and I want to be a famous writer and I have to write a novel that will be a smash hit with the elite who will then take to me despite the fact that I'm of a different class. I want to understand how one can take responsibility. The light kid disappears again and I see him defecating behind the huge palm tree that towers up to the moon. Night has fallen. A full moon fills the street with illuminating white light that falls upon us all, like a flare fired in order to save a drowning child as his mother races across the beach, calling out his name. The sound of her cries breaks the hearts of the people on the beach and a flood of sympathy pours forth for the cursed fate of the mother whose son was swallowed by the sea and stopped her sense of time forever. And

the place turned bitter as everyone crossed their fingers in the hope that the child would be fished from the voracious whirlpool and the tempestuous waters. But the more his mother flails about on the beach, the fewer the chances are of finding him, regardless how many flares the police and the army send up in the thick cloudy ceiling of the summer sky on the beach of *Manshiyya in old Jaffa*. It doesn't matter how hard she yells, or how long she raised the boy, changing his diapers, attending to his every ache and delight, or that she took pride in him in the face of the other mothers, the child is dead. And her womb gathers inwards. And there are no words to describe the loss, a mother burying a child, instead of a child burying a mother.

The dark kid brings the knife to my heart. And right at that moment I think of you; the way we fell in love on Instagram; the way I scrutinized all of your photos; a short while later we began texting. You wanted intimacy, even though you'd just separated from your husband of ten years. I brought you to my house, I gave up the privacy of writing. The whole city can see us in the sky. The whole sky watches the illuminated sidewalks. I remember when we got matching tattoos of our names on our asses - you got mine and I got yours. That way we'll never get too serious on the toilet bowl, we joked, our names will reflect in the piss filled water. The light kid appears,

he too is armed with a knife and he sticks it in the dark kid who is sticking it in me and he falls upon me, but nothing is happening. There's no blood. The light kid reeks of perfume, which mixes with the stench of the dark kid, and I must have bad breath because I haven't brushed my teeth yet and it's been two days since my last shower in this Middle Eastern heat. I'm concerned about my mental state. I spend too much time in my dreams without waking up. Documenting them is the only option. I die in my dreams. I cannot be killed and I cannot kill others. But nonetheless, I am pierced by knives. And my fears are alive and well and that's when I have to escape.

In summer I have to have black coffee with cardamom before my morning writing session. But I've finished my tin, Sally must have taken some to her lab, not realizing it was the last of it. I set the kettle on the stove and go downstairs to buy another tin, bleary-eyed, my temples pounding. Two children are walking behind me. As I greet my barber I notice that they stop when I do too. I'm not usually paranoid and I never check to see if there's anyone following me when I leave the house. But this morning I couldn't help but take notice of the two. One of them is wearing a white shirt and

white pants, and he is dark all over. The other is dressed in a black short and black pants and he is light all over. I go into the barber shop, forget my coat on the coatrack and start a conversation about the gigantic mosquitoes that have made themselves at home in my house and the kids just stand there frozen in the street. They're not doing anything, and I notice that they're not looking at me, even though I'm staring at them with my bleary eyes. People jostle them, but they do not budge from their spot. Oy. People are passing through the kids' bodies. It must be a side-effect from the microchip that Sally tested on me. I ask the barber to look outside and tell me if he can see two kids standing there. He asks me to repeat myself, I must be whispering. He turns off the television that is tuned to "Arab Idol". He looks over to where I am pointing with my right hand. And he doesn't see a thing. I realize that I am in a dream. I am scared that for a moment, perhaps the love of my life, the most talented scientist in the *Weizmann Institute*, has planted another experimental microchip inside of me. And that thought isn't much of a help. It only intensifies the paranoia. I'm afraid to leave the barbershop and I haven't had coffee yet. I politely ask whether he has had his *kahwah* yet. He takes the hint but gives me one in return, saying that he will go over to Bibi Abu Hassan's hookah shop and get me a small glass. I won't sit here all day, he has clients to take care

of and he doesn't want to turn our amicable conversation into a therapy session. I must've scared him with my frightened appearance, with the talk of kids standing there waiting for me. I decide to take a deep breath; I take advantage of the people that are getting off one of those noxious busses and venture out to the grocery store. I cross the street, freezing cold, passing the row of ficus trees and quickly reach the other side of the boulevard. In the grocery store, which stinks of fish patties and meat, there is a conversation about football, which I know nothing about. I go over to the sour refrigerator with the cheese and take out a bottle of breastmilk. The kids are standing at the doorway. The owner's doberman and its puppies pass by their legs. They look at me, but not really at me, rather they stare at my stomach. Terrified, I try to figure out what I should do. How will I be able get home without being followed. I return to the blazing hot street. I nonchalantly walk to the bus stop and hang around until a bus arrives. I keep walking and then break into a run and get on right after the last passenger has boarded. The kids look at me dully. I flash them a little smile. Triumphant. Bus number 18 goes to the *Bat-Yam* cemetery. I get off at the last stop, go down to the Jewish cemetery and ask myself what the hell I'm doing there. It begins to rain. The kids get off after I do, sending chills up and down my spine.

I raise my head and they're standing there, with hundreds of thousands of dead children all lined up like the point of a triangle. Like in the Indian Bollywood videos. It's a real *dabke* dance, only motionless. The children all have the same dull expression, their eyes are fixed on my stomach, not on my face. I wonder what to do. I call Sally. She must've shut her phone off while in the lab. I'm scared to admit that I need therapy. But name one author that doesn't walk with the dead. Actually, you could name plenty. My hair is standing on end, I have the chills. What do you want, I try asking, but they don't respond. I realize that I have been sweating a lot and had nothing to drink and the kettle is still on the stove and probably burned and God knows if the entire place is ablaze.

I hurry to the bus stop. But it's Friday and I realize that I have actually been writing the beginning of a short story all night and haven't slept well. I had only made myself believe that I'd woken up in the morning. And the busses have stopped running because it's already early evening on a Friday and I am on one of my urban excursions and can't find my way back home. I laugh along with the creatures that have been following me, "**Kids, perhaps you could help me find my way home.**" They don't answer and I've had it already. They ruined my house, which has probably burned

down by now, they've stranded me in *Bat-Yam* of all places and I can't take the bus home and now I need to waste money on an expensive taxi to take me back to the place I used to call "home". I take the taxi. My house is indeed on fire. And the firefighters are cleaning up what's left of it. I am scared to death that we don't have insurance. Sally arrives in a hurry. She's angry, seething, raging, her indignation threatens to destroy anyone that comes near her. Sally sees me and I know that she knows that I am guilty. She doesn't ask questions, she just asks the firefighters for permission to go in to our apartment. They won't let her in. She goes in anyway and looks for something inside. A police officer chases her and escorts her back downstairs. She's crying. But it's not because of the apartment; it's because of a microchip that was lost in the fire. I begin to realize that those chips mean more to her than our home and that to her, our home was merely a respite from work, but it contained nothing, it was empty, it had no meaning. I go over and ask her if she cares about me and my feelings. She punches me right in the nose, tears cover my eyes, my brain goes dark, my ears ring and the piercing sound of pain racks my face right where her tight fingers hit the center of my nerves. Electric waves of anguish spread through my consciousness. I bury my face in my hands and go cry in the corner, like a cat that had been beaten by the neighbor's son. Someone

pulls me up and takes me over to wash my face, I manage to catch a glimpse and see that it is my barber: Peres Abu Shukra. *Shukran ya Peres. Thank you. Alla yahlik .God bless you*, he answers in Hebrew, adamantly refusing to speak Arabic in the midst of all this commotion. He hands me a coat, takes me in the barbershop and parks me in front of the space heater. I'm confused; I'm lying on the red sofa, looking up at the eclectic *Arab Idol*. Outside, everyone and their mother is riveted by the sight of my house burning down. Sally is looking for me, but she does not know that I am looking right at her.

He asks me to leave, motioning that a customer has arrived, I can feel his hand on my head, he has such a fine hand, it barely touches the crown of my head. He's a barber, that's his role here, he knows how to touch hair, like making cotton candy for children, he knows how to twirl and spin it ever so lightly against the wooden stick. I don't want to go outside. I go to the bathroom and my piss is so yellow that I know I'm completely dehydrated. I go outside and cross the street to the grocery store that stinks of fish patties and meat. I ask for a glass of water. They gladly oblige and attempt to understand what happened to the apartment across the street. They can't leave the store; they can only watch the commotion. They are

brothers. God knows why they moved to Yafo from Jerusalem. I drink about three glasses. And then I tell them that it's my apartment and that it burned down because apparently I left the kettle on the stove. They begin to argue that it's just not possible. A kettle can't cause a fire in the cupboard. I'm so tired that I pretend to pass out and I lie down on the grocery store's filthy floor. They immediately call an ambulance and place a damp washcloth on my head, offering me more water. I gather from the conversation they conduct above my head that the ambulance has gone to the scene of the fire, and by the time it reaches the grocery store, I decide to quit this game, but then the paramedic arrives and I spot the two kids behind him, the dark one and the light one, with the dull expressions, and there was a hint of a mischievous smile playing on their mouths. But you couldn't be sure about it. And I'm pretty sure about it. I'm absolutely sure about it. I get up, intending to run out. But the owner of the grocery store, who is meatier than his thin brother, stops me, and just then the paramedic arrives and attacks me.

I awaken in a cold hospital room, it's hailing outside, the wind is merciless, my hands are tied and I find the pair of kids standing there, staring at me. There are no windows. The room is all white. A tired cliché of a clean, pure

hospital. But why am I tied up? The kids are naked. Why are they naked and how come they don't feel cold? I can't remember how I got here. And every time I have a thought, it's written out on the wall. I can see my thoughts being typed out in dark letters on the room's whitewashed walls. I'm upset, but I can still accept this idiotic dream. And if this nightmare doesn't subside, I will overcome it, for I have a capacity for nightmares much worse than this. You can't defeat me with horror, even those two obnoxious kids are no match for me. I begin to make sense of time and place. It is morning, I'm in some white room that's disguised as a hospital room, but is really a prison. This display of my thoughts on the wall is an experiment. Someone must want to see what I am thinking. I start to laugh. I find it hilarious, the notion that if you have access to my thoughts than you will know something. I know what my thoughts are and I don't know the first thing about myself. Knowledge, I dictate to the wall's invisible hand, well, knowledge begins with the other. I will know who I am, when those two kids that are staring at me with dull eyes will start describing what it's like to stand beside me. And I'll tell them about the mischievous smiles that they had at the grocery store. The entire day's story is spread before me, its secrets unraveled as I arrange one thing and another and am cut off when Sally enters the room. A toxic scent of sweat rises from me, but I do not

dare remove the covers. Incidentally, I couldn't take them off anyhow because my arms and legs are tied down.

She joins them where they are standing and looks at my stomach dully. I try to understand how I knew that she would be killed. Perhaps they are angels of death, responsible for our time here on earth, they take the souls that they need to take, and they are now accompanying my soul in its passage. I start to cry over my love. Because I can't picture my life without her. Without her kisses in the morning, without her busy schedule. Without the coffee that she makes me. Without the showers we take together, without arguing about why I can't sleep with her in the morning (when was the last time that happened?) without my pancakes or the caramel she makes in the frying pan, without drying each other off in the shower, without listening to her break down her toxins in the toilet, while reading a journal titled "The Future of Science." I can't go down the entire list of moments in order to catch the awful one, the one expressing the thing that words cannot express. And she isn't staring at me (like they do) with the dull look anymore, she's looking at her feet. And her hair is falling on her face. That's different. But it's a dream, I reassure myself. I'm afraid that she will die, because I cannot grasp the moment of my own death, that's what we

all have in common, lovers and haters of literature alike. The kids are coming at me. I ask them not to do anything. I ask for another moment. I remember how I met my wife, when she started working at the lab and I was a junkie. I needed money to escape reality. I was her guinea pig. And I received money in order to try out the first microchip that she planted within me. It was called--"This Morning". It put time in order for me. When you're sick like me, time is always running away in between your legs and you can't get up in the morning.

And right before the kids come at me, we share a look signaling the end of the road and then that I wonder why I ever agreed to that idiotic microchip of hers. Why did I agree to the stupid chip of hers? I burned down the house because of two sadistic boys. The barber doesn't want to be my best friend, and the worst thing is that the entire neighborhood thinks that I am crazy, the kind of guy that burns things down and passes out in the grocery store, and I have nowhere to go, I belong to this neighborhood, because my father's father belongs to this neighborhood. That awful microchip. That demonic chip. Why did she bring it into my life? She probably stayed with me because I was her experiment; her experimental chip. And that's the reason she slept with me: so that her experimental chip could penetrate her

intimate consciousness. But the microchip, which was supposed to overcome the disease, only worsened it. I'm scared of her, she'll kill me once the experiment is over. And then I'll turn into another electronic ghost, like the two wild ghosts, yes, or more precisely the child ghosts. And who tied me to this bed? Who did it? Who didn't let me out of the house to just go and buy some milk. It's her. She's conducting her experiments. Now you know- never agree to have microchips implanted promising to cure you of your ailments. I was, and still am, a disease. And now I am a dead disease. I'm already dead. Dead. Killed by an unsatisfied life by her side. Why did I fall in love with a scientist?

Who wants to write about cheating, or worse, read about it? Why discuss matters of the heart? Better to write about broader issues. I'll write about the politics of subversion: first we need to establish a subversive group. Lets take rebellious poets for example. But best make it poetesses. Because fiction needs a single heroine. So let's take Sally. The name Sally has a nice ring to it; it has lots of spiritual light and is illuminated by the Baba (as in the *Baba Sali, the rabbi and kabbalist*). So we're in Sally's shit. She leaves home because she doesn't have a place to live and she stays

in a tent and no one cares because she's living in *Beyit Shean*, a dusty little town near the Jordanian border. It's a trip. She decides to do something more important. She decides to get rich and get even with all the money she'll make, supporting hungry people like herself. She knows how to make money, she has her mother's instincts. Her mother ran all of the whorehouses in *Beyit Shean*. But there's nothing debasing about it. Working women are simply women who work, giving men back their self-respect. Alright, let's focus on the story here. So we have Sally, she goes to university and picks up all the scholarships she possibly can. Seriously. She registers for all the scholarships under every different race and ethnicity and attends all of the meetings. She completes her BA in sociology and graduates with honors. And then she's on the direct track to a PhD. In the meantime, she works as a waitress in a banquet hall, a stenographer, a poll-taker, a security guard, a bodyguard and every place either fires or promotes her. She starts her PhD full of ambition and she is unstoppable, which implies that people have tried to stop her. Certain men that she had been with assumed that they would give her drugs, and take her to parties but they couldn't control her. She progressed. She went far. She managed to get a post-doc at Oxford after sleeping with her advisor and a few other professors and she didn't need to blackmail anyone in

order to get ahead. No. She just progressed and became a professor at the age of twenty five. The money started pouring in from research grants and the conferences that she was invited to attend all over the world. It all just happened for her. She didn't limit herself to academic life and began privatizing her status, taking advantage of the media. She wrote a column for "The State" magazine. Hosted a radio show. Her blog flourished and she expanded into territories that academics had never set foot in. She recorded a hip-hop album, which was selected as album of the year. Then she decided to start a media consulting firm, because she realized that she would never get ahead in academia after making a hip-hop album and her consulting firm was all about sophisticated language and global campaigning methods and all of that bullshit devised in order to get ahead. The money flowed freely now and she didn't need to be directly involved in the business, because she hired a CEO and the company went public. She took all of the money that she made and told her mother to quit. Then she began funding young underground organizations who fought against privatization. After getting her fill, Sally finally began researching her real project: A microchip organ- a minute device that simulates the physiological activity of an organ or a number of organs in the body. The microchip functions like a pacemaker, it dictates a new rhythm of life: depressives

become vivacious and vivacious people can experiment with depression for a limited time. I want to keep writing about Sally but I need black coffee because milk makes me asthmatic, and I can't really start my morning without black coffee with cardamom. I go downstairs. *Jerusalem Blvd.* is threatening, as usual. It regards me as alien. I don't understand. Can't I live in their neighborhood? Can't they live in our neighborhoods? I don't get this shit. I really can't understand it. But I just want to drink coffee with cardamom, the kind they prepare really well. I go over to the grocery store, where I buy one item every day just to catch a whiff of their delicious meat patties. Too bad I don't have the money to buy myself a meat patty every day, because I don't eat cheapfish. How the hell can you eat fish, they're so cute. I don't touch anything that comes from the ocean. The ocean is holy. A child asks me for money, I give him one NIS, and he gets angry. When I comprehend his real rage, I don't know what to do. I empty my pockets in the hope that the gesture is universal. But he doesn't care. He doesn't give a fuck. Shit. I go into the barber's shop and take a seat. Even though the last thing that I need this morning is a haircut. But to my surprise the barber takes me outside and says that he's still closed and that I should come back in a half an hour. I can see in his eyes that he is kicking me out because he thinks that I am Jewish. But it's not entirely out of the question

that he hasn't had his coffee yet, and who knows, maybe his girlfriend broke up with him this morning. I can see the kid waiting for me and he's looking me in the eye but I can't decipher his gaze. How should I describe him? He has straight hair, the light tips fall on his face. He must be one of the kids from the ex-Soviet Union that were brought to this country. What for? They could've invested in the people that were already here, begging for help (but it's too late for regrets). He's wearing beige colored pants and purple Crocs. His eyes are blue but it's a greenish blue turquoise hue, his nose is tiny and dotted with freckles. His lips are lipstick red. His ears are huge and dirty. He is focused on me, as if I were his mom and dad, his grandma and grandpa, who mistreated him and sent him off to live alone in Israel. And I don't know why. I just want to have my morning coffee. I go over to him and take out a twenty NIS bill and hand it to him. He takes it and looks me in the eye. I can't handle that look. I go to the grocery store and buy coffee with cardamom and return home. The kid follows me. It dawns on me that this morning will not end well. I can comprehend it but I still don't know what to do. I call my mother and she doesn't answer. The water boils and I go over to pour it into a glass coffee mug containing two spoonfuls of coffee with cardamom. I stop in the balcony for a moment and spot the kid at the door that I have left open in my haste to get my coffee

fix. I close the door in his face. I have a strong urge to at least read something this morning. I settle down with David Lynch's new autobiography but I can't concentrate.

The kid enters the apartment through the balcony. Just like that. He looks at his feet. The balcony door has two locks on it. One is a chain-lock that closes the door on top and the other is a key lock. Things are beginning to come clear, this is a dream. The kid stands motionless. I can touch him, I can even move him a little. But his face is turned downwards. Beforehand, on the street, he was looking straight at me. I suddenly realize that perhaps I have fallen asleep and I am actually sleeping. Because downstairs the kid was alive and now he looks like a total zombie. I peek into the bedroom and nearly pass out, my entire body gets chills. I am really dreaming. Someone that looks like me is lying on the bed and not only is he asleep, he's also snoring. I must've gone down for the coffee and then back upstairs. I make sense of things.

The kid vanishes from the living room. Just to drive me even crazier. I sit down and try to figure out what I should do. It's a dream, I tell myself, it's just a dream. Nothing bad here can affect your life in the future, just let the dream end and you'll wake up as good as new. It's not real. It's not real.

I peek into the bedroom again. It's the first time that I am so conscious in a dream and can see myself sleeping. Actually, I'm a stranger to myself. He looks too fat, too bald, too tired, life is defeating him with every laborious breath he takes, and yet, the machine continues its work, inhaling and exhaling. I look up and see the kid lying on the ceiling in the same position (the same way he was in the living room) observing me. I watch the man who looks like me as he sleeps. I look back at that kid and his piercing critical gaze, which is almost evil, full of hate. He seems to be sizing me up with his eyes. I try to adopt the kid's stare and give him tit for tat but he wins the staredown and I look away first. It's hard for me. Everything has become too complicated. Disgraced, I walk to the living room and close the door to my room. In the living room, I realize that the kid has followed me on the ceiling, anticipating something. I lower my gaze to my roommates' ashtray. I pray that one of them walks in, but they don't. Nevertheless, it's still a dream, so perhaps something unpredictable will happen. I either make a decision to pick up smoking again, or I don't, but in any case, I smoke a hand rolled cigarette. Had the kid bore a resemblance to me, then I'd know I am looking at myself through the present and childhood. But the kid looks completely different than me. And he was begging for money and

chasing me outside, even though I wasn't dreaming. Or maybe I was dreaming on the street too. I have to wake up and I don't know how to do it. How does one emerge from such a nightmare?

I decide to try something new. I approach the bed with the guy that looks like me sleeping in it and lie down next to him. He wakes up in a fright. He runs away from me. I remain there, intending to sleep and above me I see the kid standing in the left hand corner of the ceiling with his face looking down at me. His hair is dripping. He's positioned in the corner with the leaky spot on the ceiling. I put two and two together and gather that perhaps my imagination was influenced by this. The water drips right down on the other guy, who looks up and is frightened of the kid. He looks at me and looks at him. I try and calm him down. But he's not listening. He runs and locks himself in the bathroom. The kid stays with me. I listen to my breathing and look for a way out of this nightmare.

I think I might pick up the Bible and start reading holy words. But I don't have any holy books in the house anymore, not after I gave away my entire library to Sally. What a lunatic, why would someone give away all of his books instead of taking them to his new house? And then move in with roommates at the age of forty for pathetic sex and bad company.

My double returns to my room and his eyes are facing the floor. He won't look at me or the kid. But he talks to me, which is a big step forward. I explain the disastrous chain of events. We begin praying in two voices, reciting the only prayer we remember. The kid disappears. And we are happy to be cooperating. But my double doesn't really want to stay at my side and he surely doesn't want to look me in the eye. I try talking to him. But he begs me to stop bugging him and get out of the apartment and disappear from his life. I will not leave the apartment. I come closer, crawling on the beautiful painted tiles, the kind they no longer make these days. The floor is dirty. My double climbs up the wall and lies down on the ceiling. I still don't understand how he does it. He closes his eyes and covers his ears and turns his back to me. The kid is now hiding in his belly, as if he were his mother. They are scared of something. I look ahead. I open the balcony door to see what has happened. The balcony hasn't been in use for years. There's a wilted plant, some hard soil, a single black shoe that I don't recognize, a towel and the bathing suit I bought in Amman- which have been hanging there together ever since I swam the raging waters of *Andromeda's Rock*. The rusted iron balcony used to be painted blue to match the wooden doors. Most of the street is empty apart from a

few people carrying umbrellas or taking cover from the rain underneath the roofs of the neighborhood shops. Hail hits the city relentlessly. The wind is trying to take everything that it can. I poke one foot out of the balcony. How did winter appear all of a sudden?

I think about Sally and about her success with the microchip and I regret trying out the psychedelic microchip. I should've taken the rational chip, the one that transforms you into a sophisticated businessman. I've seen it help my favorite bass player. He used to play in most successful punk rock band in Jaffa and then turned into a businessman, a success story. He even kicked his habit of twelve bottles of wine or a gallon of vodka a day. He discovered that the manager of the band and the record company were stealing from him (rule number one in rock-n-roll, the band has a short lifespan, take as much as you can during the first years, before you're dumped for being too high). He learned how to balance a budget, he became the owner of a successful company that manages business portfolios. But instead of getting ahead like him, I took the wrong microchip: the one that sends you into a psychedelic universe that has no beginning, middle or end. All I got with my microchip are bad kids that abuse me. It's ironic, because I've spent my entire life trying to avoid raising kids and

repeating the mistakes that my parents made. I'm not blaming anyone for my condition, and definitely not my parents. Just like the musician who sobered up didn't blame the manager of his band who didn't put him and his friends into rehab, and instead preferred to continue touring internationally at a breakneck pace and tried to squeeze as much money he could out of their success, before the musicians overdosed or got on each other's nerves.

I stick the other foot out on the balcony. But no memory appears before me. I want to remember her. But all I can remember are the break-up songs that I wrote for other women. Or various encounters with other ex-es. Or our time together, sleeping together, reading books. And now I just have to write this poem before I jump, about the love that is lost in my memory, the one that all others pale in comparison to. But I don't have a notebook, or a pencil, or a tablet and in any case, I have to get the microchip out first. I pick up the stake that's lying in my room. It's a particularly narrow one and I begin digging in my chest, above my left rib. The pain is excruciating, blood flows. I feel around, looking for the bulge of the microchip. I extract it and feel lightheaded. The kid is gone, the man in the bed is gone and I go down to the street to buy some coffee and return to my apartment upstairs and drink it and die of an infection in my hand.

Why did you take the microchip out? I can't understand why you would do it. And now you're dead, like a moron. What I am going to tell them at work, that my husband went crazy and pulled out our latest and most expensive development, just days before the product is officially launched? I knew that you were crazy from the start, otherwise we never would've met at the laboratory. You were there as a consultant for our project, advising on creative aspects, as a writer to a scientist. And I thought your craziness was an inherent part of the system of fiction in which you conducted yourself. But I was wrong. And now you made me a widow and an unemployed one at that. I'm finished, whether I keep quiet tomorrow and they discover that the chip doesn't work, or if I tell them what happened to you. I'll simply disappear, go underground. Maybe I'll donate some of my money to young people that want to start revolutions. It's very popular these days, you know, being subversive and changing the system through terror. But I am at fault, I drove you mad from the beginning, when I chased after you and was envious of you. I wanted to be like you, I wanted to make you completely faithful and you had a problem with that in the first place. It was evident that you weren't the type to be faithful, you were sleazy and

that had its own charm to it, but I thought that I could tame you and your literature, and even your fears, your nightmares, demons and terrors. I thought that I could contain them all in the project. Now look what's left of you, a hunk of lifeless meat without a microchip. If only you knew how much I love you. How much I miss you: your jokes; the craziness that was part of the microchip that I planted in your body. If only I knew that you were suffering so badly, I'd come over and take the microchip out myself. But I didn't know a thing. I was at the lab. We were working on several new microchips, ones that give people love, death and not just psychedelics, work and respect. The love chip, you'd love it, it gives people a whole world where they are in love. Every person would find themselves an object to fall in love with. But who am I even talking to?

I'm standing before a body that has begun to stink. You've punctured your lung and caused a terrible infection in your hand. What am I going to do with your flesh? You are much heavier than me. I cannot call an ambulance because I am under surveillance. I will burn the apartment and blame you. It doesn't matter much. You can't suffer when you're dead. Only the living suffer the memory of the dead. Quickly, I have to pour the gasoline and get out of here.

But there is a boy that looks like you by the entrance. My first thought is that maybe I planted the microchip in myself by mistake. Those chips are minute and they can move on their own within the human body. You don't need a biopsy. I can't even believe that you managed to get it out on your own and with a stake no less. Oh my God, maybe I'm on a different chip, a more destructive one and yours was stolen by industry spies. I switch on the phone to notify the secret service immediately. But there's no reception. Now everything is becoming clear. I'm totally inside the chip and this kid that looks like you is not real, he's there in order to drive me crazy. Let me out, I ask him. But he won't. I kick him in the stomach, but my foot goes right through him. Who would want to implant me with the microchip that I developed, a chip that gives children to the infertile?