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*"...the gates of the 'stone maples' were locked, and there were no  
stones or maples around, only burnt blackberry boughs on a wall made of  
uneven sandstone pieces, a stark Roman masonry: no fire could threaten  
such a house... 'inn sleepy' was embossed on a brass plaque, with a larger  
white tin plaque hanging below it: "watch out for vicious dogs in the yard,"  
and on the bottom plaque someone had written in red felt-tip pen: "and vicious*

*snakes".* Lena Eltang's debut novel, *Escape of the Kumaniki*, was  
shortlisted for the Andrei Bely Prize and the National Bestseller Prize,  
and critics have called it "the best Russian novel of recent years". The  
new book is a virtuoso game of detective, to the delight of connoisseurs  
of fine literature. The mystery of a witches' boarding house, the breath of  
the Irish West, the bizarre legends of Wales, the story of a love that goes  
from passion to hatred, the mystery of a death that may or may not have  
happened - this is a book of deception, whose characters so skillfully  
change masks and confuse the tracks that they can unravel the mystery of the  
past.

is just as important as making sense of the present...

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... many, many, many, many years ago, when  
wolves still roamed Wales, and birds as red as flannel  
underclothes fluttered over the lyre curve of the hills,  
when we sang and lounged day and night in caves,  
before the automobile, before the bicycle, before the  
mare with the face of an insulted princess, before the  
unsaddled, merry slides carried us on the ridges, it  
snowed and snowed.

*Dylan Thomas*

*To my parents*

*Часть  
первая*

ВЕДЬМЫ  
ИЛИ



## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*The priestess, seeing how the necks of the dog were gnarled with serpents menacingly, threw a sweet cake with herbs of sleeping pills to him, and he opened his hungry mouth, Dar caught it on the fly.*

All the wrecks look alike. Like dead dogs.

Dead dogs lose their breed and sex markings. They lose their name, too. When you talk about them after their death, you just say: my dog liked this, my dog did that. With humans, it's a different story.

That Saturday evening, as I walked home from Heather Hill through the Westwoods in barefoot shoes, I thought I saw someone standing in the garden with a lantern. But it was a garden lamp, the last one at the gate, the others broken, every last one of them.

I closed the gate, rewound the wire, and walked slowly down the path to the house, glass shards crunching under my feet. When I reached the lighted section of the garden where the long grape pergola leading to my mother's greenhouse began, I stopped.

My dogs were lying in the middle of a meadow overgrown with bluegrass, eyes closed, as if struck by a sudden dream. Hugin's front leg was stretched forward as if he were trying to crawl in his sleep, and Munin had all his legs tucked under him as if he were very cold. They were not like dogs, just two empty sleeves torn from a dog's coat and forgotten in the grass. One the color of pepper and the other the color of mustard.

I went back into the house, got the iron dog combs from the kitchen, and put both dogs on the garden table, first Hugin, po-

Munin's volume. Their bodies seemed unusually heavy, or maybe it was just that I hadn't held my dogs in my arms in a long time. Their frozen faces seemed made of onyx, like two Japanese cane canopies, their mouths still open, the tips of their tongues visible. I took off my shawl, wiped off the damp dew of the night, and brushed them out, first with a comb, then with a brush, to a lively silver sheen.

Hugin and Munin were not afraid of anything *that grows hair*, just like the six brave terriers described by Walter Scott. My dogs could only be taken by stealth. Or one of their own.

As I walked past the greenhouse, I noticed that my sister's grave had been dug up as diligently and lushly as a bed of dahlias. Its contents were scattered across the meadow, along with layers of sod, rotten rags, and roller skates. It was disgusting and embarrassing, as a disturbed cenotaph should be, the way Henry the Fifth's grave must have been after the king's head had been searched.

I'd have to sit down and think about it, but I had to get down to business first.

I brought a shovel from my dad's shed, dug a hole under a shrub and put my dogs there, in the dark and damp. It took me a long time to dig, and my fingers were bleeding, but the hole was still a bit shallow. There was the grave, I thought, pulling the long roots of the burdock out of the viscous earth, and there was the gravedigger, calm as the one who sang songs to the Danish prince: *I had been at the graveyard for thirty years, since I was a boy*. Thirty years, but I've been here thirty-three years.

What shall I sow here: rosemary, which smells of time, or crocus, the body of a friend killed by Mercury, or white vetch, which saves from the plague? What shall I write here: the Homeric line about the immortal dogs of Hephaestus, golden and silver, or the sullen words of the Zoroastrian god?



Perhaps Hugin and Munin would like the Zoroastrian better, for he said that the murderer of a dog guarding a house is paid more than a wolf caught in a deadly trap. *Where is the second most joyful of this land? And Ahura-Mazda said, "Where the most remains of the dead are buried. people and dead dogs."*

I will write it on the second sandstone slab in brown paint, I have two more cans left in the barn. And I'll plant no heather, because the best cure for plague is to run away from it. And the best remedy for hatred is to bury it deep. In the ground, the dry enmity will soak up years of pra- lice, soften, clarify itself, cease to be a hard pro- hairy lump with no end or beginning. Just as there is no end or beginning to a party on a heather hill.

Some people think that you can only exist if someone knows you exist. Maybe they do, maybe they don't. But to hate, I know for a fact, you can only hate those who know that you hate them. Otherwise, what's t h e use?

Weeping beech, boxwood, stone slabs and turf - the clearing behind the greenhouse is becoming more and more like a cemetery. Two graves are blackened with fresh earth, one old and imaginary, the other new and real. But I'll tidy up, the night is still young. I'll just sit here on the bench and think of my mother, it's soothing.

Mom must be upset when she comes in here and sees this sign.

When Mom got upset, she would stop talking-just not talking, as if her mouth were sealed with sealing wax. She wrote notes to Dad and me on scraps of paper, but she didn't even write anything to Deirdre, the maid, who knew what she had to do. Deirdre was very nervous on those days, walking around with her lips tight and dropping everything on the floor.

Mom somehow knew to shut up when reality turned its back on you.

I shall be silent. I will only say aloud: Goodbye, my ghostly pack, my divine gossipers, my old dogs, my deceived watchmen, my red-eared Moty Dawg and Church Grim.

That's it, I'm not talking now.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

I always thought the most carnal experience I was capable of was to be kissed on the top of my head by someone I didn't know, it happened to me once at school when I fell asleep in the zoology room, I got detention for an hour and a half after class for asking stupid questions about bees - I asked Miss Finley why there was never thunder in a bee hive, she said it was superstition and started talking about some nucleus.

and I said that it was not without reason that the Virgin Mary compared herself to a beehive and the son of God to a bee, to which Miss Finley remarked that such reasoning is appropriate in a conversation with a holy father, but we are talking about the *natural life of nature*.

then I said that the *natural* tree Iggdrasil was impregnated with honey from root to crown, and Miss Finley snorted, and I added that it was the bee that awakened the Hittite god Telepinus sleeping in a clearing near the sacred city, but Miss Finley knew nothing about it and got angry, just like the mighty Telepinus stung by a bee in the vicinity of the city of Lich-cina my dad used to get mad when he didn't know what to say.

When everyone had gone, I sat down at the teacher's desk, set the teacher's clock for half past five, and waited for the end of punishment with my head resting on the beech tabletop, heated by Ms. Finley's rage.

first I looked at the stuffed platypus, then I looked at the collection of bugs under the glass, then I wondered what it would be like to be beak-

or, say, scaly, and then I woke up to being kissed on the head.

I opened my eyes as the classroom door slammed and someone walked briskly down the hallway, an unknown kiss burned on my forehead, right on my skin, though the lips of the one who had done it had only touched the ends of my hair, the way Japanese postwar movies portrayed kissing through a tasseled handkerchief.

Despite the handkerchief, I felt the purple vibrating stain spreading down to my temples and neck, filling with resinous flesh, my body straightened and filled up like a glove puppet with a hand inserted in it, I didn't know what to do with it, so I got up and went to the window just in case, I thought, people kiss anything they can get their hands on: a prayer book, someone else's child, a gun, the earth, a mezuzah on a doorjamb, a chip in a casino, even a dead man, though it's out of the question, but what can you take from them, if even the future king of Tara kissed a witch in the obwell water

I thought diligently, almost aloud, but the mark of the kiss above my head was still pouring dark blood, sore, like a bruise, I don't know how it would have ended, if the clock on Miss Finley's desk hadn't beeped, if, if, if, if, my favorite poet also liked the word *if-if the* doors of perception had been cleaned, the world would seem infinite to man, he once said, and, like a sacrificial table, it would have swarmed with bees.

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For a long time I could not understand why some people gave me hives, because they were not sour at all, many of them even sweet to envy, or even tasteless, like bamboo shoots, but now I realized: they reminded me of wild plums from the tree near the church fence in the hated Bangor - my friends and I...

During the July battles, the whole yard was strewn with trampled mirabel balls of shells.

The ribbed pit in the plum had not had time to ripen, and in its place was a soft white bubble, almost transparent, and there was something frightening, something fake, more frightening than just the pit of an unripe plum.

so when I talk to my chief whiteheart, a cold sour bubble of innuendo rides behind my cheek like a Greek's familiar silver drachma.

No, it's no good, Lou, he said today when I called the London office, we've already canceled two of your classes! Come on, get back to your senses, get back from your back-and-forth and knock it off!

I haven't been there yet, I said, and what's to tie up?

Look, said Whiteheart, don't give me a hard time, the whole office knows what you call *Baxford* and how shabby you come back from it! for God's sake, Lou, even my secretary talks about her husband - *gone to Ireland* - when he stays in a pub till morning.

that's it, I said, because I was confused and didn't know what to say. Yeah! Whiteheart said cheerfully, finish it up, Lou, and don't try to drive or you'll be back in the station, and don't forget you've got two hours with your old ladies tomorrow, he laughed and coughed

and I hung up the phone, the white vial of my-rabel bursting habitually in my teeth, the fresh numbness behind-was filling my palate

and I used to like him, that big-horned, round-headed whiteheart, like a statue of a village old man found in the saccara, I even let him call me by my name, probably out of surprise, for I so seldom like Englishmen.

when you stop looking at people for your reflection, luz  
asked me, Gweniver, whoever you meet -

Burmese mantis or Egyptian vulture, the first thing you are glad to meet is a hovering, staring, *self-similar one*, and even when you see that his mouth is covered with blood, you think he is a vegetarian who has once mislaid a door.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*The hand of fate is nimble and dirty,  
Graceful, six-fingered and contemptible.*

When my father married Hedda, the late poppies were just about to bloom behind the house.

Hedda shook her hands when I showed her my mom's alpine slide: oh, I thought it was only in May!

The youngest sat on the porch all day with a frown on her fuzzy baby forehead, her mother obviously not interested in her, going around the house with a bunch of her father's keys, which, of course, I did not allow her to take. In pity, I taught Junior to play *cockerel and hen*, and from that day on I had no peace.

She brought me buds hidden in her fist, waited for me to say *white*, and violently tore open the green fluff-covered receptacle, shaking out the shriveled, darkish petals into the palm of her hand, and held them up to my face - aha, seez red again!

Four days later, the only things left on the alpine slide were the sparse birch and rockweed. On Sunday morning, I took my father there and asked him why they were destroying our house.

— You're an adult," he said abruptly, "tell me, why did you let herz

For ten minutes we stood in silence, and I could hear a henbit crackling somewhere in the hedge.

— You'll have to make friends with both of them," said the father, looking at the balding hill, "you've got nowhere to go from here, haven't you?"

— They never had a home of their own," he said, after some more time.

— So now they'll have my house and I won't have any," I asked, tilting my head up to look into his face, my father was tall, and it was hard to catch his gaze.

I was sure he was going to laugh, lean over and kiss the top of my head, the way he always did in anticipation of my tears, but he just shook his head.

He was like a porcelain Chinese man, shoulder to shoulder, as if his neck were sore. And his face was porcelain—if I hit him hard enough, his nose would break off, and his cheeks would crack, and his eyes would roll out in two enamel balls, and his mouth would shatter.

And then his head would fall off - for good, like the statue of St. Hippolytus in the lobby of the Vatican library.

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*She, who has forgotten,  
remembers as if it were  
yesterday,  
sheep-eaten slopes  
behind the final slam of the door.*

Today is the twenty-fourth day of June, Sunday.

I'm always the one who's not doing things right. That's what Deirdre used to say. People's unhappy days end on the 15th, I read that in Ovid:

*There is no luck for brides and grooms until the Ides of June.  
Until the garbage from Vesta's temple is carried into the sea by  
the yellow Ty-brom, I will not scratch my own hair, I will not cut*

*my own hair.*

*nails and I will not sleep with my husband, even though he is a priest of Jupiter.*

What am I to do for those whose unhappy days have just begun? What am I to wait for, the day when the wolf will break the chain made of the sound of cat steps, the voice of fish and bear tendrils, to be silent, to lie low, to be numb, until the River Dee carries the painful garbage of my life into the Irish Bay. If I do not scratch my hair and cut my nails in anticipation of that day, I shall die a shaggy, clawed virgin, a laughing stock.

Because in our Wishgard, this day will never come.

They think I'm a witch, which means they can do whatever they want with me. Of course I'm a witch, of course I'm a witch, of course I'm a witch. I don't send sheep pestilence, I don't fly on laurel branches, I don't dance naked on a stone circle, I don't rub poplar oil between my legs, and I don't even have a decent copper cauldron over the hearth.

But if you tie my fingers to my toes and throw me in the river, I could probably hold my own on the water for a while, as well as Matthew Hopkins. That's one.

My money turns into dry cow cakes before you know it. That's two.

I can cure a headache, I drink with spirits, and when I go to bed I don't know where I'll be before dawn, which is definitely a sign of witchcraft, for which they used to burn me without mercy.

Thank you, Kibela, or whoever else is my patron, for keeping the stuff under the grave sod in my garden from the village grave thieves. I would have been good without a herbalist, for it was the last way I could talk to my mother, and there was no other way I could think of.



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*... railing in the air,  
Where height reigns, as it did, where  
dizzying eeriness reigns.*

*Suum malum cuique*, to each his own evil, my father used to say. We are chained to the inn, he said, some to the galleys and some to the hospital bed.

My father was chained to the Maples by his passion as an inept builder, attached to every shingle, tile, and doorknob; if he had his way, he would not leave the carpenter's shed, and would sleep there on a pile of fresh alder shavings.

One day he started to change the railings and milled beech railings - smooth, pink, with carved posts - but they were never installed. First Dad twisted his leg when he fell down the stairs - the long pink baluster remained in his hand. He smiled at me on the floor so I wouldn't be scared, and I smiled at him so I wouldn't show him how scared I was. Then the three of us drank tea and were comforted by my mother's story that Tibetan kings did not need ladders at all, climbing to heaven on a yellow *mu* rope.

The next morning my mother had a hard time, and we were all out of it. The dismantled railings stood for a long time in the shed, propping up the low ceiling, and I used to trip over them when I went there to read or think.

Nine years later, when Hedda sent two industrious restorers from Cardiff, they used some of the pieces for furniture legs and burned the rest with the wood to make room around the workbench.

My father's shed smelled of varnish and abrasives for a long time, and I cleaned and scrubbed the blackened garden table with a funny m e t a l - b r i s t l e d brush that had been forgotten by the craftsmen. My father was laid on this table four years later. By-

because the living room table was round and my father's legs would have to be tucked in, and the garden table was just right.

In one of my mother's books about the future, I read about a house eight hundred stories high at the bottom of the ocean, where all the residents' excreta, not excluding mortal sweat, were recycled, it's called a *closed cycle*. It's the same with us now, everything goes to work, bread for breadcrumbs, old bathrobes for rags, newspapers left by the residents for heating.

The Stone Maples seem to be at the bottom of the ocean, and every morning when I wake up I feel the chilly, dark water above my head, a thick void where not even sea monsters with flat bodies and eyes on their foreheads live.

But I live on, mute star acanthaster.

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*Besides, the lottery of my destiny bars me the right of choosing.*

What I understand about myself

When I write in my secret notebook - my mother would say a *quarter* notebook - I know that no one will ever read it, just as no one will read the recipes in my mother's Travnik. Not even because it is written in the old Russian language, with fita and izhitsa, but simply because no one will need it.

But was lo, the snow-white cow, thinking about this when she was desperate to attract attention and started to scribble words in the sand with her hand - she needed to get understanding from one man, her misunderstood father, and she got it.

They embraced her and wept over her. They grew pansies for her and she ate them all the way until she became Queen of the Egyptians.

I eat pansies too! And I drink Greek sage tea! I too am stung by  
the divine gadfly and driven to Egypt along the muddy shore of  
the Irish Sea. I pickle buds  
dandelions! I dry peony seeds on the windowsill!  
I'm flying on elderberry branches!  
Give me a hug.

## **TABITA. LETTER FIRST**

### *2008. South Lambeth*

Aunt Jane, darling, I have news!

First of all, Mr. R. promised to move me to the second floor, where there are double windows with blinds and no drafts. I won't have to carry a scarf and wool socks with me anymore. Secondly, I've fixed the coffee machine and I'm starting the day with a cup of espresso, just like in winter, remember?—when you came to visit, only the beans have to be ground finer, otherwise it gets clogged and makes a terrible clogging noise. It only cost nineteen pounds.

Third, I got a roommate. In the same apartment where that horrible Latino and his horrible family used to live, I hope this one will be quieter and not make quesadillas all night long. He'd already done some beautification: he'd replaced the bell with two bare protruding wires and put the number 6 on the door, the number he'd probably taken with him to his new apartment.

I saw a glimpse of the new neighbor, he's quite tall, wears a long coat with a belt, just like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, wears thin-rimmed glasses - the frames shine like gold, but if they were gold, why would he settle in South Lambeth?

Hobart Station is a shithole after all, there's always cigarette butts on the stairs despite the bulky ashtrays on every corner, and my bathroom pipe leaks again and I have to de-

to put the salad bowl on the table. No unpaid favors from this blue-permanent Australian hostess, nothing to look forward to!

Yeah, that's right. I don't know his name, I'd have to look it up in the list of tenants at the concierge's office, but it's nice to look at him, although I haven't managed to say hello yet. He answers politely but evasively, but I got a good look at him from behind through the door peephole while he was fiddling with the new bell. His hair is an ash-colored ash-colored hair that hasn't been cut in ages, though I think a short, persuasive, military-style hedgehog would go well with that face. He also has a heavy gait, though he weighs no more than a hundred and forty pounds, I think. The eyes I haven't seen yet, I think they're green.

new, not too bright.

Say hi to Uncle Timothy and tell him I'll send him that cactus book as soon as I find time to drive downtown and get to Waterstones.

Don't catch a cold, don't go out without a scarf.

*Your Tabitha.*

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

they had conspired in advance, there is no doubt about it: when I sat down at the pub, they were talking so smoothly and animatedly that I knew almost immediately that it was a conspiracy.

they're dying to incite me, these two today, the carpenter had a deliberately bland face, and the clothier - His upper lip trembled under his gray mustache, as if he were about to cry - he always looks like that when he intends to cheat me, or maybe it was just my eyes shaking - I had gone into the *anchorage* for an hour before the *heavenly garden* - so much so that at first I mistook even the clothier's cat sleeping on the chair for a dirty hat

left behind by someone

she had two big dandy dingmongers to keep anyone out of her garden, said the clothier, and everybody knows it! well, not everybody, corrected the carpenter, and you're wrong about the terriers too, they appeared in the ninety-nineties, as I remember now: they brought her two puppies with scabies, covered with medicine, and she took them out.

That's not the point," said the clothier, "everybody knows she can cure, but she can also cripple, and Master-in-Leif says that he was nearly blown away by a hurricane when he had a quarrel with the witch of the *maples*.

I'd like to put a green bean in my mouth, chew it up and spit it at your leif!

Instead of answering, the clothier straightened up in his chair and said with an expression: "*All that nature has given birth to destruction and evil around, together it hinders it, here is the dog's mad foam, here is the deer's brains, here is the snake's brains swallowed with food!*

They serve deer brains at the restaurant on Chancery Lane, I said, so I'm not scared, and besides, if she's a real witch and not pretending to be, she knows that you can fly on a stack of black elderberries, which means I'm a useful witch's tree.

on which elderberry-z the clothier frowned, I liked you better when you were a different berry-and why on earth did you change a noble name for a trifling nicknamez

and I liked you better when you came without that shiny cat, I said, beckoning to Patrick with two upraised fingers, but I'll put up with it.

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But the mistress of *maples* still braids her braid, said the carpenter proudly, and when she was a child, she

had her hair in a ponytail and looked like a turbaned horse.

and now she looks like a biting peg-horse, said the clothier, shaking the last drops out of the shot glass onto his tongue-it's a terrible Gaelic way, worse than the habit of twisting another man's button.

as I remember now: she had a brand-new red bicycle, the only one of its kind in the whole town, continued the carpenter, you could see from Ireland how the spokes shone! especially in winter, on fresh snow, no, really, it was a great bicycle, her younger sister, alexandrina, rode on it later on.

That's right, if it hadn't been for the boatman she foolishly stole from her eldest, she'd still be sailing at her pleasure, the clothier said, but no! Now she's lying in a grave in a garden of *stone maples*, or on the seabed with her ears full of tin.

it's that white-haired boatman from henleyz nonsense, what a flaccid coo- hon motive for murder! thundered the carpenter above my ear, and I nearly knocked over my glass.

Since when is lovemaking done in the kitchenz wondered the clothier, but the motive is quite worthy, for example, the Sumerian queen hung her naked sister on a hook - for the same cause!

That's the Sumerians, I intervened, I don't know who you're talking about, good sirs, but the women here don't kill their sisters for simple boatmen, and the Oxfordshire men are boring and troublesome.

What did I tell you! The carpenter raised a finger with a nail stained with lime, murder for the royal throne is a good idea, or, say, a revenge marriage, that's something to think about.

That's right, it's time to think!" proclaimed the clothier, glancing toward the kitchen, where the patrick was walking toward us, beer bottles held between his fingers by their necks like shot ducks.

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... edna alexandrina has disappeared as if into the water, the clothier tapped me on the arm, and you don't care!

take me out of the mud, that I may not sink, said the carpenter in a high-pitched voice, with his satin-robe-clad belly out, that I may be rid of those who hate me and the deep waters, open the second, Stonebury, and leave the boy in peace!

oh, how I missed those long vowels and those co-vowels vibrating like tissue paper on a comb, all those *it was Lovg-Lovg ago* and *didv't see vo-ove*, two years ago I had to get used to them all over again - joyfully and quickly, the way one gets used to clean water flowing from the bathroom faucet after coming from the desert for however long one wants it to last

Two years ago I started coming to Wales again, when I thought I would never come: I changed my name and address, curled up like a water snail and moved upside down, gingerly finding my way on the surface of the pond, I had to avoid thinking of two points of irreversibility at once, which is not easy work, one point flashing inexorably in ninety-six, and the other flashing recently, in two thousand and five, flashing back to Dr. Meyer's couch, narrow as the bed of Mary in a Rossetti painting.

And what about the honest neighbors, does no one in the village keep a n ear to the groundz I asked obediently, knowing what was expected of me

As far as life or death is concerned, the locals are the most peaceful people in the south of the island, replied the clothier, looking around the empty pub, they have enough to worry about, burying and marrying, burying and marrying, day after day, day after day!

It's not for you to judge," said the carpenter, "you're not even from Pembrokeshire, my friend, we don't even know where you're from! The carpenter is always like that - he drinks too much and immediately becomes suspicious, everyone is a foreigner and an



i m p o s t o r , t h a t ' s h i m .

has already risen from his chair: leave alone alexandra of maples, what are you in this

If I had time, at least three days, I interrupted him, pouring the rest of the rum into a shot glass, I would solve this crossword of yours - I bet it would take no more effort than making a silk purse out of a pig's ear.

Damn, I shouldn't have said that. Especially the pig's ear.

Swedenborg wrote about people like me: *among them there are those who speak slowly, with a stutter, showing absent-mindedness*, but nothing like that, I speak quickly, sometimes too quickly, and sometimes without thinking at all, like now, for example.

You betz the clothier came to life, I catch you on a word - I bet it won't work! he put his palm on the beer-drenched tabletop, this is not a battle between lapis and centaurs, sitting in a comfortable chair with a footstool, you've always been weak in this kind of business, lou, in real man's business.

to see the mistress, talk to the sisters and search the garden, I said glumly, a dead sister is not a needle, you only have to ask the living sister a few clever questions.

Don't mess with him, boy! The carpenter shook his head, it's a simple matter, but you'll lose, and besides, it's unseemly to bet on a woman, and on a...

I put my calendar watch on! I interrupted him by reaching over the table, I don't know what came over me.

I know your watch, grinned the clothier, a real *geo clerk*, I bought it from an antique dealer when you were still called Llewelyn Stonebury, no, let's have a wish, especially as you know my wish.

All right, said I, rising from the ash bench, I'll be your village murderer as soon as I have three days to spare, but now I must get some sleep - the London bus leaves at half-past eight.

three days will be found very soon, you can take my word for it, said the clothier, with a simple-minded look-"well, just like Zanni, that's what a long nose and fringed canvas pants would look like

I took him at his word, left two tens and a handful of change on the table, said good-bye to the patrick by the hand, took my bag from the chair, went upstairs to my room above the pub, lay down on the hard cot, closed my eyes, and went down along Newport Street, along Harbor Road, and on up the hill to the humming iron wharf, to the sharp rocks and lichen, and on up the hill to the Irish sea itself, full of newts, fish scales, mud and silver rivets from Fomorian ships.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1997

*There is a herb Ivan's Cross, and the root is all crosses - bound cross for cross. To give this herb to young children when they are young - otherwise sorrow does not fit... and whoever goes to a feast, take it with him from heretics, God will have mercy.*

When Sasha's father died, everything was surprisingly simple: his stepmother went to get a priest, and he signed the papers instead of the doctor, because young Ferguson was now alone in the three surrounding villages - his father had fallen ill in early July.

By the time the Reverend Scroby arrived at the Klehns, the body had become hard and shrunken, but the nose had enlarged and seemed to occupy the middle of the face. Hedda stood over her father at a loss, wiping her face with her handkerchief, and she must have wanted to cry, but the tears would not roll down and swelled in her eyes, making them look like thick lenses, like the ones Mrs. Mol wore,

that's why they called her Mole at school.

Her father was lying on the starched sheet, yellow, important and fragile, like a hollow terracotta statue Sasha had seen in the British Museum. It seemed as if the wind would blow him off the table and carry him across the grass, tossing and turning him, and finally, when he reached the garden wall, leave him lying face down in a thicket of rhubarb and wild raspberries.

The Reverend Scrooby ran his smooth hand over his pa- pine forehead, carefully, as if afraid to peel off a piece of ochre clay.

- Your father was a good man who never hurt anyone," he said with a stern look, "but he suffered a great deal himself. You should remember that, Alexis Sonley.

Hedda shaved his father herself with a straight razor and changed him into his Sunday suit. The suit looked as old-fashioned and out of place as before; the best thing about it was the rough knit sweater with Aran patterns, which Sasha would have buried him in if she had wanted to.

Sasha also wanted to cover his father's hands - his nails had always been yellowish and uneven, and now blue lime was added to the yellow - but his hands were already folded on his father's chest, and all who came to see the dead master "Maples," lingering his gaze on his fingernails.

This made Sasha feel worse and worse, and soon enough she retired to the house, leaving Hedda and the Reverend Scrooby standing in the garden, under the thick reddish foliage that shielded her father from the August plumb sun.

## 1997

*There is an herb called Paramon, that herb is a king to all, and the root of that herb is a man, and that herb grew from the rib of that man, and we will take it and cut the rib, and take out his heart; if anyone has a heartache, drink from it, and you will be healed.*

- What is thisz for?" asked Sasha, when Hedda brought her her black crepe shawl. - I'm not going. The neighbors have made a mess of it.

She twisted her skirt, tied a white kerchief over her head, picked up a brush and began to scrub the kitchen floor with concentration. Brick dust and garden soil would remain in the house forever if she didn't sweep it away at once.

Hedda had already dressed Junior and was standing on the porch with a bouquet of yellow phylliums from her mother's greenhouse-no more had bloomed there this year, as if the flowers had ceased to live as before and had become grass. They were both pacing impatiently at the door, waiting for Sasha and looking at the garden gate, where the Monmouth teacher was sitting in his new car, having come to pick them up from the cemetery. He had driven his mother and aunt there a little earlier with two baskets of flowers he had bought in the morning at the garden shop on the hill.

The teacher was wearing a dull black sweater in spite of the mid-day heat, and he was frowning with sparse eyebrows the color of burnt oatmeal, but Sasha knew that he was terribly pleased with everything - with the fact that he would be riding in an open car on a nice day, and with the fact that Sasha would not delay the wedding, which meant that Sulphur and Mercury would finally meet in the quiet of the estate behind the Westwood forest.

Sasha poked her head out of the kitchen and deliberately ran her dirty hand across her forehead and said:

— Don't wait, I'm not going. I'll make peppermint tea and cookies for whoever comes here after you.

Hedda threw a strange look at her, and moved her lips as if she wanted to utter some short tight word, but at the last moment pressed it with her tongue.

— Get in the car, Alexandrina," she said to her daughter, "your sister has decided to stay home, she has more important things to do.

Two hours later the three of them returned. No one who had

attended the funeral wanted to go to the Maples, and the teacher's family went home to Chepstow by postal bus.

— There were twelve men in black in the cemetery," said Junior, flexing her short fingers, "and Ersley the pharmacist in a purple cloak. There were two wreaths, one of myrtle, with glass berries, and I plucked two berries.

— And all thirteen of them," said Daffydd, "were wondering about your absence. You see, no one even came to drink tea, thinking you were not well.

— I'm not well," Sasha confirmed, "not well at all. You should go home, Daffydd. I've got a veranda to scrub.

Without entering the house, stepmother Hedda sat on the garden bench and stared at the freshly washed glass of the greenhouse, shining darkly in the setting sun. Sasha walked silently from the kitchen to the garden and back again; she put the dish of bagels where her father had lain recently, laid out the napkins, brought a bottle of ginger wine from the cellar, and sat down to the table.

The offended Monmouth teacher poured the wine without saying a word, drank his glass in one gulp, bowed and went to his mother. Sasha drank hers. The stepmother drank hers, stood up heavily from the bench and walked toward the house, unwinding her black neckerchief as she went.

— Come with me, Edna," she called to her daughter, and she rose obediently, responding to the old hateful name. She knew that if she objected to her mother, even with a glance, it would make things worse tonight. And worse, perhaps, was hard to imagine.

### 1983

*There is a herb called perdibelka, which grows on boras in March, its color is azure. And this herb should be given for hernias, or give it to wives - otherwise there will be no children, but in another year give it - and there will be children. And tear it on the 5th day of March.*

In the anatomical atlas-not the one by Vesalius, but another



with brass clasps-the liver was brick-colored, kidney-

and the genitals were painted with dark ochre, as if all the rubble and sand from the quarries of the human body were concentrated there.

Ever since Sasha had found the atlas in the attic, she had imagined the man inside, recognizing in every person she met across the room a red liver cobble, an emerald stem with a swollen bud, and a velvety brown flower between his legs. When she was told-one girl from Heverstock-that all these things were slimy gray and blue, she had seen when she was at her mother's work in the hospital, Sasha wondered: and the crayfishz and corals and all the ocean life and little things!

Once they are in the palm of your hand, they shrink and fade, pretending to be colorless debris, charcoal, graphite chips, but if you throw them in water, they laugh and shine with pure primitive hues: red gold and olive, mossy green and satin black.

You can't believe what you see when even children know that things make faces at you if you turn a w a y from them. So if you want to catch them off guard, you have to turn around very quickly.

Stupid, stupid girl from Heverstock.

## **HEDDA. FIRST WRITING**

**Kumarakom, August, 1998**

My dear, you haven't answered me, but I still hope all is well with you.

Here in Laguna I have a night job and it's not easy, not like in the Maples - long tea parties in the garden are out of the question. Besides, it rains non-stop, even worse than here in February, fine and nasty. At least the yellow dust has come down, whereas I was choking all spring and my eyes were always sore.

Baby, darling, you shouldn't be angry and silent. I didn't leave because I didn't love you, but because I'm going to have a baby, and it must have a father. It's impossible that neither of you has a father.

Think how I'd look in our cramped Vishgar de with a dark-skinned baby in my arms.

Mr. Appas treats me well, but there is another woman who lives with us, a local woman, her name is Currat, younger than me, not pretty at all, with unshaven legs. He treats her much worse.

He does have a ship, but it's very small - more like a boat with benches for taking tourists around the lake. But it's painted bright blue and has an awning with festoons instead of a roof, just like over the tables at old Leif's. There is a lot of blue, orange and crimson in here, and it was a little blurry at first.

This boat used to be hired by the guests of Coconut Lagoon, mostly for trips to the bird sanctuary (I've been there a few times, nothing special, just noisy magpies and cuckoos), but now you can't get there by water, the canals are overgrown with moss, so Mr. Appas rents it out all day to tour groups, with me and the helmsman, Paco, a Chilean.

During the day I serve refreshments and beer on our boat and in the evening I go back to Tottayam and work in the workshop of Mr. Appas's elder brother. I go to bed at three o'clock in the morning and have to get up early, which is not very good in my position, but what can you do, we need the money.

I gave my word to Mr. Appas that I would sell the Maples, but I couldn't, I don't have that right, according to my lawyer, I mean I don't have any right at all. Unless your big sister agrees. But you can't count on her. She's probably glad to be rid of me.

Edna, dear, remember - the Maples are mine too, which means you must send some of the money to me, half or more. I'm desperate! You've got everything at your fingertips there, fresh fish, fresh

bread, a roof over your head, and here you have to pay for everything, as if you owe everyone, and no one will even call you for tea.

People are just awfully greedy and think only of themselves, they call me a white-bellied fish in their language, that's what hairy Currat told me, and Mr. Appas doesn't think of teaching them.

Though in that *white belly* is his baby, not anyone else's.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

I bought a ticket to baxford this morning, but I didn't go because I couldn't.

the Irish bay still rolls in leaden waves, my father's sight merges with the sun, taste with water, speech with fire, but none of these qualities will pass to me, as the Upanishads predict, because I sit on a wicker chair, drinking tea and looking out the window.

I could be in Baxford in four hours, but I won't be there in four years, I'm drinking iced tea, looking out the window and talking to Gweniver.

It's good to talk to the *shamrock* mistress, she has a wonderful face, thickly powdered, pockmarked and pigmented, it reminds me of an old ferry boat, with a peeling nose and rusty railings, which the stern sailor repairs with white paint in the mornings, walking around with a plastic bucket and splashing the careless passengers.

Gweniver talks about local funerals with the kind of gusto you hear at weddings, her eyes twinkling, her lips quivering, her low voice forming - maybe she's getting a bouquet thrown to her from the church porch like this one: *twenty-four white carnations with greenery in an austere but elegant package, black ribbons included*; I once ordered a wreath of white carnations from a local church.

flower shop, the bill is still in my desk drawer in Hobart Station.

It was the first time I hadn't gone to Ireland - I sat in the same chair, leaning the wreath against the wall, and watched the ferry leaving the wharf with *Norfolk* written on its dirty white side.

I do not order any more wreaths, but I left the first one at the port container, probably in memory of the dead sailors, I do not remember the exact reason, I do not even remember how I got home.

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Why is it that everyone is dying like flies? I asked the gweny-ver when I heard about another funeral, I asked and was afraid: the landlady had been a widow for many years, in Mr. Mount Levy's time there was a pub called the *Cat and Hail*, with four soccer TVs and not a single earthenware honey creamer.

When I look at these cremains, I remember the wasps dead in a saucer of jam on the veranda of our house, wasps that could be taken out with a spoon and placed on the grass, some of them never woke up from their strawberry sleep, and lay near the veranda, gradually merging with the earth.

Why I am saying this? according to some fairy tales, wasps are the souls of witches, and if you peep at a witch in her sleep, you can see a wasp flying in and out of her limp body.

... you're putting too much rum in your tea-cup," frowned Gweniver, taking that tin flask out of your pocket and putting it on the table, there's nobody here but us, as for the funerals, I don't see anything strange about it, every town has a time when the inhabitants die one after another, by any accident, that's how the towns are cleansed of people, you know, I? some of them.

Some people can sense this and leave without waiting for a rock to fall off an ebi rock or a crazy cyclist to run over them!

Have you ever wondered why people go anywhere at all?" asked Gweniver, after a short silence, and I was wary, knowing that the next question would be: *Why haven't you gone yet?* But she glanced at her watch, shook her head, got up and, putting the dirty dishes from my table on a tray, went into the kitchen.

It wouldn't have occurred to her to remind me that it was six o'clock, my ferry was halfway to Ireland, and soon the last bus to Swansea would be pulling away from the new supermarket in Uptown

I might, God forbid, think that my presence would be a hardship on her.

\*\*\*

The tearoom closed at eight, I'm sitting in the *sky garden*, finishing my warm añejo with four mint leaves I plucked from Gweniver's front garden, looking out the window and thinking about poetry, I honestly don't know why.

maybe because my ticket has a dirty picture of dylan thomas in a fisherman's hat with lapels on it, or maybe not.

the ticket is no longer a ticket, but it's a pity to throw it away, the blue paper with the date and hour of the failed departure - what is not a topic for discussion to the tune of a rainy evening?

in the garden of heaven, ugh, that is, in the amusement park-  
esia is the Ferris wheel, and prose is the Ferris wheel, I think, the novel lifts you up fast, lifts you high, and from there, from the sleepy Egyptian blue, looking out over the tiled roofs and damp fields, the underside of the curtain, the innocent lime, carmine, and soot, you realize you are the lord of this place.

You look around condescendingly while the creaking spring of the plot drops you into the grass, gently pushes you out of the booth, go buy another ticket, another antiques, another petite.

or else - go to the slippery circle that walks, drags, tries to hold on to the whistling rope, but now you have climbed, you have clung, you have found a hole or a burr, and it holds you, holds you, holds you! But what is that black through-and-through rush, what is that cold lake down there, what is that tin with an eight on the boarded ticket booth, why wasn't I told when passing by the merry-go-round attendant? you cry out for help, you flash a calm face worn out by sleeplessness, that's your circle, you fool, aren't you the soothsayer, aren't you the double-hearted counselor, aren't you the instigator of discord, aren't you the forger of men and words-z

## **SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008**

*Full month, half month, red month, nothing. The celestial bagpipe is the transformations of it.*

June twenty-eighth. The letter from the Heather Hill Hotel came a week ago, along with bills and a Brighton cover letter from Mrs. Treverscot.

I remembered the lady vaguely, I think she had this funny chiseled chin. Yes, that's right - she and her husband were very cold walking along the shore in the evening, and I warmed them some red wine and cloves for the night. People are grateful to you for unexpected little things and completely ignore favors they are sure of in advance.

Or maybe it was other lodgers, there were quite a few of them last spring, and I remember being confused and inviting the neighbors' youngest daughter to help. For seventy-five pounds a week. This year the boarding house is empty and the work

not much, but Finn Everton has casually nestled like King Nuadu's silver hand on his shoulder and has no intention of leaving.

I printed out the letter in the kitchen and left it on the table for my mom to read: I was invited to the Heather Hill Hotel for *a cup of coffee at dusk in the art deco lounge, Saturday, five o'clock in the afternoon.*

Mom reads Weedman and my rare mail, even bills and advertising postcards - dubious entertainment, but better than nothing.

I know she reads - I once found a nail file instead of a bookmark in Travník. And six months ago I found a twenty-pound piece of paper in the middle of it. It was on a day when I was scavenging through all the bags and drawers of the dresser to buy coffee and toilet paper-the house may be a mess, but it's alive, as Deirdre said, *i f i t* has both. I sniffed the bill, it smelled faintly of moth balls. Now I was ashamed I'd changed it, and I hadn't seen any of the *stuff* in Travník since.

The envelope with the invitation was prominently displayed on the kitchen table, glowing as if it were the windows of a large hotel glowed in the darkness when viewed from our veranda. Sometimes, in quiet weather, there would be car horns and the marvelous, incomprehensible sounds of other people's voices.

— Oh, God, I have nothing to go in," my sister Edna A. would say and start pulling out the closets in her room.

— There will be too many strangers there," Mom would say and send a thank-you and apology card.

— I've got nothing to do there, I've got glue welded up from tonight," Dad would say and go to the barn to glue his thick chairs.



— Wear a green velvet dress and make your lips red," Prue's roommate would say.

— I wonder why they remembered you," Teacher Monmouth would say and reread the letter again, wearing his octagonal, unrimmed glasses.

Wow, I miss teacher Monmouth.

\*\*\*

*Those who are not colored are just plain stupid.*

I was the only one at Mrs. Maul's school who didn't carry a bunch of supermarket-bought bottles and tubes in my satchel, and everyone took pity on me and offered me a taste from their stock—usually in a stuffy powder room, in front of a narrow mirror pasted directly into the tile. It always smelled of sharp girl sweat, cheap powder, and a little bit of clotted blood.

Why did I listen to my imaginary Prue and put on lipstick? Even pale makeup looks like blue streaks on a Gurupi woman's face. Besides, my eyes were immediately dry from the unfamiliar light: icy whiteness pouring from the grainy lamps in the hotel ceiling, as if from the eyes of a dragon buried by Ludd at the foot of the hill.

Walking down to the basement, I entered the Heather Lounge and stopped on the threshold.

The ladies in the chairs turned their heads and stared at me, silently, holding their white cups over white saucers. They looked ordinary enough, one of the guests, Mrs. Anderson, the grocer, whom I recognized immediately, was wearing denim overalls tucked into rubber boots.

Our poor provincials, lake maidens in sealskins.

The appetizers had not yet arrived; in the middle of the room, on the stained carpet, there was only a table with three coffee machines, and a short man in a brocade vest was circling the table: he kept talking, turning some knobs on the shiny panels, the machines hummed and sputtered brown jets, the fat man's cheeks puffed up and down, as if he too were producing coffee portions, only invisible.

Suddenly he turned to face me and cut himself short, acorn eyes stopping at my cleavage and slowly rolling down my stomach and legs.

- Come in, my dear," said the coffee dwarf. - What kind of coffee do you prefer?

He scooped a handful of grains from a huge jar labeled Dura and held out his hand to me, inviting me to come closer and smell. The ladies woke up and spoke quietly to each other, their heads sticking out of their chairs like lizards from sun-warmed rocks.

I waved my hand, refusing. *But if you decide to go in, beware of eating their food or drinking their wine, I thought to myself.* I had better stay at home and think about my trip to Henley, I said to myself as I sat down in the chair by the window. I still had a lot of explaining to do: *What are you doing again?* Deirdre would ask, and I wouldn't know what to say.

I promised my sister I would help her out, but do I want to do that? And does she want to do that? And are we no longer enemies? And how is it that the fresh stinking ambergris of the last three years has lightened and hardened and become musky and golden? Could it be the action of sea water and direct light?

It appears that treachery in the eighth circle, in its first ditches, where deceivers are tormented for love and lucre, is punished by a special humiliation-the *help that comes from the deceiver*- I imagined the Younger in the motley skin of the affable Geryon and laughed quietly:

*He was clear-faced and stately  
With calm features friendly and pure, But the  
rest was snake-like in composition.*

Well, no, the seventeenth song is no good, but the eighteenth is: evil slits for those who have deceived those who have not trusted them.

Angry, little, wet slits.

\*\*\*

*I'm scared that things are falling into disrepair,  
and I'm not uncommon in comparison.*

If I had known that I would stop talking forever that evening, I would have answered the coffee door with something pleasant, something insignificant, just to move my lips a little. But I didn't know and sat silent, I didn't know, because I didn't have the golden divine hearing of my grandmother's icon.

When my mother was alive, she used to show me this icon, but then it disappeared God knows where. And my mother was gone, too, though she still comes to the house sometimes, but we don't talk anymore. On the icon there was an old man with some kind of rays or strings coming from his head, and my mother said that it was a divine hearing, called *toroki*.

When my father sat in his chair by the window with his hands on the wheels - it made it easier for him to breathe - and listened to what was going on in the house, I imagined the same wary strings coming out of his head. I imagined them going up to the guest rooms, then out of the house and around the garden, and then, weakening, creeping across the beach sand and drooping by the water, like the red laverbread seaweed that Deirdre the maid used to chew instead of tobacco.

The windows in the living room were blacked out, and the sticky

coffee fumes seemed to settle on the walls and ceiling. Me-

I was already dizzy from the heat, the smell of over-roasted beans and the steady murmur of the owner's voice: *You press the button and the morning begins. Reliable Robusta. in installments. airy foam.* Mrs. Anderson was wiping her face with a napkin now and then, and her neighbor was fanning herself with a promotional booklet with an Alpine pey-gage on the cover.

Where's the treat? At least some tartlets and not much of a draught. If Daffydd were here, he'd read to me on the your ear with something cool and ancient like this:

*No meat on plates, no milk in jugs; No shelter for the homeless, no gold for the bards: Let Bres choke on his bounty!*

The funny thing is, if I had a couple hundred in my pocket, I would have dutifully bought this nifty machine of theirs, push a button and all the mornings of the world began. Art Deco living room. Ebony and pheasant feathers.

Coffee at dusk with *Dura*.

You're a fool, Sasha, a fool. You're also a witch.

## LOUFERS CLUB GUESTBOOK. 2008

*Levy Junior writes:*

Today was a special day, folks. Daley and I had carried out the action mentioned at the last meeting-and we hadn't been caught! It was a low-risk day: the boarding house was empty, and Lamia had been tending to her greenhouse since morning. The scarecrow was a good one, stuffed with brown paper, with brown hair and eyes made of beer corks, much better than the one from last year.

We leaned the scarecrow against the wall of the Maples, near the gate, and poured gasoline on it from a bottle, because it was overcast and the straw would not ignite. A little too much, the wicket was immediately occupied and so were the bushes. Lamia

came rushing to the wo-

and started to put out her hedge of garden hedges. - she'd have tears in her eyes!!! Lamia was a sight to behold, with her hair in a tangle, her face sooty, her hands scratched, and, in short, Daley and I were pleased.

Then the firemen arrived, and even earlier it rained and everything went out.

*Let us fivd edva's rottev skuLL.*

*The Daily News writes:*

Today I will not be able to attend the meeting, I have to go with my father to buy goods, I will send my brother instead, he is a fat man, although he is still young. I propose to postpone tomorrow's Action. All members of the community must participate in it, so that there will be no sneaky betrayals.

I also suggest writing a letter to the police so that when the remains are removed, Lamia can be arrested immediately, otherwise she will discover the body is missing and run away.

I read that you should wear salt and wax around your neck to ward off evil, and my grandmother says it's important not to touch a witch's wrist or you'll fall under her spell. I can't imagine how perverted you'd have to be to touch Lamia's wrist. She's old!

*Let us fivd edva's rottev skuLL.*

*Neo\_93 writes:*

Daily News, you talk a lot. It's not her old age, it's her chutzpah. We're not here to do Boy Scout stuff, we're here to investigate a murder that nobody in this town gives a damn about. We'll be in every newspaper in the county and London too.

The action will take place at seven o'clock. We'll sedate the dogs with sleeping pills. I took some pills from my mother, I'll check the dosage on the veterinary forum. We'll meet in the grove behind the Irish Chair.

*Let us fivd edva's rottev skuLL.*

*Levy Junior writes:*

Neo\_93! You're taking on too much, did I put you in charge of this operation?

The action starts in the dark, which means nine o'clock. No groves, meet at the woodshed near the Trefoil, bring face bands, flashlights, ropes and not too big shovels.

*Let us fivd edva's rottev skuLL.*

*Arianrhod writes:*

Guys, take me with you! I don't like Lamia either, she thinks too much of herself, and she has Russian crazy blood, so my mom says.

You need manpower to dig. I'm very manpower, especially compared to Neo's glasses.

*Neo\_93 writes:*

Damn it, who gave the password to this forum to Sally Beanz

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1992

*There is a herb sprinkle, good to drown in vinegar and drink at the end of the week on the lean heart, in that man's body and morning clean, and head lehche lives, which man was.*

Real femininity lies in not being afraid to be ridiculous, Sasha thought. Whether it was taking a cheap *strapovtiv* at the opera and sitting upside down with her knees at her chin, or tying a silly sweater over her head on a windy beach, or, say, taking off her tight shoes in a café and wiggling her toes - in general, always doing what you wanted to do, ignoring the surprised looks of acquaintances.



The youngest was just like that, and Sasha was a little jealous of her. In July, ninety-second, her sister wanted a new name and got it - although everyone in the house laughed at her, and in the city, too.

She had to sit in a stuffy carpenter's shed for nine hours, pretending to be deeply sad and rubbing her dry eyes with her fists.

— Why, why do you need a new name?" asked Hedda at dinner, when her gaunt, gloomy daughter came into the dining-room with pine shavings in her hair.

— Because you could have thought of something better for me," she said, "*Edna, that's the* name of half the town! Her mother didn't bother to look it up in the name book," she jabbed her finger at Sasha, who was sitting across from her. - I want to be called Alexandra! Right from today.

— You can't be called that," remarked her father, when Hedda pushed him with her foot under the tablecloth, "you are sisters now, and will be confused. No, it's no good, it's impossible.

— All right, as you like," Junior came out from the table, took a hot bun with jam out of the basket, and stuffed it into her sweater pocket. - Then I'll live in the barn until they call me back to the house, but I want them to call me by my proper name: *Alexandra, go home!*

She left the room with her curly head held high, small, straight and unblinking, like a statue of Dama. Her father and stepmother looked after her and smiled for some reason. When the door shut behind Edna, the stepmother shook her head:

— She can't sit there all night, a child should sleep in her own bed, after all, she's only nine years old. Go get her, but not right away, in two hours, let her suffer. Why not give her a middle name if that's what she wants, nobody takes it seriously anyway. Make it Edna A. Sonley.

— I hope you are not going to give her *my* name," asked Sasha, turning to her father. - It's childish nonsense to have two Alexandras in the same boarding house.

— Well... there are two Isoldes in one novel," my father said indignantly. - One is blond, the other is Belarusian. I don't think you should be so nervous about it. Mother and I will discuss it after dinner and work something out," he ran his hand over Hedda's thick wrist, the black bracelets jingling, Sasha shrugged and stood up from the table, pushing back the heavy bench noisily.

— We'll discuss it after dinner, I imagine," she said as she left the dining room and caught herself trying to keep her back very straight and her head high.

In the morning she found Edna in the garden, ruddy and contented as a figure of Cunning in an Apelles painting, her sister walking toward her with a stack of postcards written at breakfast.

— Look," said Junior, handing Sasha the top card with daisies in the dew, "I wrote to my aunt in Caernarfon - by myself! Though you say I write like a barbarian on a rock.

*'Dear Auntie,' read Sasha, 'we are doing well.*

*The summer is terribly hot and the sea is dirty.*

*Your niece Edna Alexandrina Sonley (you can just call me Drina).*

## 1998

*There is a herb of oblique jelly, and that herb is very good, for which the fur does not stand, drink it in wine and drink it in milk, and it will stand without a doubt, but only give it to a wife and she will go astray, then she will think who to give it to.*

Every time she opened the door to the greenhouse, she searched with her eyes for the familiar canvas apron and threaded gloves hanging

on a nail, and every time she came in, she ducked down - just like her mother, even though she was shorter than her and couldn't bang her head against the aluminum frame even if she stood on her chicks.

The brick wall, along which the hibiscus trees grew, always remained warm, you could read here even in winter - the sun warmed the glass by noon, the flowers were scarlet in their pots, the smell of damp earth was suffocating, and even the frozen grass outside the windows of the warm room seemed covered with blue petals.

Over the past eight years, her mother's dracaenas had weakened, but the hydrangeas and honeysuckle had survived. Sasha had hoped that the dracaenas would recover immediately after Hedda's departure, but the rusty spots never disappeared, and one tree thinned at the roots and fell one winter morning, exposing the pathetic, tangled roots.

The first time Hedda left was in November, two months after her father's death.

— I'm going to Cardiff," she said, "someone has to take care of the finances. For your information, we're broke and about to be. The land and the guesthouse will have to be mortgaged, or better still, sold!

— Sell, leave, and forget Firs," Sasha thought, remembering the play from her mother's textbook, but kept silent. She and her stepmother rarely answered each other aloud.

When she returned two weeks later, Hedda smiled at herself in the mirror, like Joyce's pastry girl, and went into the bedroom every time the phone rang. Sasha was worried, and several times she went to her mother's bedroom door when she spoke on the phone in a changed voice, but heard only scraps of words: winter, home, myself.

The day before Christmas Eve, a man with glossy straight hair, stubby rings on his long fingers, and a curt name showed up at the house. His name was actually long, full of stumbling consonants, but Hedda said it was Mr. Appas, and everyone called him Mr.

Appas.

He arrived in an old Rover, with a worn leather suitcase containing Christmas presents for Hedda and the girls—three thin shawls, which he handed over immediately, almost at the door, and Sasha had a pang of hope that he would leave before Boxing Day.

Sasha got a green fringed pashmina, the color of immortality, the Indian guest said, and Hedda smiled and took his hand. Sasha could not look at Appas's hands without astonishment, especially when he intertwined his fingers, laying both swarthy hands on the white tablecloth. It seemed to her that his fingers were a joint longer than the average man's, and his rings looked like the hollow, fake ones Sasha had seen in a London shop on Portobello, a pile of them for a pound and a half each.

When he arrived, Mr. Appas set up in one of the upstairs guest rooms and the first thing he did was to bring Sasha four worn-out bills.

— I hope the hot breakfast is included in the price," he asked, putting the money on the counter, "and also, would you be so kind as to change my towels? They've been in the bathroom too long, and they're damp. You ought to have a better heating!

— He's going to teach me," Sasha asked her stepmother when she returned from the greenhouse with a bunch of bluish sedge. - He's a what-z

— Mr. Appas is a good friend of mine," said Hedda, stopping in the doorway and looking at Sasha with eyes bright with resentment, "he has a sister who runs a decent restaurant in Swansea.

— I know," said Sasha, "I had a mango lassi with yogurt once. It was not a good mango lassi.

Hedda raised her eyebrows and opened her mouth, but did not speak. She went quickly to the pantry and returned with a tall vase, handing it to Sasha:

— Put sedge in his room. Change the towels. And mind you, Mr. Appas has a cruise ship in Kumarakom, and he knows the hotel business as well as you do.

In the morning, when he came out for breakfast, the Indian spread out on the table a stack of brightly colored photographs of Lake Vembanad, the Bhagavati temple, white herons, and floating houses. They are called *kutuvala-we*, he said a few times, and Junior repeated it happily: ku-tu-va-la-la-my.

The hot breakfast, an omelet with bacon and cheese, was not to his guest's liking; he spread strawberry jam on his toast and chewed it long and carefully, blotting his dark red mouth with a napkin.

— He who builds up his meat by eating the flesh of other creatures is condemning himself to misery in whatever body he is born," he said, when Hedda cautiously asked him what was wrong with the English breakfast. - But you have a fine coffee, and I think I'd like another cup.

Sasha sat across from him, a little askew, looking at the dry little face, the shade that appears on the underside of leaves when the plant lacks iron, and tried to imagine her stepmother's lips searching the face for just the right place to kiss. Appas shook his head understandingly and asked:

— It is chilly to-day, but you have not put on your new shawl, dear Alix, should we conclude that it does not suit you?

— I read about the color green in my mother's book," Sasha said, looking him straight in the coal eyes, "and it says that green is the color of bankruptcy. It also mentioned the green flag as a symbol of shipwreck. Moreover, the Egyptians used green to represent the dead Osiris," she rose from the table and, after a moment's thought, added:

— Not to mention the color of the mold.

Mr. Appas departed in his rattling car on the morning of the twenty-fifth, after Sasha had served pork for dinner

raisin roll and steaks with green peas, ignoring the mountain of vegetarian supplies Hedda had thoughtfully made.

When she saw Sasha cooking, Junior ran to call her mother, who had gone to her sister's in Cardigan for the obligatory Christmas lunch, but it was too late - the smells of burnt meat were wafting through the Maples, mingling with the smells of mandarin peel and spruce twigs.

Mr. Appas quietly went downstairs, threw on a guest bre-zent jacket, and, muttering something about the pleasant coolness, hurried toward the sea.

Hedda arrived at five o'clock, threw off her wet woolen coat, and flew up the stairs to her room. Later, when she bumped into Sasha in the hallway, she silently and firmly poked her in the collarbone with her fist and walked into the kitchen, holding her fragrant curly head high.

At eight o'clock they met at the table, where Appas was picking at rice pudding with a spoon and talking about his plans for the coming year, glancing at Hedda, who sat on his left, his black eyes bulging with tears in the candlelit living room air.

In January and February there were few guests and it rained. Alexandra and Hedda hardly spoke. The two rooms upstairs had to be closed to avoid wasting coal.

On the third of March Hedda departed, leaving a short letter.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

It didn't work out.

Coming back from the seashore along narrow Duane Street, I heard a howl and a brass chime behind me, and backed up against the wall: a ferry car, judging by the yellow lettering on its yellow side, belonged to the ferry company, was struggling to get up the street.

The two shaggy-haired guys in the cab looked like twin Sicilian demons, and, judging by their determined faces, were in a hurry to help the offended, as sons of Zeus and Thalia should do.

Barely past the *Irish cross*, the clumsy car came to a stop on a bend, slightly pinning me with a wheel - the water tank towered over my head like the torso of a dragon, and the unhooked iron ladder rested on the masonry above my shoulder.

I froze in place, sucking in my stomach for some reason, looking at the black letters *n* and *o* in front of my eyes, the huge ribbed wheel spun a few more times and stopped.

Stand still, buddy, said one of the firefighters, coming from the side of the pump and holding out his hand to me, now hold your breath and squeeze in slowly.

I came out smiling - I hate that flat smile I always get when someone steps on my foot or pushes me roughly on the bus - and started to shake off my lime-stained shoulder, the walls of the old-fashioned Duane were whitewashed to a high standard, the guilty palik, who turned out to be a boy, grinned at me from the cab, his partner gave me a firm pat on the back: Sorry, buddy, but that's not all, we need your help, go out there and hover! We'll try to get out of here, or the whole alley will burn down on High-Newport, there are four other houses in the fire-prone bush.

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After a screeching noise, they dragged on towards the bridge, and for some reason I followed, looking at the tracks left by the bulky yellow *Dennis* on the scratched asphalt.



The cobalt clouds that had been hovering over the sea since morning darkened, swelled, and poured down a short, heavy rain; the water in the narrow channel under the bridge immediately rose in a cap of dirty foam-it was not twenty minutes before the firemen appeared on the road again, and, noticing me on the side of the road, stopped

lucky that witch alix on high newport street! said the elder palik with regret, unscrewing the cab window down and putting out a sharp elbow, it rained all over the place, it didn't even have time to burn!

I asked, feeling the dampness creeping under my thin coat and sweater, and water from the puddle trickling into my left shoe.

The fireman turned to the driver, and both smiled merrily and fearfully, here, take this! the senior palik handed me a glossy card from the cab window, just i n c a s e you have a fire, don't be shy, call me.

I shove a four-digit card in my coat pocket, I've got too much water in me.

you know best, buddy," he poked his partner in the left shoulder, and he gently pulled the car away, looking at me with some vague bewilderment.

It's understandable, I've been getting that look for years.

\*\*\*

on the way to the bus station, while the stubborn westerly wind was blowing in the underbelly of every back alley, I went in every now and then to dry off and have a drink, but the cold wet beast was still scabbling under my spine, not relieved either by black rum or strong tea.

I was thinking about Julia, the Brandon witch that Herward the resurrected hired to *cast a spell* on the Normans during another stupid war, and then the Normans set fire-

whether her house and herself in that house, sure to be full of copper balls of potions and stinking bird stuffed with

I was also thinking about a witch I didn't know, alix, whose house was burned down today in the middle of a civilized island that's ruled the waves for a hell of a lot of civilized years.

people do not change, my mother would say, only the weather and royal honors change! this saying, and the fact that one does not keep borrowed books in the house and spits in the child's face to promote his welfare, is perhaps all I remembered from what I heard from my mother.

but not all: she called me *Lord of Disorder*, and I was offended, though I knew that in the old days that was the name given to the steward of a castle ball, whose restless retinue was festooned with bells and rattled them industriously-I had no retinue, but I made as much noise as the twelfth night of Christmas Eve

ever since I decided that I had been switched as a baby, it had become difficult to bear my presence in the house, I must disgust them, and then they would give up the idea, I thought, then they would give me to my real parents or just let me go free.

Besides, at school they called me the witch's grandson, which was a shame, not so much because of the witch, but because Mrs. Sis Stonebury was really too old, and it was noticeable, though she was neither gray like my friend Anners' mother nor fat like the math teacher in Gwynedd.

my mother was old *inside*, like a new glove that had worn out the satin lining, my mother was older than my father, and that was no good.

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*a child of emaciated loins*, Joyce would say, such was John the Baptist, born to Elizabeth and Zacharias, but the

It was no consolation to me, and I wouldn't even let my mother go to Guinea Point, hoping she'd be forgotten sooner.

We lived in the countryside, and only a few people in the town school had heard of our family, but those who had heard of it did not miss it: where did that old woman get youz they asked me in class - was it in a cauldron of rootsz and judging by the fact that your father had long since gone out of sight, he had nothing to do with it!

when she died, I breathed a sigh of relief.

my mother did not stand naked in a white circle in the kitchen and dip herself in oil and salt, she did not cut my skin and say *now you are one of us*, she did not hire demoniacs to work in the fields, she did not fly under a green moon to meet a horned god, and she did not even read the Gardner.

She gave birth to me the day Gardner died at breakfast in the wardroom of a Lebanese ship, but that's pure coincidence.

A week after the birth she was forty-four years old, and eight years later her father sold the shop, went to Chepstow, and settled in a room above the *White Hand King's Tavern*.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*I know, Odin, where your eye is hidden:  
is hidden in the glorious spring of Mimira!*

Deirdre wouldn't have approved. I'd done a lot of stupid things- much more than Mom had, and Deirdre didn't approve of Mom either.

I imagine what she'd say if she saw Drina's grave in the garden, or little Saunders as my fiancé. Deirdre would come out on the porch in her uniform blue dress, chin up.

like a Wedgwood sugar bowl and say what she thinks. And I'd cry. And my mom would just shrug her shoulders.

Mom didn't interfere if Deirdre scolded me; she didn't like to talk too much. If she heard something unpleasant, she would apologize, turn, and walk away.

I envied my mother's skillful indifference: the neighbors admired her flower beds and despised her for her soreness and dropsy, but she couldn't even remember their names, she was like a blade, hardened to absolute cold, impenetrable and shiny. Impatience and agonizing boredom boiled in her like acid in a retort, but only she and I knew that, and my father didn't. But he knew something else about Mom that I didn't realize at the time. And Deirdre knew, too, but she wasn't afraid.

Because when you love someone, you know the strange about him, and you feel the wild, and you see all his slumbering ooze, and the green gloom of the bottom, and the heavenly power blinded in him. But you are not afraid, everything strange seems explainable to you, and the wild is almost tame, and if someone asks you how you tolerate it, or simply *how it feels*, you do not even immediately understand what it is about.

I remember that day and everything about it—the clatter of cricket balls, the sudden cheers, the Venetian green of the grass, the taste of cooled tea, that humming summer island silence that can only be appreciated after spending a summer on the continent.

Mom and Deirdre stood on the veranda, leaning against the railing, looking out into the garden and talking in low voices. The two skinny long backs would have been almost indistinguishable if it hadn't been for the red apron ties around Deirdre's waist. Sometimes I thought my mother forgave Deirdre her frequent absences and Irish windiness just because they looked a little alike, both blond and bright-eyed, both with skin not too white, the color of a weak tincture of marigold.

— I saw your bag of runes on the table in the kitchen," said Mother, "it was about me. You have a bad feeling about me.

— No. It was about your daughter," Deirdre said. - It was hard to believe, but the runes predicted two husbands for her: one husband who would lay down his ear like Heimdall, and one who would lay down his eye like Odin.

— Which one is Heimdallz," Mom asked, but Deirdre had already spotted me, waved her hand, and went into the rooms. I went straight to the bookcase, found the *Velva Divination*, and began to read about Heimdall, the gold-toothed son of the nine sisters. He drank honey and blew a horn, and then he fought Loki and killed him, of course, but there was no mention of his hearing.

Who he pawned it to and why? I thought about it until the evening.

— The runes say that my first husband will be deaf, and my second will be blind! - I said to Dora the next morning, when I went to Crossman- us for fresh bread, and she laughed all over the store, and I laughed too.

No one in the school knew how to laugh like Dora Crossman - squinting and opening her carmine mouth wide, just like the triumphant king of the elves.

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*... I'm the owner of the great Ferry's Tavern,  
I am a white moon, glad of any man who comes to  
me with silver.*

I was looking for the bangle box when I went to Henley, and I had been reading my stepmother's letters. The elephant-faced god Ganesha kept knocking on my window all night, trying to pull the latch with his gilded trunk.

I had only eight or nine letters left, the rest having disappeared four years ago from the toolbox in my father's shed. I should have torn them all up and thrown them away, as I had done with the first and the second, instead of stacking them up as if they had withered.

*LiLLet-doshh.* Tear it up and throw it away.

Last night I dreamt about that Belgian pianist I spent the night with at the Millennium Hotel, I'd rather dream about Ganesha, honestly.

It was a murderously sweltering summer, and I remember the shriveled crabapple and the Japanese cane in the garden that had turned a sickly pink from the heat. I received two birthday presents, from my father and from Aunt Reggie in Galway, two convert of fifty pounds each. In ninety-three, that was enough for a trip to London, so I went to London, especially as the radio said it would be cooler in the east of the island.

After spending half of the first envelope at the flea market, I walked to Kensington Gardens, sat down on the grass beside a freshly painted green bench, and poured the bags in front of me onto a handkerchief. Here's a Cologne water bottle, here's a wolfsbane, here's a cigarette case with a cork lid for Papa with the previous owner's initials scratched on it, but that's all right, they almost fit: Y. O. - it could have been, for example, Waldo the Careful or Waldo the Ordinary.

Or, if you think back to Dad's workshop, Waldo Oselok. Someone's cool shadow blocked the sun, and I looked up: A black-haired man in a sandy trench coat stood beside me, a bag of hot sandwiches in his hands, rapidly dripping with orange butter.

— You're going to get your coat dirty," I said, shielding my eyes from the sun as the stranger moved a little closer, the light shining directly into my eyes.

— God, I hadn't noticed! - He put the bag on the bench and sat down on the grass beside me, smelling of vervain, but not disgusting; in one book a girl named Drusil-la smelled like that, and she drowned out the scent of courage with vervain.

— May I see it?" He reached for the cigarette case, but I quickly wrapped it in paper, stuffed it in my bag, and zipped it up.

— Oh, I see," he was not the least bit embarrassed, "it must be a present for your loverz.

When he said "*lover*" in French - *votre amant* - I relaxed, sat back and looked at him. The stranger's face was too round but expressive, probably because of the sharp, humped nose, exactly like the one I had seen in the Halsovsky portrait of the *young man with the glove*.

— Henry the Eighth used to hunt here, with deer running around and ladies watching the hunters from under shady hats," he said dreamily and handed me a flask that looked like an embossed book. I shook my head, refusing.

— You should be," he sipped slowly, scrutinizing my face. - What a stern girl, though, not wanting to drink Saracen zammut. English provincial upbringing, *v'est-ce pasz*.

I silently reached for the flask and held it to my nose, the aniseed smell coming from the neck, I drank what was left, and looked at the stranger in bewilderment.

— It's not strong. Mom used to pour something like that on her ice cream. It doesn't work on me at all!

— *Pas vrai?* Well, your mother knows how to drink," he grinned. - This stuff is supposed to be lit and drunk with coffee beans, but I don't play garçon games with alcohol.

— I have to go. Thanks for the treat," I stood up abruptly, shook off the blades of grass clinging to my dress, and reached for my bag. A large, horny bee buzzed in my head, and the tip of my nose stung, as if from the cold. I swallowed the sweet, nasty saliva and sat down on the grass.

— Wait! - The man suddenly rose nimbly and gave me his hand, smiling with his mouth glistening with oil. - I'm sorry.

I'll walk you out. I have absolutely nothing to do until the concert. My name is Nathan, and I'm completely harmless.

We walked for another two hours, drank iced tea, then sambuca in a pub, then, by six o'clock, we drove to the Barbican, where Nathan had a concert, but I was drunk on elderberries burning with blue fire, and Mozart's Twenty-fourth Concerto seemed to me too stormy and full of despair.

Then we went to Nathan's hotel, because it was too late and there was no point in coming to see me in Tiverton Street, Nathan said, and there in the hotel he lay down in a bathtub full of eucalyptus foam and told me to sit on the edge and stroke his legs, surprisingly slender for such a heavy body, musical legs with little ripe heels.

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*The fools rush in where the angels fear to tread.*

... - You are a classical copyist, a recluse's dream, Nathan told me. - Or no, you will marry a sculptor and he will sculpt your buttocks in white clay, you must marry a sculptor. Turn this way, " he said, "turn this way.

And I turned like a mill wheel, and the boiling river water ran down my back, driving the millstone, crushing the coarse, humble grain into dust.

— This city of yours is like Mahler's orchestra: it's unusually big, with the trumpets in the back shining in a golden chain," he said, leading me to a window overlooking the rooftops of Sloane Street, "you can't live here, you can't live here.

— London is a hollow cry. A musician should live in a small patriarchal town where every boulogne knows him and the milk is on credit," he said, taking out the



bottles of cognac from the mini-bar and arranging them on the podium like chess pieces.

— There's nothing to turn your nose up at," he mumbled, opening them one by one, "this is the best thing the world has to offer you.

The strange thing is that I remember every word he said, and I hardly remember what he did to me. It was as if everything had been covered in a hazy, birdlike film from the moment we had been in the state-owned bed - and we had been there almost immediately, after Nathan had washed me with a hard washcloth and placed me in front of him in the brightly lit bathroom.

My legs were spreading in the settling foam, my head was spinning, and I was afraid of one thing: slipping and falling headfirst like Lupe Velez in the Warhol movie.

— You, Alexandra, are like the Welsh weather," he said, "a fog that drifts over a red strip of dunes with a black-and-white lighthouse at the end. Your men will beat you with a rawhide whip, and rightly so. Otherwise, your lighthouse is impossible to reach: it looms but does not show, teases but does not give.

Wow, I can't *get it*. Goddamn Na-tan music puppet.

I wish I had dreamt of a blue three-eyed Yamantaka in a crown of skulls, at least that one was real.

## **LETTER FROM DAFFYDD MONMOUTH. 2006**

... I don't know what you intend to do, Sasha, but whatever it is, you can't close the hotel!

Think of the fact that this house is all that's left of your parents, and you'll have to sell it, and without guests you can't support the Maples or yourself, sad as it is. When Mr. Sonley died, you instantly called off our engagement, made a black dress, and wore it all through the autumn, and wanted to keep it on for the rest of the year.

The ancients wore mourning not to show their grief, but out of fear: they were afraid that the deceased would recognize and persecute them in ordinary clothes.

If I were Waldo Sonley, I'd come from the other side of the world and give you a good beating for what you did to his wife and daughter.

If we'd gotten married back in ninety-seven, you wouldn't have this whole Alexandrina thing in your life, you'd be living in the privacy of Monmouth House, letting your stepmother deal with her offspring.

You write that you are tired, that you cannot play the role of the innkeeper in Goldoni's play and that you would prefer *love for three oranges*, or something like that. Do you realize that in the eyes of the people around you you look more like *La dovva serpevtež*? You are not loved, but you prefer to remain ignorant, and ignorance is expensive.

When I was teaching junior school, back in good old Heverstock, I had a strange girl in my class who, to put it mildly, no one was particularly fond of. I think her name was Agatha. She had fat legs, a floppy body and something wrong with her face - kids don't forgive that - so she was, at best, ignored.

On Valentine's Day, when everyone was displaying their painted shoeboxes on the windowsill, she trustingly put hers in, and I promised myself I would put something in it, but I forgot. At home I remembered when I saw the same box displayed by the maid, and I blamed myself all evening, imagining the poor child's disappointment.

The next day Agatha's shoe-box contained a whole pile of cards with vignettes, and even a green teddy-bear. When I saw this, I admitted that I didn't understand anything about these children, repented, and for a whole week I let them down all the tricks and pranks as complacently as ever.

I would have thought so until now, if at the end of February I had not seen a beige bear in a store on Albert Terrace, my curiosity prompted me to ask which boy had recently bought the green one, I was told that a girl had bought it, and also that she had bought a pile of postcards and signed them all right there *i n t h e* store, on the counter. She was in a hurry.

Guess what I was thinking when I bought the rest of the bear.

The things you told me back in London that I had promised never to remember - and now I did. About how you forged birthday invitations to avoid upsetting your mother, and came home exhausted, sitting in the woods or on the beach in a beach cabana, talking about your social successes. And also: how you sent yourself postcards with views, supposedly from a traveling friend, and showed your mother how you got rid of the envelope with the treacherous stamp of the local post office. You think she didn't know about it? You still think no one knows about you.

By the way, the beige bear still lives with me, but not in memory of the girl Agatha - or maybe not Agatha at all, God knows, it's been so many years.

... One more thing: please, don't go on about Branagh Saunders. I wanted to tell you before, but I assumed - not without reason - that you would take it as jealous grouchiness. Don't mess with him, dear Sasha. He's just a boy, a curly-haired Anglo-Saxon with straw in his hair. You know what they say about you two. *Older Sonley doesn't like Saunders too much, but she can't manage the hotel on her own. Young Saunders doesn't like Alix too much, but he's as poor as a mouse in a vicar's house and would lie down with a shoe-brush if it would do any good.* Forgive me for that beer-scented quote and for not stating it. I know you don't care, but I couldn't help myself. I'm sorry. This guy was good for your little sister, and-if you didn't kill her, send him to her, wherever she is now.

M.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1996

*There is a love herb Crow, which grows in the hog lands, its color is white, its root is red. It is good for wives and maidens - they will begin to grieve for that man. A man needs to know a lot.*

Deffydd Seamus Monmouth owned his parents' house and the meadow behind the house, two hundred yards of unimproved land on the east side of the highway that had been purchased from Waversie in the old days.

These Waverseys were not good at watching their gates and not at all at watching their flock, their purple-ribbed sheep occasionally straying from the pasture to the road and standing along the side of the road. You could tell by the angry honking of cars stuck near the turnoff to Lly-gein, sometimes drivers would get out of their cars, shouting and waving their arms, trying to frighten the placid animals stomping in the warm dust. The sheep were the cause of young Monmouth's quarrel with his neighbors: he thought it was up to the owners of the flock to drive the sheep off the road, while the Waversi argued that it was up to the owner of the meadow.

In selling the land after the war - *in the days of the peppered wind*, as old Monmouth used to say - the Waversys had bargained for the right to graze sheep there, and they knew that Deffydd's grandfather had only needed the meadow to separate the estate from the road. The deed was silent, of course, and Daffydd could have forbidden his neighbors to graze sheep in his ferns at any moment, or even wire the meadow and let the dogs in, especially since he had two shaggy chestnut briards living in the house, dumb with idleness. But Deffydd didn't, and Sasha liked it.

She also liked his face, soft as putty-it seemed that if she touched his cheek, her fingers would sink into it as far as the

of the nail beds. When she did have to touch it, though, Daffydd's face felt like a reed sultan-no, more like glove suede, thin and slightly fleecy.

Sasha, unlike many, was not annoyed by his schoolboy, touchingly articulate speech - *violets, you see, no doubt, like shade*, he said as he showed the guests his flowerbed - nor by his dull elegance, nor by his love of Elizabethan poets. She liked the teacher's *self-presentation*, as Mrs. Vaversey used to say, and if he had taken to signing the class journal "D.S. Monmouth, Esquire," for example, Sasha would not have laughed: yes, he was different, and yes, she was going to marry him.

The Monmouth house was perched on a bluff between two groves of fir trees, separated from the land by a wire fence, its sash windows to the north looking out over the bay and the south over Bird Hollow. On the terrace were large stone urns from which barberry bushes withered in the sea breeze, and the door sign, once gilded, retained the house's former name: Suffolk Woods.

Alexandra did not come here often; the house seemed empty, despite the tapestries and worn carpets, and she was deterred by the narrow stone corridor that led t h r o u g h the house from the kitchen to the terrace. It seemed to her to be one of those secret castle passages she had seen in Llansteffan, and as out of place in the Monmouth house as, say, red deer's milk and calganum stalks in the school canteen.

It was just as out of place in the gilded dueling pistol that hung over the dresser in the library, where the teacher usually slept in winter to avoid heating the bulky stove in her aunt's cold bedroom. Daffydd's ancestors had been teachers and farmers, none of whom would have thought of challenging someone to a duel, but Daffydd claimed it was a fatal item and kept it ready, cleaned and loaded.

Sasha knew what was said about Deffydd at school, most often from her sister, who had to say *yes, teacher*, and *no, teacher* in class, though when she met him in the Maples' living room, Drina would sit on the arm of his chair and wind her finger through his long, ash-colored hair.

The students called Deffydd the Mammoth. And *Black Worcester*, for his love of the sauce he loudly demanded in the cafeteria for every dish, even oatmeal. Hot oatmeal was served at Wishgard School from morning to night, and Sasha's cheekbones ached at the sight of the unleavened, steaming porridge simmering in the copper cauldron.

When Deffydd's aunt died, leaving him Monmouth House and its grounds, his life changed. For a start, he hired a servant, the elderly widow Helen Bowe, and made it a habit to host Fridays with a splendor not seen in Wishgard. The table was always the same: kidney pudding, sherry and lemon soufflé from Triton and Cucumber, but the napkins were linen and the silver was perfectly cleaned.

Having enjoyed his lunches to the fullest, the teacher decided to change his life in an extreme way: in ninety-five he started commenting on Dante, in ninety-six he bought a ring and asked Sasha to marry him, and in ninety-seven he bought an open-top car with gray lacquered leather seats.

## 1998

*There is a sea-grass, small in itself, dark in leaf, and raven-colored, as soon as it blooms - pods, a kind of good. Put it on a person's head and he sleeps for three days without sleep. Put it against water and the water will open. And the root is like a man.*

Drina turned her back to Sasha, each time, night after night, clasped her eyes shut and breathed evenly. Just like that boy--

Petronius's chick, pretending to sleep, but firmly believing in the morning everything he had been promised - a pair of pigeons, a Macedonian horse - and demanding payment without hesitation.

The dark flesh of the night gradually became electric, the tense humming increased, and then, after waiting for the right time, Junior turned to her sister without opening her eyes. She knew that from that moment on no words should be spoken, for if they could neither see each other's faces nor hear each other's voices, how could they guess what was really going on?

If Sasha had been asked what she had been thinking when she first reached out to her sister, curled up on the edge of the bed in the style of a wintering grass frog, she would have said: ice cream, I was thinking about ice cream. A cool, slightly puffy, melted belly, and above it a fresh cream ball with a rough berry. Sasha stroked the berry, feeling the attraction and disgust mingling in her throat.

The astringent chill accumulated on her tongue, and Junior's clock ticked loudly and tirelessly inside her body-the little body was stuffed with minutes like poppy seeds in a poppy head, the minutes were tight and strong, tighter and longer than Sasha's. For a moment she wanted to clutch her sister's throat with her hands to stop her clock, but then Junior hummed in her sleep and turned on her other side, revealing her mosquito-ridden back.

*Sasha remembered-if with a bold hand I stroke the boy and he doesn't feel it, I'll give him two of my best fighting cocks!* And she smiled in the darkness. She knew Junior was waiting for that touch, crawling under the covers in the room where her mother and stepfather had woken up so many times until they disappeared, shadows like the ones her sister had shown in the Chinese theater made of shoe cartons. But if asked, she would probably say: I'm not waiting at all, I just have nowhere to go.

Sasha also knew that Junior wouldn't say a word in the morning. She wouldn't show it, as if she had danced in the heather the night

before.



The dragonfly dances, the music, and the faces of the transparent hosts.

Too much thirst makes a person helpless," Sasha wrote in her diary the next morning when she woke up and saw no one around. She thought for a moment that she had been dreaming, and she was glad.

I must have been helpless, that's what - like the old rhetorician Eumolpus of *Satiricov Liŕri*, who'd been up to no good in a friendly house. No, I'm no match for him. His mouth was drying up with an agonizing desire, and I had a dreary, untalented thirst for touch, that's all. It's somewhere on the border between longing and despair. Well, let's say I'm not on this case, then what is it?

I am not made to make love to a man, just as sea water is not made to look through, she wrote a little later. You open your eyes in the greenish murk and marvel at what you see, and rejoice at the glistening bubbles before your face and the satin shells at the bottom, but when you surface, you sit on the shore for a long time, pitying your sea-ravaged eyes, blinking painfully, rubbing your inflamed eyelids, and weeping with salt and frustration.

I'm also not cut out to make love to a woman.

But making love to a woman makes me feel a little better.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

I dreamt about the ibis again today!

The ibis' stride, it is said, was the measure of length in the construction of temples - and the ibis didn't know, walking along the wet coastal strip, searching the sand for a scaly sheen, poor, poor black-headed ibis - the god of wisdom, the *one* who did not

who can swim, lord of words, incapable of human speech.

I have baroque, elaborate dreams in the winter and ibises in the summer.

Even in summer I dream unbearable things: as if from the sun-baked sun you come into the blue mottled cold of your pupil and get covered with gooseflesh, or as if you are standing in a cold auditorium at a white board, rubbing a white crayon - whether written or oral, there is no answer, you can't see white on white and you have no strength.

no more strength to right this blade on the raw belt of pity, getting rid of superfluous words, while they char, beating against the corners, your words blindly spun, the sluggish muscle of syntax, the battering of ribs, the hooting, the babbling.

here's my father, the one I never dream about-not in winter, not in summer-I dream about the town where he died and I've never been, the little Irish town with the word *back* inside the name when he died, I was handed a letter that he didn't have time to write.

send

By that time he was no longer out of the house and gave his letters to the milkman, who brought cream and milk, or to the baker, who left bread in the hallway

when he was found five days later, there were three cartons of milk on the porch, only three because two days had been holidays and the milk boy hadn't come, and the baker's old man, seeing that the door was locked, just turned back and rode his bicycle along the icy street, shivering and pulling his hat over his eyes and his collar over his chin.

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*I don't ask much of you, Lou, but there's something you must do if anything should happen to me: you must come here and take possession of the inheritance, yes-yes, the house and the*

*shop, however little it may concern you-*

*the thought of the matter being abandoned vexes me terribly, promise me this, forget all that pains you, for it is said of the vindictive: they make their heart like a furnace, their baker sleeps all night, and in the morning it burns like a blazing fire, think of it, louellyn stonebury.*

when I was eight years old, I convinced myself that I was a changeling, that I was found in the woods or on a hilltop, it was obvious that I couldn't have been born to *those two*, I told the school about it, but everyone laughed at me, and the teacher wrote a note to my father, and my father laughed too, and then he slapped me in the face for some reason.

he called me Luellin, after the dead man lying in a patterned coffin in backwoods Llanrust, where he and his mother spent one Honey Saturday crumbling plum pudding in a state-owned bed, he could have called me Rodri or Mervyn, but he chose the name of a good-natured cuckold who hung his partner on a nearby moor but forgave his worthless wife, if *he* chose my name, of course, because  
it's confirmed-  
I still haven't gotten

\*\*\*

I can see him sitting in his cluttered Baxford house, where I have never been, writing me this penultimate December letter, the bulky radiator hissing and clicking, the icy sheets on a string tapping in the wind outside the window, stacks of bills for drapes and tweeds, gabardine and bouclé, letters from suppliers, dried flowers like broomsticks, a waxed candlestick on lion's feet - since my father had been alone, all the candlesticks in the house had looked a bit odd.

he writes to me on Sundays when his store is closed, and at the end of each letter he puts his disheveled coupe-

and this letter came on Thursday, and it was about an oatmeal Christmas scone with a hole in the middle that a neighbor had brought him, and a holly branch that he had hung over the door himself

I immediately pictured the handful of people at the St. Paul's, gathering in the dark for morning service, all those dressed-up Irish old women with their thick silver-foil candles, the dark moss and lichen of their uncovered hair, the hoarfrost on the stonework of the church, the close rows of masonry slabs with half-erased names, and decided to read the letter to the end.

*My dear son, the letter went on to say, a Chinese book says that sheep in the north grow out of the ground, the lambs sprout like grass, and their umbilical cord goes deep into the ground, and you cannot cut it, you can only make it break by scaring the lamb with a loud cry so that it runs away, such a lamb will not return to the flock, but will graze far away until it grows up.*

*I frightened you with a loud scream and tore your umbilical cord, and for twenty-eight years now you have been grazing on the sidelines, not wanting to recognize me as a relative - isn't it time you grew up?*

\*\*\*

I failed as a writer, failed as a teacher, failed as a mental patient, though Dr. Mayer tried hard.

*I have brought my iron to the cold forge, says a father to his son in an old novel, wishing to show that he is disappointed in his heir, but my father did not need metaphors, he did not speak to me at all.*

I mean, the last time he spoke to me was in December seventy-nine, in his new apartment, between the kitchen

He talked to me and sent me home on the last frozen bus, in which I was alone, and the driver turned off the heating: probably angry that he had to work on a holiday.

All day long I think about the iron crizas from the excavations of Dur-Sharrukin: the Assyrians kept them in their treasuries as if they were gold bars or pearls, and they were so convincing that after three thousand years they found a place in the Louvre, and *no one doubts* them, but everyone doubts me, even those whom I myself doubt.

vain iron on a cold anvil, guilty meh-ha, Zapyantsov's agonizing hammer-I drink too much and don't read enough, maybe that's itz

I used to read a book a day, sometimes even two, I read everything - even the obnoxious Paracelsus, eventually I stopped distinguishing sugar tongs from Kant's stocking remover and the elementary body from the sideral body, got angry and stopped reading altogether.

## **SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008**

*We'll sit with you and the  
wind on this rock of death.*

June twenty-eighth.

It was a good thing to leave the house to go down to the sea in the belief of having tea on the way, to walk across the slippery terrace in the night rain, dimming the lights as I went, and to remember that there was nowhere to drink tea, certainly nowhere. The carved red doors of the tearoom are closed to me, though I have done nothing wrong to Gweniver Mount-Levy, and on Harbor Road they pour me iced tea, though I have done nothing wrong to Master Leif.

Nor, for that matter, does anyone else in this town.

To go out and watch the cold blue in the sky, the small lemon sun sprouting out of the hills a little at a time, and the juniper branches nailed with heavy dew glistening here and there like silver spoons forgotten in the garden after a party.

To get to the Old Port, to the fence of the marina, to the place where the fog clogs my ears and mouth and the silence becomes viscous. The sound of footsteps also becomes viscous - where the foot hits the mud, and where it hits the pebbles - distinct and crisp.

Climb Abbey Rock, sit on the cold black cottonwood, and remember what I'd been thinking that unbearable January Sunday: from here, Junior's body would fly down a few dozen meters until it hit that ledge over there, I thought. Then - if she didn't get caught in a thorny shrub - she would fall right between the oil-colored rocks jutting high out of the water. They look like the backs of harbor seals, glistening in the sun.

My sister would faint from fear before she hit the boiling black water of the surf, and she would not hear the splash, would not hear the voices of the soaring birds, would not hear anything. That's what I thought at the time, even though I had no intention of throwing her off the cliff. It's just that when you think of someone's imminent death, the rage passes more quickly.

\*\*\*

*There ovce was a Looshvger vamed  
Stephev Whose ear was most odd avd  
shvevev.*

First of July. Luellin Elderberry.

- Can I call you Lou," I wrote in my notebook when I saw his name in the guest book, "because the name Luellin reminds me of a sad story.

— That's how—" He put down his pen and looked up at me, one eye blue-gray, like wet moss in the sun, the other green, like a speck of oxidized copper. - I'll pay cash, Miss Sonley.

I almost dropped my keys when I saw his face, but I kept my head down and counted the money he'd put on the counter—two twenty-pound bills, a shabby five, and a handful of silver change.

He smelled strongly of beer and swamp, that is, of beer from his mouth and swamp from his clothes. He must have been walking through the Westwoods, where the marsh lights come to life in a summer rainstorm. What a rare surname *Elderberry is*, elderberry, the Greek puffin, the *Fehsh* rune - tea from its flowers purifies the blood and a decoction of its bark soothes the heart.

— Why, this guy Luellin, has he done anything?" He put his wet white coat on the arm of the chair and sat down, looking at me with his different eyes, which from a distance seemed to squint a little.

— No, it's nothing like that," I wrote, "just an old Welsh story. Two laborers from Neath, Llewellyn and Rhys, were returning from an inn and heard music from the heart of the hill. Rhys danced merrily and soon disappeared, and Luellin was accused of his murder and imprisoned," I wrote quickly, and so sprawlingly that the last two words were on another page.

— Luellin to jail? What was that for?" He kept looking at my face, not at my notebook, as all the others do now. - You've got a lot of order in South Wales. You have dances, you have funerals, you have girls who don't speak, though they seem to have their tongues in place and probably have a good head for it.

— You didn't finish," I wrote, stepped out from behind the counter, handed him the keys, and continued on page two: "The men from the village went to the hill, heard the harp, and saw the elves dancing. They caught Reece by the sleeve, pulled him out of the circle, and took him home. True, he died almost immediately. I put--



love the broken glass, it was my last garden lamp. Do you mind?

— It's not a fun story," he rose from his chair, seeming taller than he had when I'd opened the door for him. Now he was looking straight at my mouth, and I tightened my lips involuntarily.

— I know a better story," he said, pausing in the doorway, "about Luellin the Great marrying a hunchback princess, after which the lords had their land taken away and the Welsh language outlawed. What time do you serve breakfast, Miss Sonley?

— Eight o'clock," I wrote and showed him my paper. - Eight o'clock, not a minute later.

\*\*\*

*Shee, that pivches are going to  
wevches If they gsh£ vot cLeave their  
£evches.*

When Junior fell in love with Saunders Branagh, she stopped talking to me altogether. I didn't know anything for a long time-the spring had been endless that year, the tight machinery of the hotel season still hadn't kicked in, and there was a greenish, damp fungus in the bedrooms that I'd been suffering with for three weeks.

Prue told me about the Verona lovers when *she* made them *sit* in the backyard - Sparrow uses our old wicket because he's always in a hurry. I remember that the place they chose surprised me almost more than the news itself. As soon as the snow melted and the red mud dried, poor Wishgardian couples went ashore, climbed into rickety boats or lay in the dunes on the cold sand. A young hustler named Saunders Branagh should have had his father's car, or a tent, or at least a hunting lodge in the Westwood forest.

— They put your father's old jacket on the grass," Prue said, "They pulled it from the greenhouse in a hurry, so they grabbed what they could.

*Haste is its own hindrance*, a schoolmaster, who was no longer my fiancé, would have said. In February of ninety-ninety-nine I sent him a seagull ring, and in return I received a hot-glossed du-el weapon, bought from a Pembroke antiquarian. I don't know what he meant by that. Everything Monmouth's teacher does feels like a tragic prop, and everything I do feels like a Ben Jonson-*esque* decorative-antique play.

The elderberry bushes my mother planted in the early eighties never grew into a decent hedge, probably because the soil behind the house was too poor. The previous owner

"Maples" was a gloomy, hard-drinking postmaster who had been promoted to letter carrier - it seems he burned letters in the back yard that he was too lazy to deliver. When he died, the Maples were sold and the letters came to old Ersley's apothecary, who simply put them in a drawer next to the weights and waxed paper for the pounds.

Saunders Branagh had been cuddling with my sister in my elderberry tree since early April, and I'd wondered at her slipping gaze and the bruises that looked like elven pinches, and I couldn't even approach her now, let alone touch her. It didn't bother me too much—we didn't talk much by then, and we didn't stay in the same room very long, so if the fae pinched her for being careless, I didn't see it, and I didn't want to.

I don't know what reason my sister had for being angry, but mine was as clear as summer. There was a king in the north, Havgan Clear as Summer, who was at war with a king named Arwan Silver Tongue. Oh, don't mention the tongue. When I think of Edna A.'s tongue, I feel like I have a juniper lollipop stuck in my mouth.

If anyone told me now that I should kiss her, I would cover my face with my hands and sway silently, like that Algerian boy who sits with his hat in the middle of Eiremh Park-I always give him a couple of coins, though he probably has more money than Prue and me put together.

And there was a time when I kissed her wherever I could get to, the ninety-eighth year, what can you take away from it. The love-oil was coming out of my ears, and I didn't know what to do about it; I wanted to go to the seashore, stand on the brick harbor wall like the murderous Telamon on his Aegina causeway, and scream until I was hoarse. My nerves had a life of their own, a kind of *insect* life, poking through my skin like the tendrils of a hungry mantis, my head a buzzing bumblebee electricity.

Sometimes I felt like a snail crawling along the window pane, and there, on the other side, they were looking at me and poking their fingers into my slimy abdomen; sometimes I felt like I was covered with sticky herring scales, sometimes with a crust, under which the suk-rovitsa was accumulating. It was strange that no one could see it, neither the rare netizens nor the guests.

When Junior turned to face me on her parents' bed, I was surprised - she could have pretended to be asleep. Or open her eyes and mouth wide and scream. Or just get up and leave. Or mumble something rude through her sleep. Or silently take my hand off her breast. There were many things Junior could have done, but why did she turn to face me? Maybe she felt like a snail on the window too.

but I won't recognize it anymore.

— Drina, are you having an affair," I asked her that evening as she walked through the dining room, unwinding the scarf her mother had left her, too long and covered with some kind of pollen.

— I have a man, a real man, and I wish you the same," she said in a steady voice and went into her room. The voice of Fred Durst from Limp Bizkit rang out from behind the door, which meant that I had no idea what to do.

When I realized that there would be no help at home today, I immediately felt like a soggy breadcrumb, took my cup and went out into the garden.

Nine years have passed, and I remember the color of the sky then, the color of the linen scarf and the words of the song coming from behind the locked door:

*I had to be on my guard,  
Otherwise you'd have stuck a knife in my back.*

## **HEDDA. SECOND LETTER**

*Hochin, May, 1999*

Hello, my girls, I am writing to you on the terrace of the workshop on Gangadeswarar Street, sheltered under a wicker roof in the shade. It is so hot here that my sweat-damp clothes do not have time to dry - I didn't think that could happen.

Last year, when we lived in Kumarakom, I kept to my English dresses. Now we have moved to this dreadful Hochin, and I wear saris, as they are more spacious and do not have to be washed so often.

The whole town stinks of the oil in which sweets are fried and wrapped in brown leaves. It would seem dirty and wild to you, as it did to me at first. You have probably already picked apples and made jam, but here instead they pickle some pods and eat them for a year. Today the feast has begun-one of those endless feasts I haven't quite got to grips with-the locals are slaughtering chickens and goats and decorating with flowers the image of a fat, shabby goddess, with drums thundering and trumpets howling so loudly that I can't understand it yet.

I don't even have to cover my ears. I'll never understand anything about this country.

The walls of Mr. Appas's house are upholstered in faux bar-

hut, with two gilded plaster dogs sticking out of the door - a terrible tastelessness, our Alexandra would say.

I can't get used to it, like the toilet in the courtyard - four earthen walls, very low, you can't see behind them unless you squat down. I still get a shiver when I see women washing their children under the running water from the fountain, right on the curb.

My bathroom, too, was just an empty room with a hole in the floor, but after Gauri was born, Mr. Appas had to get an earthenware basin and a proper English table for changing the baby. Although, to my horror and shame, he doesn't consider his daughter a baby. But, strangely enough, *Masi* Kurrat has grown fond of her, walks with her and even calls her Devika, the little goddess.

Mr. Appas's uncle has been commissioned to restore screens for a rich collector, and I have to sit on them from morning till dusk. I have Curratt and an old relative who sways all day long and sings her dreary songs, with a ruby in her nostril and eyes like a turtle's.

The screens are as tall as palace doors, so we work on the terrace, we can't get them inside, and at night we have to cover them with plastic sheeting in case it rains. But the rain keeps coming and coming.

But now I know a whole bunch of secrets, I could work at the Royal Museum if I came home, but I don't think I could.

The embossed leather that covers the screens is called *gold* leather, but it is a lie, like so much else in this country: they take ordinary cowhide, emboss the ornament with a wooden plate and paint it through sheets of silver leaf. My grandmother in St. Davids had a whole box of toys made of such silver, and it cost nothing.

A lot of things are like that here: it looks luxurious, but if you scrape it with a knife - clay, plaster, stain and pressed sawdust.

Rajiv Appas was not a good husband to me, but neither was your father, Alexandra, you can take my word for it. Don't think I regret what I did. The old life seems to me a succession of hazy days, without light or joy, a succession of deaths - both my husbands and parents are buried in Wales, even my aunt, who seemed so healthy, the greatest and most glorious of the family, is dead.

Alix, darling, I know you read these letters, so I appeal to you directly to make my daughter answer me at least briefly, at least with a postcard.

She feels betrayed, but my act was not a betrayal.

I was sure I'd take her in as soon as things got better.

And it just keeps getting worse and worse.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

I could not understand why my father preferred a stuffy room with wisps of dust in the corners to our spacious house, where dried molasses was always smelling, and where there were rows of glass jars of apple jam and currant wine on the pantry shelves.

my mother did not put away the supplies in the cellar as the neighbors did, she said that the sight of food, prepared in detail for the winter, soothed her heart as much as the crackling of a goatherd or the sight of a snow-covered rowan branch

when my father left, it took me a long time to settle down, I wrote letters of complaint to him secretly from my mother for a couple of years, and finally, one day, having saved up a few pounds, I went to Chepstow, unknown, on a winter cold bus, I remember it was the twenty-fourth of December, it was snowing lightly, the bridge across the River Severn was completely iced over and the bus was a little skiddy.

I left early to be ready for Christmas dinner, and in my bag I had a present: a red knitted sweater in shurry paper, in a gilded cardboard box.

It took me a long time to find the inn where my father had rented his lodgings, the few passers-by were in a hurry to get home, and they pointed carelessly to the left, to the right, to the river, so that I did not get there until seven o'clock.

If anyone had to leave, it was me! Why don't you tell me the truth about my parents? I blurted out when I saw my father at the door of the attic room, a phrase I had thought of on the bus, my father looked at me with his usual hesitation and stepped aside to let me in, I saw his feet and was surprised to see him wearing flip-flops, my mother would never have allowed that, flip-flops with bent toes.

you're your mother's child, you're a flighty fool with fantasies, he said, as if he were reading a book, and then he went to the far corner of the room, where he had a sort of kitchen, and began to make tea, while I unwrapped my ice-cold scarf, sat down on the bed and cried.

The amazing thing is that the man I wanted to leave more than anything else in the world-an arrogant forty-five-year-old man with a thin neck, that bony nose, that asthmatic voice, and that perpetual odor of stale drape fleece-this man took it easy and left *me*.

We had tea and a piece of cold cake, and then he walked me to the bus station-the last bus left at half-past ten-and he walked fast, head bowed low, and pulled me by the arm as if I would have resisted

He printed out his present at once, and now he was wearing a red knitted sweater-he was probably going to go to a party where he was expected and already anxious, and he was wearing a hooded jacket over the sweater, so I could hardly see his face.



I've only been to see him once since then, in eighty-nine, when I sold the house after my mother died-I brought a bare, embossed, gold-rimmed check and proudly placed it on the plastic table in my father's kitchen on Widger Road, a dazzling amount of money for those days, which for some reason I didn't want, but he took it and probably didn't flinch.

that day - winter and chilly again, funny even - I went up to the porch of his house and stood on the steps for a while, looking at the freshly painted pine door and my own name on the earthenware plaque.

I realized that I had come here to try again to get him to pay attention to me, only now I was twenty-one years old and had a much better chance of doing so

I'll hand him the money and say, "Papa, you want to open *your shop*, don't you? You want it to be like it *used to be*, so you can walk among the satin stacks, stroking them like blue-green, round-skinned heifers, admiring bone buttons on sheets of cardboard, pin up white labels, hire a ruddy assistant with round calves and chase her around, there's not much you can do in a plain, simple shop that smells of dusty linen and sawdust, that's what you wantz.

and he'll remember that I'm me and wonder how big I've gotten.

\*\*\*

The woman who let me into my father's house was full of sympathy, she offered me tea while she continued to deftly sort through a basket of spruce cones on the table.

I want to paint them gold and make a wreath for the front door and use the rest for firewood, she said.

he's got a terrible cold, she said, lying under a cotton blanket and won't talk to anyone, not even me!

when he's sick, he's unbearable, she said half an hour later, when I'd finished my tea, finished my breadcrumb and had two cigarettes.

I'm sorry, she said, as I put the check on the table next to a pile of sticky-smelling cones, said goodbye, and left. After a couple more years, he moved on, bought a clothier's shop. in an Irish port town and married some widow Simmons, he never visited me while I was in the hospital, never sent a lousy postcard or picture, all these years I had no idea what he looked like.

He doesn't know my address, I told myself, because I'd changed my apartment several times, and my last name after the accident in Swansea.

I didn't know his address either, though I could have found out by writing to the same old anders or former neighbors, instead I tore off his lean face in all the pictures - carefully bent and torn off along the fold line

so it's been fourteen and a half years

in two thousand three, I got my first letter from him.

\*\*\*

when I leave home for a night, I go out to get a toothbrush, soap, and all sorts of little things, I purposely take nothing with me, I even buy a shirt in the morning, and I feel like a real traveler, even if I've gone no farther than the next county.

it's also because I have to *buy a ticket* wherever I go, whether it's to Argyll or Nottingham - if I get behind the wheel I'll be put back in jail, I'm a prisoner of burnt bus seats, a drinker of boiled water, a careless electronic rider, a spinner of ghost steering wheels, a pedal-pusher of pretend pedals.

In autumn on the seashore it gets dark quickly, as soon as the sun disappears in the water, everything around immediately becomes one color-

It is the color of wet slate or something, and the grass, and the sand, and the living creatures, and the stray cats, and if it rains, the heavens merge with the earth, only the whitewashed half-timbered facades emerge from the darkness and the lanterns faintly glow in the fog, like the gas lamps on Pall Mall in William Murdoch's time.

My shoes were full of water, but my cloak, which I had put on inside out at the station, with the cloth side up, was too long and looked like a Gothic casulla without crosses, but it could turn into a blue raincoat, exactly like that of the god Indra.

*terre terre each cieL j'ai de maL dsh pays?* - Is it sandrar, ver-len, or am I just drunk?

the gates of the *stone* maples were locked and there were no stones or maples around, only burnt blackberry bushes on a wall made of uneven pieces of sandstone, Roman masonry, I ran my hand over the wet stone: no fire could harm such a house, strong as a damask gate.

a copper plaque was stamped on a brass plate, below which hung a larger one made of white tin: Be *careful*, there are *vicious dogs in the yard*.

on the bottom plaque, someone has written in small red floro: ... *and vicious snakes*

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I rejoiced at the antics of the unknown barbarian, the bold lettering in red and white reminded me of another fresco depicting a geographical map I had seen in the Palazzo Pitti when I still allowed myself to travel to Florence.

qui ci sono del *monstri*, this *is where the monsters live*, the artist wrote this in that corner of the map that he just didn't know what to say - artists often do that

where the wicked dogs sit silently on the magic chain of the glaip-nirz it was quite silent behind the wall, I could hear the drops of rain

I thought it was a greenhouse where the young witch probably grows her belladonna, though why youngz I didn't even ask the clothier how old the lady of the house was, what was her namez.

SONLY'S SONLY'S YARD, oh no, God, not sleepy.

For a moment I wished someone huge would come here, put down the stone wall with the brass plaque and carry it away like cricket goals from a school field

In the meantime, the rain intensified, the drops turned into jets, and I was soaked from head to toe in no time, the white button was pressed with a hoarse thud, like the last key of a piano, but the bell did not ring, I tapped my knuckles on the doorjamb - but who would hear it in such rainz I stomped to the gate, rang the bell again, tapped my heel on the bottom board of the gate, and finally took a handful of gravel from the path and threw it over the wall-something glassy rang, shattered, a door slammed-or a windowz-and there were rapid footsteps on the wet gravel.

Well, whatever happens.

I was determined to spend the night in the burnt *maples*, boarding-house or no boarding-house, I wanted a bed and breakfast, and I was willing to part with fifty pounds, though it was a hell of a lot of money, four quiet evenings, if you count on the Havana Club Añejo.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1998

*There is a herb called izmodnik, which grows near polniki or old boundaries, and on this herb the mother herself goes out. The same herb is good for a man who is fed, let him drink it with warm honey, and he will bear it up and down.*

- The queen bees are convinced queens, they don't become worker bees even if you starve them," said Junior in early June, "because they are bigger and prettier.

Your mother didn't stay here long either, Sasha thought, now she is sitting on the white sand with a scarlet pomegranate in her hand or walking around in a silk sari buying goodies.

Sasha didn't tell her sister about the letter from India, it was unnecessary.

That afternoon, when she went to Ersley's druggist for the mail, she put the thin blue envelope in her pocket, separated it from the bills, and then-bought herself a couple of briquettes of vanilla ice cream-sitting on a bench behind the Copper Anchor, read the letter and slowly tore it into pieces, leaving them in the garbage can with the sticky ice cream wrappers.

- This woman will not burn my wasps in my kitchen," Sasha thought in December, when the hotel cards ordered by her stepmother arrived, and now, not even six months later, everything had turned out the way she wanted.

Mr. Appas wanted to own the Maples, but all he got was Hedda with an Indian boy in her belly.

Stepmother Hedda wanted to be the owner of the Maples, but all she got was a sari, hot sand and an Indian boy in her belly.

Master Daffydd wanted to be master of the Maples.... No, Daffydd wanted to be Sasha's master, but he got a seagull's gold ring that Sasha had sent Sasha a while ago by registered letter, and on the back of *the* envelope she *had* written: *return to Monmouth House, thank you in advance.*

Junior wanted to be mistress of the Maples... no, Junior wanted to be left alone. She also wanted to get a passport and go to Lake Wembanad.

- Mommy doesn't write," said Junior instructively, "because nothing good is happening there yet. And at all

not because she's forgotten me. She'll have to get well enough to call me to her, and I'll draw a red dot on her forehead and get on a plane, and you'll stay here alone with your dusty rags and all the Irish salesmen will be yours!

Six months later a second letter came from Hedda. Sasha did not tear it up, just put it in her father's file drawer and covered it with sawdust.

## 1985

*There is a herb called zemlenitsa. It is good to parboil herbs for those who have a toothache, and parboil them with currant leaves, and put the root on the tooth for those who have a toothache.*

When my mother turned thirty-five, Sasha found a rare silvery fern in the woods and gave it to her in a neatly glued adobe pot from the garden. A week later she found her gift at the very gate of the boarding house, in a new thicket, and then it disappeared from sight, as if it had gone underground.

- Things should not be repaired," explained her mother to a frustrated Sasha, "broken or broken, they bring us to disintegration, they live on the very edge of chaos, even if they pretend to be whole.

Sometimes her mother's explanations passed Sasha by, not because she was inattentive, but because at some point she felt as if her ears were blocked. That's what happens when you turn off the headlights in a night forest: the voice of your companion becomes dense and a thick, leafy silence descends on you, not making you aware of yourself, but making you stare intensely into the darkness.

One fall day, in the year eighty-three, Sasha was driving with her father through Westwood late at night, and the car stood in the middle of the woods, something wrong with the electricity. Her father got out, picked up

Sasha curled up in the back seat, both hands clutching the backrest of the driver's seat - she felt uncomfortable all of a sudden.

At first she heard the resilient silence of the forest through the scotch-taped rear window, then, as the rain fell, she thought the sparse black trunks of elm trees began to shift gently behind her. They converged quietly and inexorably, like cunning Scotsmen in a Burnham forest, turning the wide, rutted roadway into a tunnel of a collapsed mine, with splinters of silver ore glinting here and there.

Sasha realized that the only thing separating her from the darkness was her father's bowed face with wet hair sticking to his forehead, his nimble fingers, and the faint bluish light of the flashlight, but it was enough to make her shiver. It was the same way her father's deft and impassive hands separated her from her mother on those days when her mother was upset, unable to speak, and there was a visceral, dangerous silence that seemed about to burst out through her dilated, darkened eyes-a shade called cobalt blue in the box of paints.

People get better when they wear out a little, like guns or saddles, Deirdre said, but Sasha didn't believe it - Mom wore out so fast and inexorably that it took everyone in the house's breath away.

Ever since Ferguson had prescribed her the pink pills, Mama had been experiencing new oddities, or should I say absurdities, just as she had at the Maples when the Sonleys first moved in. For the first six months, or more, there were oddities in the house, like mezzanines full of thick plush curtains, or a locked cupboard in the basement, which, when they opened it, had only a jar of sugared tart jelly and a sticker reading "1974" on the floor.

1989

*There is a puffball grass, which grows along the old boundaries of arable fields, its color is white and white in itself.*

Sasha had put on records only a few times in the last two years, and then she'd stopped altogether-as soon as the curly tenor's voice came on after the intro, the past would come at her with all four paws and a heavy, glassy-eyed head. Just like the suffocating bear-skin she had once crawled under when she was visiting Mrs. Thorne in Aberstwyth, crawled under and stood still, listening, feeling the power and strength of the beast still there.

Ever since her mother died, and she died in eighty-seven, in December, when Sasha was thirteen, the past had been like a broken clock without glass in which you could turn the hands by hand-and Sasha had been turning the hands, knowing that one day the spring would fail, straighten, and shoot out at her with all the force of the forcibly clenched time.

The thoughts were giving her a headache and her fingers were going numb.

A bent-iron arch with the word "GUEST" on it had fallen on my mother when she and my father had reinforced it over the gate the week before Christmas, trying to attract customers who were less and less likely to show up on the road each year.

The arch was left by the previous owners; Sasha found it herself in the garden under empty cardboard boxes, labeled by her mother's hand: *dishes, baby things, or miscellaneous.*

Together with her father, they took the sign out into the yard, Sasha sanded it to a dull sheen, and persuaded her father to wrap a garland of red bulbs bought for the hotel alley around the iron bars. The arch was huge and lush, and even her mother came from the kitchen to look at it, though she was having a hard time and was not talking to anyone.

My father took off his boots, careful not to step in the mud, stuck four thick nails in his mouth, and climbed the gate to reinforce the sign,



He was dragging a tangled tail of wires behind him and saying something angry, but you couldn't hear the words from below. Sasha and Mama stood watching him. It snowed, and the arch gradually turned red and white, like a winter branch full of berries.

My father was struggling on one leg, tucking the other amusingly like a heron, one of his thick wool socks had a hole in it, and my mother silently pointed to it with her hand.

We'll mend it, Sasha said cheerfully.

Oh, my God, my God, my God, my God, my God, my God, my God, my God, my God, said my father. Up there, he was electrocuted, just a little, just a little.

Oh, no, he said, he dropped the hammer, staggered, hit the end of the arch on one nail, the iron scraped against the iron, the sign crashed down with a rustling and clinking sound, Sasha managed to run away, and Mom fell on the sparse, muddy snow, which in that winter could not even cover the grass.

When Sasha looked at her mom, there wasn't much blood at all.

There were more red glass crumbs and black needles of artificial needles.

Mom's face is gone.

Instead of mom, someone else was looking at Sasha. It must have been death.

Death had a nasty, smooth face, and Sasha laughed into it.

## **TABITA. SECOND LETTER**

*2008. South Lambeth*

Aunt Jane, come quickly, I have so much to tell you.

I'll meet you at St. Pancras, and we'll go straight to that cafe with the Chinese screens and have tea and talk. His

His name is Luellin - I think it was a king - and he told me a lot of old stories.

Well, he didn't tell me, I read it in a book, but I took it from him! It was about the Battle of Chester and about Cadwallon Dolgoruky - Auntie, what they taught me at school, I can't imagine.

We English have no idea about a lot of things. It turns out that the Welsh were Christians and built monasteries when they were still praying to Odin in England, and they didn't speak English even under Henry the Eighth. Also, I didn't think Thomas Cromwell was such a scoundrel.

Luellin is away so often that I used to listen to the sounds on the stairs, and recognize his footsteps when he was still far downstairs, and even the jingling of his key, and the way he breathes heavily, he often has colds, almost every week, and then he locks himself in his apartment and drinks linden tea with honey, and Dominican rum - how can you swallow that stuff!

He's got a whole case of this rum in the kitchen, it's called Anyeh-o. Last week he left me his keys because he was waiting for the master - he has leaky pipes in his bathroom too! - but he had to leave right away, so I smelled this rum. Brrrrrr, men have no taste in beverages.

I ran down to the shop in Dulledge Street and bought him two bottles of fine Bordeaux, seven pounds a bottle, and a bar of bitter chocolate. Good wine needs no bush.

I left it all on the kitchen table, and tonight when I see him again, he'll probably treat me to this chocolate with no idea where it came from! Llewelyn is terribly unseasoned, I realized, even though I've only seen him eight times. Including four times on the stairs, a glimpse.

But today, on St. Patrick's Day, he would invite me to his house, and there was no way he wouldn't. I put a paper shamrock on his door, just above the doorknob, just in case.

I'm sure he thinks of me, but he thinks I'm too young, for he must be at least forty. That's only seven years less than Mr. R., and he's a real old man.

Yes, by the way, I was transferred to the Dictionary Department, so now I have my own desk with drawers and my own corner in the Archive Room, full of shelves, so no one can see me.

You can spend all day cutting out paper angels and writing Easter cards to spare.

Kisses to you and your  
uncle.

T.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*We are what we try to pretend to be. We  
have to be more careful.*

June thirtieth.

I read now in Defoe's: *Dr. Stephanus Chrysolitus has discovered that to prevent the plague, one should eat boiled and roasted raisins in the morning; he reports this for the public good.*

My mom must have read the same book, because As a child, I was fed raisins for general weakness, as the maid said. There was always a wooden bowl on the kitchen table with brown berries swollen with boiling water, which I used to use when I made clay dolls, always with brown eyes and shriveled, sweet mouths.

It is still strange to read the very books my mother used to read: the words and proverbs I heard as a child, the ones that seemed part of my mother's own language, are so different from my mother's own.

The lizards slip out of the dried, stained pages and announce themselves - here I am! She found me here! She loved me and wrote me down in a notebook! She sat in a wicker chair on the veranda and ran her thin, transparent nose over these lines!

God, I wish I could see her, just one more time. Thomas More in the red cover called out to me with *a siffogrand-* I had to *go back to* the house, and I had to *go back to* the house, and I had to *go back to* the house, and I had to *go back to* the house, and I had to *go back to* the house, and I had to *go back to* the house, and I had to *go back to* the house.

Nathaniel Gawthorne mumbled the familiar *perfection of killing, something my* father always shrugged when he heard it from my mother, complaining about the burnt crust of the pie Deirdre had left in the oven. It turned out to be a parable about a beautiful woman who had her birthmark removed from her face. She died because she was no longer herself: she couldn't recognize herself in the mirror and died of horror.

And mom died because an iron sign fell down.

And Daddy died because Hedda didn't love him. A lot of people die from that, like me. And Junior didn't die, though everyone buried her long ago. She just split in the middle, like a talking stone, Llech Lavar, trying to put a word in someone else's funeral eulogy.

Death is one of the things the world is built on, there is nothing inhuman about it. You don't have to be in the attic to understand that.

I am sitting in the attic because it is dry, it is warm, there is a wood beetle in the walls and the straw mat smells of crow's-foot grass, bougan grass and peregrine grass. I am sitting here because the house is noisy and the barn is damp after a long rain - it has been raining for four days, so loud that the narrow cloth flap of the awning on the veranda has torn off and hangs like the wing of a shot swallow.

Speaking of death. There was one more phrase of my mother's that I couldn't find in any book, I guess my mother thought of it herself.

*Queen Anne has passed away.*

\*\*\*

*Thy request is heavy, for  
who, defeated,  
want to remember his battles?*

When the inspector came down to breakfast he was wearing a cheap white shirt, freshly unpacked, which amused me—a fresh shirt always shows by the creases in the sleeves, and I found small carnations scattered in his room in the wastebasket. There was no luggage at Elderbury's; I went up to look when all the guests were at the table, which meant that he had come for a short stay and would not be staying overnight, and had bought the shirt at the supermarket at the station.

That evening, when I handed him the keys, I mistook him for a tourist who had overdone it at Leif's bar and had missed the ferry to Ireland. It happens, we once had students who had missed the ferry, and they had met Finn Everton and stayed another day, both of them funny math boys. I never thought Finn could turn someone on. I'm guessing there was a love potion involved, which any girl in Wishgard can whip up in half an hour.

I took Mr. Elderbury for a bored traveler, but this morning, when Prue dropped in for a cup of tea, I heard a strange thing: yesterday he was asking her at the bus station about the fire and about me. There was a discrepancy: the arson had happened only yesterday, and he had never seen me at all. So he came back from the bus station to look at me. In this weather.

— It's a cop," Prue said firmly, "don't even think about it. He was pretty drunk last night, but I can smell a cop a mile away, even if he's got gold glasses on his nose and a toothbrush sticking out of his coat pocket. It's about time you stopped talking, Alix! Now he's gonna have a hard time asking you.

— Why question mez," I wrote on my napkin and put three question marks.

— Well, of course," Prue faltered, "you had the gate burned down and the whole south wall burned down. And everybody knows who did it. And then, didn't you write to the police when the dogs were poisoned?

I shook my head. Why would I write a paper the local sergeant wouldn't lift a finger if it was about Sonley's family, or what was left of it.

The sergeant's name is Paul Dolphus, nineteen years ago he took me to the grove behind the school and I punched him in the nose, and fourteen years ago, in his father's billiard room, he called me a Russian brat, after which various unpleasant things happened to him that I had nothing to do with.

The Londoner has not come to look for the murderer of Hugin and Munin, I think he is interested in another grave, not the one under the yellowed boxwood bush, but the one in the blackberry bushes.

Well, good luck to you, Inspector Elderbury. It's a pity you have such smoky, gooseberry eyes; it's a pity to lead a man with such eyes by the nose, especially as the nose is just like the Dogmatia portrait, strong and arrogant.

But it can't be helped, I will have to confuse you as the non-existent Pitanians of Sparta confused Herodotus, and if it doesn't work, I will make you confuse yourself, and you will see real bones of flying snakes on the Red Sea.

\*\*\*

*And behold, the voice of trouble was heard in the cave from the multitude of demons.*

Branagh's blue-eyed Saunders came to fetch the keys, and I left him at the Maples for the master - for the few days I would have to spend in Henley.

I handed him the shendi in the kitchen, took the knife and was about to go into the garden to get some sedge, but he caught me by the arm and made me sit down at the table.

— Where are you going, Alixz," he asked, looking frowningly at my face, as if trying to find the white circle around my nose, which is the Chinese opera term for a character who is planning something devious. - Don't give me your leaflets, what are these new tricks?

— Cardiff, of course," I wrote in red pencil, mentally filling my face with scarlet makeup, which is pure truth, the way the opera's Guan Yu is painted, by the way. - For the wedding dress, you know. I won't talk to anyone else in this town, so bear with me.

— I wanted to talk to you about Edna Alexandrina," said Saunders, "I have a right to know how you two agreed on the ownership of the boarding house. Whether you are my fiancée or notz

— I don't know anything about her since she ran away," I said, "but if she comes back, she'll own half the property. Along with Hedda, if Hedda's still alive.

— Yeah-if that one's alive, if that one's alive," Saunders grimaced, "you'd bury them all. I'll go with you to get the dress; we'll stay at the Angel for a couple of days, and it'll be nice to see you in your nightgown.

— I don't have a nightgown, I sleep in my dad's pajamas," I wrote, mentally drawing blue patterns of stroopiness on my cheeks.

— Yeah, and besides, you're not going to Cardiff," Saunders

finished his shandy and tapped his glass on the table. - Listen.



Come on, Alix. I'm willing to put up with a lot, but there's a limit. You shut your bedroom door in my face, okay, Saunders tolerates it, half the town thinks you're a murderer and I'm an alfonso, okay, Saunders tolerates it. But this mute thing you're doing is pissing me off. Open your goddamn mouth!

When my fiancé gets nervous and stops watching himself, his voice becomes squeaky, like anyone who can't hear well. I stared at him, trying to imagine how it had happened to his eardrums-there, in the deep, slow fish and murky plankton, on the sandy bottom of Gaafaru, overgrown with purple and rusty gorgonians. The cold filled his head, everything swirled before his eyes-a crunch, and the membrane crackedz.

Saunders waited a moment, then took my hand and rubbed his nose against my wrist.

- Lemon mint," he said, flaring his nostrils and stretching his upper lip like a horse smelling smoke, "I wish I could smell you all over. Your sister smelled like sour milk, as I remember," he smiled slowly, his apple teeth smooth, and I realized I couldn't be angry with him.

I can't even take my hand off, it's like I'm glued.

Deirdre said it right: fear the bull's horns, the horse's hooves, and the Englishman's smile.

\*\*\*

*Her mortal pallor is transformed into bloodless leaves, Still and scarlet with her.*

Third of July.

The bus to Henley was crowded, I pulled out of my bag a magazine I'd bought at Reading station and began to swat-

The car smelled of spilled beer and vanilla perfume, as irresistible as a sore throat, and my throat was even scratchy. T h e car smelled of spilled beer and vanilla perfume, as irresistible as a s o r e throat. *Give us help in the midst of hardship, for the defense of man is vanity*, Father Davant from Sunday school would say. Maybe he wouldn't.

Davant's father had a habit of cutting little men out of velvet paper, cutting out four in an hour and handing them out at the end of class to those who excelled by asking the right questions. I have one in my desk drawer - if I earned another one, I could do a scene from the Chinese Three Kingdoms in the shadow theater.

I liked Father Luke from the Cardiff church better, he had a shaggy beard and gold patterns on his robes - my mother didn't really know who she was, so she went to Protestant, Catholic and Father Luke. In church, we left thin, bendable candles under the icons, lighting them from other people's candles; the wax was creamy yellow, but there were black stains on our fingers.

In ninety-eight I read in Marcel Duchamp: *No, I don't believe in God. God is a human invention*, and I was terribly angry. Electricity is also a human invention, so what if it exists by itself. It's amazing how smart people don't realize the obvious. Take Dresser, my runaway son-in-law.

I wonder what he's doing now, putting the house in order and having misgivings. All my stories, if you put aside the first one, called the *Hotel Mille-nium*, started with misgivings and ended too civilized, which is the trouble.

Phone numbers are blackened padanuts in my garden, my address book is full of restless silence, restless-

It's a clay whirlwind in me, eternal as the Welsh damp, and there is no takeoff, no takeoff.

Since my sister left, I had only the past and the time before that, and the present was as black as the background of a mezzotint engraving. The copper board for this kind of engraving is made rough on purpose, so it was as if they had gone over me with a cutter, and now, no matter where you put me, I look black and dreary.

What I'm about to do with Dresser isn't a takeoff either, so much as a glide along a parabola, an attempt to fix the past with a *faux pas*, crumbling like over-whitened opera cardboard.

Dresser doesn't owe me anything, he was just trying to have a little fun.

And I need to do something fierce and devastating or I'll suffocate.

## **FIRST WRITING EDNA ALEXANDRINA SONLEY. 2006**

Remember that summer when you and I built a barricade to stop the sun?

Don't laugh, I remember everything well - it was a wonderful June day, we were eating plums on the veranda, the sun was slowly moving across the white tiles from the door to the railing, and you said that if you stop the sun bunny, so we started to build a barricade, we dragged wicker chairs, some cardboard, newspapers, covered it all with my mother's shawl, we made a barricade, and the sun slid quietly over the top, and whoosh!

Six years later, a London drunk in his Plymouth crashed into my stepdad's car, and everything went wrong. And then it got worse: my stepfather died, my mother moved away and disappeared, and I became a lousy sheep and a butt *plug*.

Even in bed with you, it was my fault that you had to settle for me, in bed I was - *spar- shivoyovtsyohotcherstiklok*.

... All the things you've done to me now have been good for you.

Your *real-life* romance would end up like everything else you start: boredom and guilty journal entries. His toothbrush under your nose, smelling of birch tar, his talk of racing boats, his quick morning visits to your bedroom, how cheap, for God's sake.

The three weeks you've been hovering around him, rustling with crumpled napkins, I've been laughing, because I knew that if I bent over a couple of times to get plates out of the cupboard drawer, your whole engagement would fall apart like a bad spell.

... By the way, thanks for the offer to come back, but "Maples is not a mint - you can't break it in half. If we had our own restaurant in a place like Henley - on the seafront, with white rattan furniture, overlooking the rowing clubs - then it would be different.

There's a joint called the *Artful Fisherman's*, for sale near the old Hambleton Mill, and a lot of people come there, and the *Fisherman's* is on the bank of the stream, and there's an apartment upstairs. If I sold the Maples, I'd have enough for a down payment, but I'd have to get a divorce first.

That's where it gets tricky, mark my words.

Dresser won't let me go, won't give me a divorce. Even this Ule thing is a load of crap, he took my credit card and that's it. Fenya's at his parents' from morning till night, and if I talk about divorce, I won't see her at all, he says to me: you'll crawl from here to Pembrokeshire on bloody knees, and you won't get your daughter.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

so a cabbage leaf caught on the window sticks to sweaty fingers, losing pollen - and you realize that it will not fly even if you blow it off your palm.

I'm not really a fan of entomological comparisons in the spirit of Tennyson, and my palms never sweat, but when I held out my hand to Alexandra Sonley, I immediately thought of the cabbage leaf beetle, which I can't help.

a prisoner, flat pinned to a leaf, withering, mute, if she was a witch, she was as cold-blooded as a Cranach's Sibyl, the kind *you can't say to her face as a drunken German peasant: Frau, I saw you riding on a fence post with your hair loose and your girdle loose, dressed as a troll, between night and day!*

that evening, when she opened the gate to me, alexandra did not say a word, just turned and walked down the narrow path through the wet garden, where not a single street lamp was lit - it seems that I was not the first to throw gravel over the fence here

It was not ten minutes later that it became clear what Mrs. Mount-Levy meant by a foreign temperament: the only thing English about the landlady was the cheerless attitude with which she treated the stranger, that is, me, and the angular name of Alix.

There was nothing about her that caught the eye, except the imperceptible, relentless smile that I wanted to catch and hold lightly with my fingers, and the familiar, drugstore-like smell of her hair - mintz fennelz licorice rootz

such a face can be seen in a London newsreel from the Second World War: a woman walking hurriedly down Sloane Street, fedora pulled up over an arched eyebrow, stockings painted on with beige makeup, purse with gas mask on, shoulder blades drawn together in anticipation of an air raid, black soft dust or lime powder on her shoes.

\*\*\*

After breakfast I picked up a book on Chinese silk and went into the garden to sit on the wide bench I had seen yesterday, under the plane tree - there was not a soul in the guesthouse and the landlady, as the chatty Everton had told me, was going to Pembroke to get new curtains for the drawing-room to replace the burned ones.

she'll have to travel so often, I thought, in a week there'll be another fire here, or new windows will be blown out by a stone thrown from the road, I wonder why no one is standing up for her.

It was still three hours before the first bus to Swansea, and I was sure that I would leave: what a wager, not without reason the carpenter had discouraged me - it was enough to reach out a hand to Sasha sleepy to feel her bloodless anger and disembodied resentment, this woman is not capable of strong Shakespearean action, she lives in the murky slow world of Celtic tales, where everyone dies seven times a day, to be resurrected in the next saga as if nothing had happened.

When she found me at the far end of the garden, behind the glass greenhouse full of glossy leaves, I was surprised to find myself lying on her bed in dirty shoes.

I stood there for about ten minutes, gnawing on a green apple, looking at the grave mound and listening to my inner voice, that is, to a *secret premonition*.

do not disregard the secret premonition, said Defoe, and him I believe: he did not let Robinson on the coveted ship, and the ship did not reach the shores, but Robinson did!

there was no one in this grave, my premonition told me; the juniper bushes around the sod-covered mound of earth were too close and dense; besides, as probably any admirer of Swedenborg, I feel the presence of a dead body, as well as the presence of a deadly intention.

On the north side of the mound was a flat stone slab, on which was written: *rest in peace, edna alexandrina* - not embossed, but written, crookedly and sprawlingly, with drips of brown paint, on the slab I could see a couple of ants circling near a blue crushed berry.

If Miss Sonley's sister was really buried there, it would be upside down, like the disgraced poet Ben Jonson, or like the Irish king.

Kings were also buried standing upright, in battle dress.

\*\*\*

I had *no doubt that I would see you here*, Sasha wrote, standing behind me for a while, tearing a leaf out of her notebook and showing it to me, holding it with two fingers, the notebook now hanging around her neck on a leather cord like an acorn around Wendy's neck.

I clutched the apple core in my fist, turned around and looked at her face for the first time-except for yesterday's exchange of glances over the hotel desk-the face was dry and serene, with only the pink, cold tip of her nose giving it something foxy, restless

I already knew from Finn Everton that the landlady had not spoken since Sunday, and I regretted that I had not had time to hear her voice-if I had stopped in the *maples* a little earlier, I should have known what it sounded like: hoarsez unconcernedz grumpyz grumpyz eulogisticz

what she does when she needs to cry or laugh - she writes in her notebook *crying* or *laughing*, in parentheses, as they do in theatrical dialoguesz

I wanted her to write *heroine leaves* and walk away, but Sasha sat down next to me and started looking at me with her wide-open eyes, tapping her index finger on her notepad

in the bright light, her eyes must have turned olive-

I was about to tell her that, but I hesitated when Sasha picked up her pencil.

*I buried her here, she wrote and pointed her finger at the side of the mound, if that interests you, tore her into little pieces and buried her - she didn't deserve any better.*

I couldn't help saying, I have so much antique garbage in my head that it comes out every now and then, like underground water, or rather like sulphurous springs.

Sasha cringed, the underground Lucretius was not to her liking.

For ten minutes we sat in silence, hesitantly squinting at each other, then she stood up and extended her hand to me with the palm up, I did not immediately realize what was going on, I also stood up and extended my hand, covering her narrow, unexpectedly hot palm

*Give me your stump, Sasha wrote impatiently, I'll throw it away, and you'd better get ready - your bus is two hours and fifteen minutes away, she tore out the paper with the last sentence, put it in my hand, put the pencil in her apron pocket and walked towards the house, slightly hunched over, looking at the ground, treading softly and carefully*

like an old callah beera with stones in her hem, I thought, and for some reason I felt sad.

\*\*\*

Everton's maid told me at breakfast that I was the only guest in the boarding house, and I lied! As I passed through the drawing-room, where the glazier had already removed the broken panes of glass and the burnt curtains moved in the draughts in the window openings, I saw a barefoot guest with a book, sitting in a rocking chair in the pose of a Fragonardian *reading girl*.



I sat down at the table and said hello, she looked up from her page and looked past me, or rather over my shoulder, at the stairs to the second floor, at Finn Everton, who was coming down the stairs with a bucket full of dirty soapy lather.

against the fire-blackened wall, the stranger's gray pleated dress was as jagged as an Arab onyx, I hadn't seen such dresses in a long time - twenty years, no less, it seemed that the styles of the times of *three of a perfect pair* were coming back into fashion

Well, Finn, you said that the hotel was empty, and here you meet interesting ladies, I said cheerfully, hoping that the woman would meet my eyes, but no, she glanced away from the maid with a frown and lowered her eyes into a book.

I saw her eyelashes and eyebrows the color of burnt apricot kernels, her broad feet the color of light honey standing firmly on the floor, I saw the bright, pure colors of her body, I saw even a crack on her lip! And yet she reminded me of the *figure with a handkerchief at her mouth* on a Baroque cemetery slab, I don't know why.

No, I know - there was something flat, ethereal about this woman, something of the saintly agatha on the altar of Tiepolo's work, where qui-cian torture cannot be believed, because you can't cut off the untrue breast.

*interesting-who?* the Finn interrogated, setting the bucket against the wall with a clatter, the foam splashed on the woman's bare feet, and she quickly and nonchalantly picked them up under her without making a sound.

Mr. Elderbury, you should go to your rooms, said Finn, angrily, as she began to run a rag over the floor; it's cleaning time while the lady of the house is away! She took hold of the arm of a wicker chair and, before I could object, easily moved it into a corner, along with the idle stand-by, who was staring at a book - she didn't even look up, though the legs of the chair creaked unpleasantly.

I took two steps forward for some reason and extended my hand to her: this Finn is so awkward, I said, almost touching her shaggy sleeve, but then the woman stood up, put the open book on the table, walked around me and smoothly headed for the stairs to the gallery.

I moved the book toward me and saw that it was not a book, but a hand-written notebook, a quarter notebook, in which my mother used to write down the expenses of the house.

I looked at the beginning of the open page: *he was smiling at me, lying on the floor so I wouldn't be scared, and I was smiling at him so I wouldn't show how scared I was*

Hey, wait! I went to get the woman, but she was already upstairs at Sasha's bedroom door, I ran up the stairs and hit something cool and weak, slipping under my arms like an empty silk cocoon, I jerked back and hit my shoulder on the doorjamb.

Ixion, king of Thessaly, might as well have embraced Juno, who was molded by her husband out of periwinkle clouds.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1986

*There is a weeping herb, and that herb should be kept clean in the house, and the unclean spirit will flee away from that temple, and the house will be protected by God from evil. And the root of this herb, if it pleases the cross to cut and carry it on oneself - and that person is not afraid of the devil and will not die an evil death.*

Russian books, now stored in the pantry, on a shelf with rolls of wallpaper, which her father was going to paste on the bedrooms, and then abandoned, were given to Sasha with difficulty, but not because she had forgotten the language, no - Russian still rang in her head with the words *evil* and *impossible* and clinked

with funny suffixes,

turning a crow into a crow, a magpie into a magpie, and a tick into a teacher's tick.

The books seemed alien to her because they were too fractional, too thick, too thick, too thick and arrogant. Too thick meant they weren't real, she thought for a long time, remembering her mother's detangled hair on the dressing table. The hardest thing to read was

"A Small Face Herbalist." Even its title seemed ridiculous to Sasha, not to mention the fact that the leather cover, which looked like a dried bread crust eaten by mice, weighed more than any of Sasha's textbooks.

- *Small*, because it's small," explained my mother, taking it out of the closet, for which she had to stand on a chair and stretch on tiptoe, "and there's also the Big one, the one by the St. Petersburg publisher Kaspari, in two volumes, with copperplate engravings! But we can't afford it, my dear.

Not affordable, Sasha realized. The Small Herbalist was fat and disheveled, and it wouldn't even fit in the pocket of a kitchen apron, let alone the Big Herbalist, which would probably take up the whole closet, if not the whole house, if not the whole Abergwyne.

Reading the faded volume was like playing Scrabble with the savvy Deirdre, sprinkling unfamiliar words like *pigforv* or *oLLiach* - Sasha just couldn't believe in such a combination of letters and climbed into the dictionary, each time dejectedly recognizing Deirdre's victory.

Words crowded into Travnik in incomprehensible Slavic cursive, and sometimes it seemed to Sasha that this was done on purpose, so that those who were not supposed to read them would not read them. When I grow up, she thought, the letters will smooth out, straighten out, become English, and separate themselves into the important and the not so important, as a dog's coat is divided into undercoat and pluck under an iron comb.

After about ten years, she began to think that these pages smelled like her mother's braids, once, in hard times, her mother-

Since then, she has been patiently fastening her braids to the back of her head in the mornings with hairpins and combs.

When her mother died, Sasha found a round biscuit box in the bedroom - the braids curled up in it in two lazy golden snakes, resting their heads and tails on each other.

There were small tortoise-shell studs sticking out of their tails.

## 1990

*There is a herb called livakum, which grows in a blue color. And thou shalt dig it in the month of May on the first day of Tuesday. And under its bark you shall find a stone, named enetriug, and keep it wherever you go, so that no one may see you.*

"If you touch that tree, you'll die," Sasha told her sister their first summer, because there was a secret under the tree, under the fruitless apple tree. She and Prue had buried it six years ago, put a colored glass on top, and had never checked it since.

There was a sharp lamb shovel, a soapstone squirrel, two teeth, a bent pewter spoon found in the shore mud at low tide, and a jar of pills-mom had taken them in eighty-two when she got really anxious.

On such days she would ask her father and Sasha if any strangers had come, and at dinner she would talk about a ferry from Ireland on which someone we didn't know would arrive, and that would change things, *oh yes, then you would see*, she said.

My father stroked my mother's head and looked at Sasha as if winking, in fact his left eye twitched, but Sasha didn't know it yet and winked back at him.

A familiar jar appeared on the bathroom table, her mother smiled absent-mindedly for an hour, said no more about the steam, and brushed her and her daughter's hair. Sasha prayed that

The colorful pills were enough to *last* her a *long time*, she needed such a mother so badly, she was ready to live with such a mother until she died.

Now, if you touch that tree... - Sasha had said that summer, and Junior had not forgotten. Two years later, after a bitter, unbearable quarrel, when Sasha caught her looking at the Murano beads in her mother's jewelry box and slapped her hands so hard that the beads scattered across the room, elusive as mercury balls, Edna went to the far end of the garden and touched the apple tree to die.

An hour later Sasha found her sister in the nursery, stretched out on the bed with her arms folded across her chest. She stood at the door, but didn't go in; let her die, she thought; death was useful, of course, but boring, like fish oil, so Edna would soon get bored and rise again.

She lay on her bed, on top of the blanket, shivering with cold - the tenants, an elderly couple from Reading, had moved out after dinner, and Sasha had not put the heat on for the night. She sat in the living room with a book, wrapped in an old woolen blanket, waiting for footsteps on the stairs, a fine, crumbly stomp, but there were none, and after half an hour Sasha quietly went upstairs to peer through the ajar door.

Her sister was lying on a green quilted blanket without a pillow, her head tilted back, her plump white throat tense and her neck seeming longer than it really was. Edna's legs were spread so wide that a childish fold could be seen beneath her dress, which differed from the doll's only by a barely perceptible thickening of the shadow. It wasn't the first time Sasha had seen it - a year ago her sister had played naked in the garden like Aranyani in her forest - but now she realized she could have drawn *it with a few strokes of wax crayon*.

Like drawing a poppy bud covered with invisible fuzz.

Or the core of a mushroom. Or - the felted underside of a mother-maple leaf.

1995

*There is a herb machikha, and grows lapushnikami, one side is white and leaves crosswise on the ground stretched, yellow, yellow, yellow.*

At the beginning of June, when Sasha found out that Hedda was lying, it was as if by accident.

That afternoon she took the postal bus to Quadrant, the station square in Swansea, and walked along the featureless promenade, which was known here as the promenade.

Early in the morning, Sasha was glad to find her stepmother's forgotten folder with the essay: *Characteristics of the Mediterranean Region*. She had long wanted to go for a drive to Swansea, and the essay, as Hedda had complained yesterday, was due on Tuesday, after school.

Why would the hostess of a Welsh hotel write twenty-two pages about the Côte d'Azur, Sasha thought, opened the cardboard folder and leafed through it lazily. The abstract was typed on a familiar typewriter, judging by the *w* and *z* that had fallen *off-as* soon as Hedda had unearthed the machine in the far corner of the barn where her mother's things were

The day was sunny and dry, with tourists on rented red bicycles and locals with wire shopping baskets on the frame, flour-white baguettes and bundles of greens tied with string sticking out of the baskets.

The smells of the area - sharp sea odors on the left and sweet clove odors on the right - seemed to mingle just where Sasha was walking. When the hot smell of curry joined them, she remembered that she hadn't had breakfast and had stopped at the pier.

She was in the middle of the street, where an early Indian restaurant was flapping in the wind with a linen awning that read *Badam Poori*. A cold bee buzzed in her stomach - that's what her mother always said when she was hungry.

I'll be back on the bus in two hours, she thought, just in time for dinner, because there was an express train to Penfro in the evening. Sasha walked along the shore some more, looking for signs of the cast: a strip of red carragen, scraps of net washed clean - you could tell how far out to sea the sea had gone, leaving spotted pebbles in clumps of seaweed, like quail's eggs in their nests. The smell of curry seemed to follow her, a spicy cloud on the collar of her sweater, a hungry bee buzzing louder and louder; Castellamare was at least two kilometers away, and Sasha gave up.

There was still no one in the open, low-fenced restaurant, only a gloomy serving boy in a turban pacing the courtyard, wiping down tables, arranging salt shakers and sauces. Sasha counted her money, looked at the menu, and ordered a mango lassi with yogurt for four pounds fifty.

She was immediately brought an iron vase with drips and a bent spoon.

She swallowed her lassi hurriedly while the Hindu clattered chairs, clinked dishes, glanced about unhappily, but when she stood up at last, laying the coins on the damp plastic that smelled of rags, two men came out of the kitchen door: a dark-faced man in a white linen apron and a curly-haired woman in a dress painted with large poppies.

They stood on the threshold and seemed to be quarreling, the man held a swarthy thin finger in front of the woman's nose, the woman's back was ugly and covered with colored cloth, but the woman laughed, kissed the angry owner on the temple - he waved her away - and walked quickly past Sasha to the exit without even looking at her.

The kitchen door slammed, the wicket clattered woodenly, Sasha sat up again, her breath coming in gasps, the yogurt curdling in her gi-



*I don't know if there's anything wrong, ma'amz,*" the server asked sullenly behind me, raking the change from the table and stretching his long saffron hand over Sasha's shoulder as fast as a lizard licks a fly with its split tongue.

Goosebumps ran down Sasha's legs, no, heavy ants stomped, a whole army of desperate red-haired Myrmidons, she looked after the departing woman and realized that now she would scream her name or choke with rage.

The rage inside Sasha could be wet or dry, the dry was unbearable and Sasha was afraid of it, the wet could be resolved by some disgusting gesture or word, Sasha knew this and always tried to scream or break something heavy as quickly as possible, without prolonging the suffocating attack.

But now she couldn't do anything, her tongue felt as if it had fallen apart and was lying in her mouth like a dusty piece of felt. Hedda, red-eared bitch Hedda," the tongue throbbed helplessly, "Hedda, you're cheating on my daddy, you goddamn doll.

Sasha got up from the chair and went to the exit, moving her ant-strewn legs with difficulty, the owner's linen apron flapping awning in the wind, the stepmother's round face with a hot pupil hanging in the curd clouds, the protein turned scarlet and curled into flakes, she crossed the street in front of the bus, not hearing the thick honks, went down the stone steps to the beach and sat on the sand.

She had to think about it.

## **LETTER FROM DAFFYDD MONMOUTH. 2005**

... your circumstances are always with you.

You decided one day that you were made for painful memories, you are bound by them like a museum skeleton of a predatory creature is bound by wire, and if you pull them out, it seems to you that you will crumble into a thousand vertebrae and small cartilages.

of crows. Memories are lime in your blood vessels, Sasha, and they keep your blood running and you yourself from unraveling.

In you lives a girl tormented by premonitions and a rude old woman at the same time. I once knew this girl quite well, taught her English and Latin, even loved her as best I could, but the old woman.... oh yes, I was always afraid of the old woman.

Oblivion is the defense mechanism of the soul, some glasses must be covered with soot so that one will not be blind when looking at tomorrow. If I hadn't done that with my memory, I wouldn't even be able to write to you. But I am writing to you.

You probably don't remember the time in October of ninety-four, when I took you to London after our engagement, when we fell in the rain in Kensington Gardens and floundered through the endless, waterlogged alleys. I suggested we get a room in one of the old hotels that overlooked the park and spend the night - drying off, drinking wine, making love.

I wanted you so much then, so cool, so pale, so disheveled, that I was ready to bite my nails with impatience, like a hungry boy left out of school.

What childishness, you said, shrugging your shoulders, we have return tickets at half past ten. There was a fearful prudence in you even then; later, mixed with loneliness and wildness, it gave rise to despair.

You could drive it out of you, you have so much animal, *natural* strength, but you won't lift a finger. Your soul is sparse, but only because, I repeat, you live in the cramped closet of your memories, as you used to live in the pantry of your parents' house, folding up the old box spring bed for the night.

You are the best and most destructive thing I have had in years, after you left I began to look into things, into people, into my own experiences the way you did, in your intense witchy way.

It is funny to say that I read Plato and Thomas Hardy to the village teenagers, even though I know that they are just words that make up their own world, the papier-mâché of their own horror, something utterly useless and unattainable for others.

Books are written for those who write them, they replace their lives like barley replaces coffee, you once said, and those who read can't sip someone else's life, no matter how hard they try. Why don't you start writing?" I asked you then, and you answered without thinking: "I have everything.

You've got your head all mixed up, my girl. You've got nothing, nothing at all.

Wherever you go, there is a wasteland of fierce thistle, not because you are looking for it, but because you carry it with you. You were left in that wasteland as a girl, and I remember you then, perpetually unfulfilled, with a tortured smile. You reminded me of that boy in Kipling's story who was abandoned by his parents in India to the mercy of a relative or a foolish servant, and went blind because he didn't want to look at anyone.

I knew I had to get you out of there, peel back that crust you'd built up over the warm, living Alexandra, but Stone Maples was pulling you down with as much force as if your boarding house had been called Stone Anchor.

But enough of moralizing, that's not why I'm writing to you, I wanted to tell you that I haven't forgotten you, and listening to talk about your family, or rather, what's left of it, I still feel a familiar chill, and I can't catch my breath for a while. Especially when I hear stories about you and Drina, people say terrible things-but the worst part is, I'm not surprised.

It does.

I always knew you were capable of a lot of things, you have a *natural cruelty* that is rare nowadays. More--

Most people are hearsay violent, they read violent books, they listen to violent news on the road from Bournemouth to Reading, they look at blood-soaked screens, but with you it's a different story - you just don't know how to be different, like you don't know how to be angry or obey passion, you're as quiet as a square after an execution.

If you killed her, I'm on your side.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*Straight before Aeneas' eyes, the abyss is immense behind him.  
Strikes the stern; and the swept away, rushing stern falls  
headlong.*

Third of July.

It didn't turn out quite the way I wanted it to, but it could have been worse.

Dresser did not meet me, for *my telegram was lost*, and I had to get there myself, wading through the smart crowd in the streets-sixty thousand guests, according to yesterday's paper-and through the crowd at the door of Lions End, where guards stood with long lists like silk scrolls from the days of the Tang empire.

I gave security the name of Dresser, got a guest token on my lanyard, and walked along the beach, past sleepy, half-naked girls in deck chairs-one girl had a cold-looking handful of glass grapes on her hat, and I suddenly felt thirsty.

I had to call the caretaker several times, probably because he had left his phone at the club, or because he didn't want to talk. When he finally answered, I spoke so quickly and in such an aggrieved voice that Dresser wasn't even surprised.

- I'll find you myself," he said, confused, "since it's the way it is. Look, Alix, it's a misunderstanding, your wife and daughter aren't here... they didn't even know you were coming! they didn't even know you were coming! Well, don't go far, I'll be done soon.

The race was about an hour away, and the crowd was already seated with glasses and umbrellas, the anthracite water glistening dryly in the sun, the Victorian silhouette of Temple looming in the distance at the starting line. I looked into the dignitaries' gazebo, where two uniformed guys were setting out cheese and celery trays; I waited until they came out, reached over the railing and picked up three cheese slices strung on the thin shaft of a blue-and-white flag.

With cheese in my cheek, I passed a museum display case with cups, then a hangar from which stately rowers emerged with narrow, velvet-paper boats, each carrying a statue of Amon high above their heads. The crowd kept coming. The caretaker had once told me that the Lions End Club had two thousand ninety-eight members, and that everyone could bring a friend and a child free of charge.

Today, Dresser's friend was his enemy.

I took a glass of juice from the garçon and sat down in the shade under the spacious canvas awning. You can't starve at a royal regatta; no one here would think I had twenty-four pounds in my pocket, ten of them in change from the kitchen tip box.

A hurried boy in cuffs slipped me a program: the time of the afternoon cocktails, the order of serenades and marches by the city orchestra, a list of attending *sirs, baronets, etc., etc., etc.*

At the very bottom of the sheet, in tiny, almost unreadable print, the racers were listed, all those singles, pairs, fours and eights. A single rower, mentioned in small print, seemed to be me.

— The Queen Mother's Cup race is coming up," they said behind me, and I turned around. Behind me was a smiling Dresser with a stack of the same programs in his hands, his crystal steward's badge glinting in the sun with sharp edges.

— It's not easy for you," I said, extending my hand to him, "Hello, hello.

When I thought about how we would meet, I thought of anything but a kiss. He leaned over and kissed me on the temple.

My temple rattled immediately. Dresser always had that effect on me: there was some tedious flow of lymph in him, some special submissive tension, like a volunteer from the audience who'd been lured onto the stage by a magician and was about to be sawed in half.

— Let's go to the cottage and put your things away," he nodded at the valise. - I didn't expect to see you, to be honest. Your sister's suddenly gone to the sea, but you can stay with us, of course. You're welcome.

He headed down the cobblestone path toward the club, and I followed him, listening to the painful ringing in my head as I stared at the russet-cropped back of my sister's husband's head. Well, what husband and what sister, come to think of it.

No sister, no husband, and almost no chime.

I'd only been following him for a few minutes, but - surprise surprise - there was already a coppery taste of distress on the tip of my tongue, familiar as the taste of insomnia and colds.

\*\*\*

*je prevds mov £iev of je le trøshve.*

... tennis balls, Dr. Ferguson said at the time, buy your father tennis balls, his hands are numb, he needs to stretch his hands - often, every day.

I went to a nice sports store in Pembroke but the door was closed, the owner had written *surrendered* on the window, the other two shops only sold shorts and dumbbells, I almost missed my bus and was terribly upset.

- Go to Cardiff on Saturday," said Hedda, "he's lived without balls till now, he'll live for a couple more. You'd better help me straighten the creases in this bloody hole.

Surprisingly, my father was getting heavier and heavier, even though his collarbones and knees were all that was left of him, and sometimes it seemed to me that his body was deliberately accumulating weight in order to stay on the ground longer, not to break away and not to take off.

Every time Hedda and I lifted him up and put him in the chair to change the bed, I was afraid my father's lead-laden joints would burst out of their articulations and show themselves, and I was also afraid of his teeth - they were weak in the gums, and I dreamed of my own teeth crumbling apart.

In the evening I took Junior for a walk to "Heather Hill" and there, leaving her on guard near the cleverly trimmed turquoise bushes, I climbed over the tennis court fence and jumped onto the springy grass.

There was a cart full of tennis balls in the corner of the court under a wicker awning - that's our basket of chickens, I thought, I knew I'd find it here. At five o'clock the hotel served tea and sorbet, so the tennis lessons were interrupted for an hour. At six, Coach Sean was back on the court, and I could borrow a few balls from him, but I had a sudden urge to steal, steal more-a whole basket of fluffy chickens with "*Heather Hill, 2008*" written on them. I quickly stuffed the pockets of my nylon jacket, climbed back over, jumped onto the sandy path, and saw that Junior wasn't in the bushes.

Screaming in the hotel garden wasn't a good idea, so after looking for my sister nearby for about fifteen minutes, I moved the balls behind the

She went to the terrace, where the guests sat and stood with cups in their hands, gazing at the Westwood hills in the twilight.

Behind the glass wall of the café, the white dresses and jackets seemed a vague blur, but the fugitive's yellow blouse shone like a single fruit on the branch of a lemon tree. I walked to the edge of the terrace and made signs to Junior, but she didn't even look in my direction. She was sitting at a wicker table with a blond young man in tennis pants, dipping a spoon into a glass of soda with a little air of importance.

sherbet.

— I'm sorry, for God's sake," I said as I climbed the granite steps, "but I'm going to have to take my sister home.

— This is your sister," said the young man, surprised. - I found her in the bushes. Why don't you sit down at our table, Alix, dear. Would you like some tea or sorbet?

— Well, sit down," Junior licked the spoon and handed it to me, "taste how cold it is.

I sat down in a cane chair and looked at the stranger carefully; he looked like someone, but I couldn't remember who.

This is what it looks like for men who can live for weeks at a time in a

"Heather Hill for ninety-nine pounds a day, I thought; they have wide eyebrows-the seventeenth-century mouse skins; they have sly, feathery lips that you want to touch. Those who stay with us look different - though if someone asked me what that was about, I'd have a hard time finding the words.

— Hey, I think you didn't recognize someone," Junior tapped me on the arm.

— I think you ought to go home," I said; "thank the gentleman for the treat, and let's go.

— What's the matter, Alix," said the stranger, "it's me, Saunders. I've been working here for two weeks now, at the reception, I'm doing some sort of summer internship.



— Saunders Branaz

— I met your sister by the court, I tried to bang a ball against the wall there, from five to six Sean always lets me, but the little one didn't get to go out there.

— You've changed a lot. You were eleven the last time I saw you.

— And you were thirteen, and you've changed, too," Saunders said, glancing at my chest, "I can tell it's been a long time.

The youngest followed his gaze and opened her mouth. I, too, looked at my round, lumpy, cotton-wool-covered breasts under my thin jacket, and pulled the zipper up for some reason. The balls in my sinuses didn't even move.

— We should go," I muttered, getting up and pulling the chair out from under Junior, "it was nice to see you, Bra- na.

Saunders put a few coins on the table, took the white-covered racket from the chair, and followed us, treading softly in his tennis slippers. The youngest looked back at him every now and then, trying to smile as broadly and serenely as she could, though her small strawberry mouth was no good for it. I tugged on her arm, trying not to walk too fast, the stolen balls burning my chest and stomach, and it seemed that everyone in the café had forgotten their cups and was watching me.

At the edge of the terrace, Saunders caught up with us and stood in front of me, blocking my exit to the stairs. The setting sun was shining in his face, and he put his hand to his forehead like the visor of a tennis cap he hadn't gotten around to wearing yet.

— I'm going to see you," he asked, not bothering with the questioning tone, "I'll be here until fall, then I'll have to go back to college.

I nodded and looked over his shoulder: Coach Shawn was walking down the yew alley, wearing the same soft slippers as Saunders.

He waved to us and turned toward the court. He waved to us and turned toward the court.

— Six hours," Son-dera said with faint annoyance as he looked away, "I haven't had time to practice my backhand. You have to take every chance you can get," he said with importance, "Other hotels don't allow staff on the courts. And rightly so.

To think how important it is to look perfect! If someone had asked me which of these two men was giving tennis lessons at the hotel, I would have pointed to Saunders, I said to myself. But out loud I said:

— Come by the Maples sometime, we have two young and mean dogs, but they are leashed during the day. Thanks for the treat. Well, we're off, goodbye.

— Adios, girls," Saunders tousled Junior's hair and brushed his lips against my cheek, pulling me to him with one hand and touching my chest in an almost imperceptible motion with the other, and I jerked back, but his fingers were already sliding down the nylon of my jacket, fumbling with the zipper and pulling it down.

— Show me how much you've changed," Saunders said softly, "Don't be shy, since we're old friends.

The jacket didn't open right away, as if the balls were trying to hold the flaps of their shelter, but as soon as I moved, lifting my hand to the clasp, the first chicken came into view, making Saunders freeze and open his eyes wide, squinting at the sun.

A yellow, fluffy ball landed on the mosaic floor, rolled across the terrace, and froze near the stairs, followed by the rest of them, and then the rest of them, and then the rest of them bounced noiselessly down the granite steps. I didn't even know how many were there, just waiting for it to be over, just standing there, not moving, looking Saunders in the face and still clutching my sister's instantly sweaty palm in my hand.

\*\*\*

*... It's my Macedonian horse melting with thirsty sweat, his mouth jagged like the rim of a Mycenaean cup, and his road breathing pink clay, and I'm laughing, laughing.*

My sister disappeared a few years ago, and it doesn't matter whether she took the southeastern road, where the letters with Indian stamps found in the barn led, the northwestern road, where the caretaker I'd stolen inadvertently took her, or the yellow brick road, looking for a suitable Goodwin. The important thing is that wherever she goes, her garters are embroidered in scarlet orden letters: *Shame on anyone who thinks ill of it!*

My sister was never my sister, first she was a burrowing stepchild with whom I had to share my nursery, then she was an unsociable teenager with two us, then she was my girl, then she was a dance partner for Saunders Branagh, then I don't know who, I haven't seen her in a long time, maybe no one elsez

I know that sooner or later she will show up at the Maples as if nothing had happened, dragging her self-born daughter by the hand, I even know what she will say: Ali-i-x, you look terrible, what's wrong with your hairz.

And then there would be coffee stains on the living room carpet, cigarette butts in the sink, hair in the sink, cheese stumps in the refrigerator, hotel bills in a jumble, empty wine glasses in the garden, and jumbled silver chains in my jewelry box.

Mom will be offended and stop coming again. Everton is learning to curl his hair and fake a shaky sailor's walk. The herbalist will have to hide it better, I don't know where, from curious little fingers. At night the house would burst with baby cries and Francis Healey's voice, and during the day the television would mumble with stupid quizzes.

Edna Alexandrina, my sorrow, come home.

## HEDDA. LETTER THIRTEENTH

*Kumarakom, October 2000*

Girls, send me some money right away!

Do you earn nothing at all? Not even the five hundred a month that we had before I left home? I can't find a place for myself, I keep thinking of what you have done with the hotel, I imagine an abandoned house with a rotten roof and a garden overgrown with thistles, and you both on a swing, in rags.

Mr. Appas demands his share - he's my husband now. His countryman and friend from Swansea even went to Wishgard to deliver his letter to you, but there was no one there - that's how you run a boarding house! He put it in the letterbox at the gate, and I suspect it's still there.

Drina, I wrote to your e-mail address, even though I don't know anything about computers, but I didn't get a reply there either! Rajiv, I mean Mr. Appas, says he's *going* to sue *my daughters* and force them to sell *the* Maples, whatever it takes.

I fear for you, my stubborn fools.

He feels cheated, though I promised him nothing but loyalty - and I am keeping my promise. True, it is not too difficult here in sweaty Kerala, the Indian type of face no longer seems beautiful to me.

Before, when I was serving beer on the Appas ship, I still saw white men, burnt-red Swedish tourists and the like, but now my stomach has grown back and I'm no longer allowed out of the house.

Besides, I have to work awfully hard, otherwise he gets angry, bangs on the table and shouts that I am English trash, white trash, and that he has received no gift or blessing from my parents. But they were dead before I met them! Sometimes I think he's gone mad-especially when he spends hours rearranging furniture around the house, or when he's like.

he buys a monstrous amount of *rasgulla* on the corner and eats it all in one sitting. Or she buys these almond things in the mead and feeds me from the palm of her hand, my tongue stuck to my teeth from the sweets.

It's still here, it's hot, all through July I've been sporting a teak play table with a Bombay mosaic, Currat says it's from the Udaipur Palace.

Strangely, I'm beginning to like the openwork carvings, the vervain and the mother-of-pearl, whereas before it seemed like a horrible piece of jewelry. You can't believe it, but they even make furniture out of papier-mâché - scrape off the multi-layered varnish and there's paper! In this country, everything is used: apricot bones, old furniture, scraps, I used to think it was poverty, but now I think they just feel differently about things. Rajiv used to take me to a huge hangar on the edge of the city, where the ceiling is covered with old screens, elephant saddles, and carts without wheels-his uncle buys up this ghastly stuff from the villages and sells it to collectors, aging it with herbal juices and oils. Sometimes he makes a *maharajah's table* out of various pieces - from beds, chairs and

God knows what else!

I'm terribly tired, I'm going to chew my pan and go to bed. It's all right, Edna Alexandrina, my boy will be born soon, my Benjamin Sybil Phanindra Taranjit, and everything will change. I will be the mother of Appasoff's son!

And when things change, you'll come to me, won't you?

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

twelve years ago there was not even a post office in the village, and letters were sent to the chemist's shop; now there is a post office in Wayne Road, and I went there to see if I could make any sense of it, since I had decided to stay.

I decided to stay-maybe because Miss sleepy doesn't want it so badly-sleepy, sleepy, sleepy-lee, the rare ringing name, there's no mistake about it, it's her-when I saw the nameplate on the *maple* gate, my mind went dark as if the goddess Ata from the nineteenth song of the Iliad had walked barefoot across my head.

It was clear that the old men had a surprise for me, both of them thinking that I had become lazy lately, that I had abandoned the oars and was drifting with the current, if they only knew how murky the water in my river was, a natural gangue, if you bend over the side there is no reflection, only clay darkness,

*but the walrus and the carpenter went to the shore  
that night, and they wept bitterly, looking at the sand:  
ah, if only someone could clean  
up all this garbage!*

before, a postmistress would have had ink on her fingers, and the office would have smelled of old cloth, dust, sealing-wax, and something else subtly postal, but the postmistress here smelled of pear soap, and I was sad.

What letters are there, Ms. Maur waved her hand, for the year I've been working here she's only received bills, and it's hard to imagine this sleepy-eyed woman writing a letter to anyone, more like drawing runes on someone else's doorjamb or mixing John's butter according to her Russian mother's recipe.

and you knew her mother-z the pleated gray silk fluttered before my eyes, my bare feet ran silently up the oak staircase, I forgot myself and grabbed the postmistress by the elbow: tell me what she was like-z

I wasn't even three years old when Waldo Sonley's wife died, look, I don't give a damn about Alix, she added, everybody knows she's as cold as a cucumber at the bottom of a cellar, nobody even looks at Alix!

Why, *I look at her*, noticing Miss Maur's bitten nails, I have a sudden confidence in her, and a certain Mr. Branagh is looking, isn't he?

Saunders noonday teethz Well, that's easy, she drugged him and got her hands on him, just to annoy her sister in the next world,

Miss Moore shook her pear hair angrily, I could do that! I said proudly, *but the* postmistress smiled perplexed: "What *did you say your name was*, Alderburyz, I'm taking a break in five minutes, would you like to take a break?

have a couple of buns around the corner here.

I shook my head and held out my hand to her to say goodbye, Miss Maur's hand was rough and cold, but there was a silver ring on each finger, even on the little finger.

I could use one ring, too, in this tightly-knit, blind village where everyone knows everything about everyone else.

the ring of Gyges, king of Lydia.

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returning from the post office, I poured myself some iced tea in the kitchen, and sat for a while on the bottom step of the stairs leading up to the upper rooms

my father fell down the same narrow oak staircase, only leading down to the basement, also a spiral staircase - steeper and more uncomfortable

the steps were seven inches wide at the sides and diminishing toward the center, he must have missed his foot on the first step, stumbled, and flew down into the stone cellar.

must have been very quiet in the house, when he stopped shouting he put his hand to his eyes and did not see her

he knew it was light in the cellar, he could hear the meter wheel crackling, which meant the light bulb was on, but he could not see his own hand

(how do I know thisz I've read it all somewhere)

I was handed his double-bottomed box: on the top were holey Swedish coins and two dry chestnuts, and at the bottom were my letters from the seventy-seventh year to the eight-tenth of the ninth.

the neighbor who sent me the box and the address of the Baxford notary wrote that there was no one in the house except a shiny Siamese cat.

the cat couldn't get out because the door was locked from the inside, it had been hungry for days.

That's what the neighbor wrote: *the cat was very hungry and acting ugly towards the dead body.*

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In the early twilight I saw a marten flying up the trunk of a tree, and there was something desperate in its upward movement; one does not go robbing wasps' nests, I thought, one flees so quickly from strong and dangerous enemies-but who was its enemy here, in this shady garden full of toy death and honeysuckle-z

and whether one must necessarily *know one's* enemies to be greatly afraid of themz

Borrowing a canvas jacket from the hallway, I took an empty packet, went out of the gate, walked down to the sea and spent about an hour there, walking slowly along the shore, watching the bottom haze that rises during a thunderstorm cover the shore with green slippery threads and some unknown black peel

Every now and then I bent down to pick up shards of glass and scrap tin, squinting and cursing myself for being absent-my glasses were in my coat pocket, and without them I was a little dizzy.

As I picked up the sharp coastal minutiae-which Whiteheart would have laughed to see what his rebellious slave was doing-I thought of what Gweniver had told me, though I thought of



there was nothing much to think about what he had already seenz  
when I listened to the shamrock mistress, and before her, to the  
angry clothier in the pub, I imagined Miss Sonley to be a haughty  
young lady, bright red-haired, spoiled, and as agile as a marten, the  
kind of woman who would make me think of her, a darling, or  
something, I had imagined myself as a child a Lassarillo of Tormesa,  
but now that I knew that the witch of Wishgard was quiet, narrow-  
shouldered, and her hair was only blond, I could only think of her in  
connection with yesterday's arrangement, which, by the way, I  
thought vaguely of - the day and evening were filled with Cuban  
drink, as if-

then a yellowish emergency light

I couldn't even explain to myself why I didn't go home that  
day - I was late, tired, I remember myself at the bus station,  
under the tin awning, shaking drops out of a flask into my palm,  
walking through the Westwood forest, filled to the brim with  
warm fog, I also remember meeting a woman named Prue, who  
had bulging eyelids and bulging teeth and a voice like the  
monotonous pounding of rain on a tin roof, and if anyone in this  
town had to be a witch, I'd point to her without a doubt.

\*\*\*

Finding that I had missed the Cardiff bus again, I decided that  
if I went by Swansea tomorrow morning I should be home in  
time for lunch, so I returned to the *Maples*, intending to warn  
Miss Sleepy and leave the room to myself.

I entered the garden through the gate on the sea side, uncoiled  
the soft black wire, walked past the greenhouse, nodded at a  
familiar knoll, passed the thickly blooming jasmine under the  
living room window, climbed the porch and pushed open the heavy  
door.

the door was locked

I knocked, pulled the bell, then walked around the house, took off my jacket and climbed through the charred living room window, which had been unglazed since yesterday; there was no one in the living room, though the wicker chair swayed slightly; there was no one behind the counter in the hallway, and the front door was locked from the inside, like a classic detective story.

The hungry ghosts of the former owners or the skeleton from the closet were about to appear, I thought, and went into the kitchen, where the maid's apron was hanging on a nail hammered into an oak beam, but the maid herself was gone.

Then I looked in the pantry - on the shelves were long-necked bottles with names written on pieces of plaster, and drugstore-looking jars, no cheese or ham, it seems the elves bring the breakfast basket to her doorstep in the morning, I thought, and immediately I heard a noise upstairs, either a *mouse laughing* or a *bird*.

I ran quickly up the stairs and down the corridor, opening all the doors in turn without a word-until I came to my own room, where the innkeeper turned from the mirror and was so lime-pale that I took a step toward her, willingly putting up my hands.

I saw her holding my glasses and a suede napkin and was about to say something like *don't be so frightened, I let a lot of people touch my glasses*, but then I noticed that she was standing in my dress, buttoned all the way up, and I hesitated - it looked like she was wearing it over her naked body.

*I shouldn't have hoped for oak doors in a house without windows, Miss Sleepy,"* I began, and then I faltered again, for she put her hand to the top button.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1985

*There is an herb called perevaska, its color resembles that of a mother's cap, and when it blooms, it becomes on top l i k e needles. Give it to wives who can't give birth - give it in wine or warm water, God will immediately pardon them, they will give birth and be healthy.*

When Deirdre got sick, Sasha thought she did it on purpose - to spite Pomme, who was said to be walking around Westwood Cemetery with a serving girl from the Irish Cross.

Deirdre's barbs and quick tears seemed to tire the good-natured Breton, her father said at dinner, but he should be simpler, funnier, and closer to the haystack. Sasha imagined a haystack at the bus station, right in the parking lot, with couples walking around the haystack, giggling and elbowing each other. There was no touchy Irishwoman near the haystack.

It's amazing that so many strangers come to Deirdre's house, Sasha thought. She gets so many daisies and fresh marmalade that she could open a kiosk in the Old Port, she'd said so herself yesterday, treating Sasha to candy from a round box.

How many people would have come to see me if I'd had some kind of influenza now," thought Sasha. Prue Sparrow would sit at my head and sigh patiently, Dora Crossman would look in out of curiosity and go off to tell everyone how awful I looked. I guess that's it. It's about time I got married, and I'm woefully short of melts friends.

It's about time you g o t married," Dr. Tor Ferguson, who looked like the pudgy-eared lion on the front page of the Litchfield Gospel, said cheerfully to Deirdre. - It's about time,

except we put a mustard compress on your chest and a pill in your cheek.

Deirdre obediently unbuttoned her flannel robe, pulled up her shirt, and Sasha, standing in the doorway, marveled: Deirdre's breasts looked like bread! Two flat, fresh tortillas! No - two bare, shiny coastal pebbles that you could throw on the water and they would bounce merrily and repeatedly.

In the same cheerful voice, twelve years later, old Ferguson said to his father: It's about time you took care of the papers, dear Waldo, it's about time.

Dad hadn't taken care of the paperwork, and now the Maples were shared equally, and if he'd listened to the doctor, it would have gone to Sasha, of that she had no doubt. It couldn't be helped, after the accident on the Cardiff highway, Dad didn't care about anything.

*Liza, it was youz* he would say to Hedda, who entered the room, but when he recognized her he would turn away with a tired grimace. At first this pleased Sasha, but one day she heard Liza say it herself when she entered the half-dark bedroom and saw her father's mouth fold into a squeamish crease.

For the first three weeks my father still talked - he demanded tea, complained about ants in the bed, about the hard edge of the blanket, and then he stopped talking altogether, closed his eyes and began to listen to some sounds he could only understand.

It must be the clatter of hooves on the sidewalk, Sasha thought, because sometimes her father smacked and moved his hands as if he were pulling invisible reins. Or maybe it was the sound of his own footsteps, which he missed. Or the reproachful whistle of the planer getting stuck on pine knots.

Daddy, you'll soon get back on your feet, even if they're not very pretty, Sasha wanted to say. Lord Byron had a boot with a shoe block sewn onto his lame foot, and all the women on the island suffered for it. Or, say, King Oedipus: that was his name - *swollen foot*, or take Ulysses: his name comes from the words *hip* and *wound*.

But my father wouldn't listen, he drank his tea in silence, handed over the tray and turned his back to the wall, waiting for Sasha to leave. There were long bluish scratches on the wall - Dad was always scratching the plaster, he had lime under his fingernails, and he wouldn't let him clean it, he didn't like the shiny tools in Sasha's bag.

People die when someone wants them to die, Sasha thought.

Deirdre needed Pomme; she recovered, cut her hair to match the boy's, planted sarsaparilla and catnip in the garden, quit her job at the Maples, married her Breton man, and set off across the Straits.

Hedda didn't need Dad, and he never recovered. He died eight months after the accident, unable to mend his broken bones and regain his mental clarity.

Sasha had read in an old book, I think in *Physiology*, that a hoopoe chick plucks its parents' shabby, weak feathers and licks their blind, dirty eyes. She was willing to do the same, to go to Ersley's day after day for oxygen and to wipe her father's back with sage vinegar, to take imaginary ants out of bed day after day and to rearrange the blankets, breathing in the dense odor of urine, morphine, and painful sweat-but that was probably not enough.

Old Dr. Ferguson died too - two years later, of heart failure. I guess he wasn't much use to his son, young Ferguson.

## 1992

*There is a herb matitsa at old places, its leaves are round, like a cabbage, smooth on one side, and that herb is very good, which mother or machikha does not like children - give it to drink or carry it with you - it will help.*

When nine-year-old Junior realized she had breasts, she went straight to Sasha and unbuttoned her school dress and showed her:

— Look, it will soon be bigger than yours! Everyone at school today was jealous of me and even touched me to see if it was real or not.

— Do you unbutton yourself at school like that, like you do here in front of me? - Sasha snorted, standing at the stove, not taking her eyes off the coffee pot.

— You're so stupid! We had gym hour, and we were bra-watching in the locker room," Junior said, pouting her lips and looking away. She was always quick to take offense, forgetting it immediately, but she could remember it suddenly, six months or even a year later. That's the way a raw fin flares up in the stove-a blue marsh fire, hopeless, extinguished-but when you leave the house to get a better stove, you come back to the fire humming in the stove and freeze in amazement.

— We were taking apart an antique telephone in class today, and it was full of black powder. And I saw your mammoth in the hallway," Junior added, taking the pot off the stove and pouring herself a cup of coffee. - He's going to grow winter hair down to the floor, and you've got some taste, Alix, I tell you!

She didn't want to become a teacher's sister-in-law, any more **t h a n s h e** wanted to move to Monmouth House, with its drafty, unheated corridors and long, stony road into town. Drina was still afraid of the ghosts that lived in the marshy glades behind the Westwood forest, just like a little girl.

She was also afraid of turning into a crow or a water worm, like the two royal swineherds in the saga her sister had read aloud to her at bedtime long ago. They were always *quarrelling* about nothing, even fighting with their tails at the bottom of the sea: *then they turned into two ghosts and scared each other, then they turned into two snow clouds and wanted to snow each other's land.*

Sasha had always been amazed at how obediently Junior took her fiction, ancient horror stories and Celtic heath myths at face value. What a listener Deirdre would have been, she thought, too bad the stubborn Irishwoman had abandoned us to our fate, just as the Roman legions had abandoned Britain.

1988

*There is a herb called shake, a thin grass, which stretches on the ground, clinging to it; the flower is white at the very ground, you can hardly see it. It is good for you to ask for something from people, and everything will be good for you.*

- They didn't name it Stone Maples because of the maples," Mama explained to Sasha one summer day. "There were never any maples here, but when we came here, Deirdre looked at the runes, and your rune *CaLc* is associated with maples and mountain ash. I suggested to my father that we call it *Maple Manor*, but he said maple was a weak tree and added the word *stone*.

You, Sasha, look like a stone, but inside you are a weak child, even though your father and I put hawthorn leaves in your cradle and you were supposed to grow up to be a bully and a daredevil. The Alexandrina tree was not very hardy, not for the fact that it is used to make guitars and baseball bats. Mom had to treat Sasha now and then, and she dried herbs, the whole kitchen was lined with rustling meteorological trays, and the pantry was filled with tinctures in long-necked bottles. My mother wrote the names of herbs and explanations with a ballpoint pen on a scrap of Band-

*Aid: do not shake, only externally.*

*but either breed it or breed it.*

When Sasha and her father were left alone, they felt as if they had woken up in a different house, confused and heavy-headed as you do when you fall asleep in the shade of a yew tree. Her father quit his job and started a boarding house, and Sasha stopped going to Mrs. Mol's school.

She wandered around the house, grabbing at her mother's chores in her mother's thread gloves, she did everything she was *supposed to do*, but she couldn't keep the Maples in her hands, and it looked like the house was going to become a wire thorn and the banshees and all sorts of other evil things were going to settle in it.

After a few years, her father became ill and stayed home more and more often. By then, Hedda had already moved into a boarding house, and a sandbox and swings were set up in the backyard for Junior. Sasha had unusual worries: she brewed bark and barberry roots, planted foxglove in the moss, boiled, cooled, decanted.

His father's fingertips and lips were turning blue, his hands were swollen, he had stopped wearing his wedding ring - it was now in an earthenware bowl on his dresser - his eyes were dark every now and then, and his skin was dry and shiny. Hedda did not seem to notice it; she had, as Sasha's favorite writer would say, a *fascination of the heart* that allowed her to occupy herself only with objects pleasing to the eye and things that were not tedious to the soul.

She now managed everything that her father could not, she managed everything - indifferently and deftly, like the white horse of the goddess Epona, which always walks at a measured pace and never at a gallop, knowing that no one can catch up with it, no matter how hard they try.

Sasha knew for certain that her stepmother did not think of her father's illness as a trouble, a wormhole, a scourge, a plague, a calamity, or a malevolence-she simply did not realize that her father might not wake up one morning. In the same careless way, the ancient Celts, convinced of the immortality of the soul, lent each other money with the condition that they would pay it back in the Other World.

Sasha was afraid to talk to her father about the hospital, afraid that he would agree and she would have to be alone with two *strange elephants-she had* read somewhere that a Ceylonese elephant, when separated from its herd, dies of loneliness, and she felt like such an elephant in an Indian herd of strangers.



## TABITA. LETTER THIRTEENTH

*2008. South Lambeth*

Auntie, you wouldn't believe it, he's a real Welshman, he's got a Red Dragon flag on the wall in the hallway, called *Ddraig Goch*, I think he was born in West Glamorgan - just like Anthony Hopkins! He's Presbyterian, of course, and likes leeks and hot toast w i t h melted cheese.

I've been thinking for a long time how to describe him better so that you would understand me. I'll start with the strangest thing: he never laughs, only smiles, but in a disturbing way. I wish one day I could make him laugh so hard.

He also has different eyes: one is gray, the other green, you can see that if you look at his face in the daylight. But you know, auntie, you have to try to look him straight in the face. On the stairs he always nods and passes quickly, he won't even say a word about the weather, and when he leaves me the keys, he looks away or looks down. But it's not shyness, you know? It's something else, but I can't figure out what it is.

The day before yesterday, I went to his house by myself, baked cookies, put them in a basket and came, sort of neighborly, terribly afraid that he would not be alone, but he was alone.

It's St. David's Day, dear Tabitha, he said as he opened the door for me, and as luck would have it, I don't have any daffodils. He opened a red wine - the kind I'd bought! - and brought out two glasses, one of brandy and one of something else, probably water.

For some reason I told him I didn't drink, then he started to make coffee, looking for a coffee pot, but I told him I had a coffee maker, I just had to cross the playground, and he came to me like a child.

At home, I cut off the yellow flower from my opuntia and pri--

pinned to his sweater with a safety pin. Remember how happy I was when the opuntia finally bloomed? That's a good sign.

His face is tired, as if parched, with many fine lines near his eyes, but his mouth is so fresh, boyish, as if from another face altogether. It's a pity he smiles so little. He also has an odd dimple on his chin, as if someone had started to write the letter U there.

I guess I think about his face too much. But you'll see it soon enough and you'll understand.

You're coming at Easter, right? A lot of things will have changed in my life by then.

*Soft fire makes sweet maLt.*

*Your perfectly happy T.*

## **SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008**

*Wae's me, wae's me;*

*The acorv's vot yet*

*FaLLev from the tree.*

Fourth of July.

I rummaged through their dark bedroom, but all I found was a driver's license, a well-hidden photograph of a laughing athlete, a stack of dimes held together with a hair band, and two of my stepmother's old letters from India with a gray-haired guru on the stamp. The old man had a hard, sad look in his eyes, and I imagined Hedda picking out that portrait at the post office, trying to get at my conscience.

So that's what it was - Junior had gotten into my stash, found my mother's letters, and decided to punish me. Now I was looking for *who-knows-what* in her hiding places, which were ridiculously similar to mine-in the linen drawer of my dresser, in my velvet bear, in the pocket of my old winter coat.

Heddins' eloquent letters were eating away at my palms like quicklime, so I stuffed them back into the laundry and went to the window. Outside the window was a green club glade, blooming with yesterday's shells and tangerine peels, and in the morning light it looked like a battlefield from which the last of the Getaires and Persians had just been carried off, missing only the horses in bronze breastplates.

The driver's license looked alien to me - it was a flat, fake face with eyes that were very sunken in. I was about to put it back when I saw Dresser's face on the back, with my sister's name next to it. My God, that's little Edna A. My poor girl.

I pulled back the net curtains, stepped out into the hallway, grabbed the caretaker's cloak from the rack, and stood in front of the full-length dressing room mirror.

*How did she do it?*

I took off the stale orange robe I'd borrowed from the bathroom. My back and legs were immediately covered with goosebumps from the draft. There was a round cat-hole in the bottom of the door, a hole I hadn't noticed yesterday, and cool air flowed out, the breath of a sleeping river. I was suddenly glad to be standing here, naked, a few feet from the Thames. There's something childlike and optional about rivers, unlike the sea, the sea always wants more from you, and if you don't give it to it, it turns away.

After putting on my cloak and tying my belt, I looked at myself and then at someone else standing, let's say, in the bedroom doorway. *That's it, isn't it?* Someone cautiously grinned in the depths of the mirror and motioned toward me. The woman in the cloak pouted her lips and shook her head, a quick squirrely glance to the right and upward. No, not like that. I slowly unbuckled my belt, opened my cloak, and looked at my breasts-two pink wolf berries instead of large amber cloudberryes, no, not that.

A door slammed in the kitchen, barefoot footsteps were heard somewhere, then, almost immediately, the muttering of a faucet and an irritated

the squealing of the coffee grinder. Six o'clock. The caretaker always gets up at six o'clock, and during the regatta he doesn't even eat breakfast, which he had warned me about from the evening.

I would have to eat breakfast alone in my sister's kitchen, spread my sister's jam on my sister's bread, and watch the blue-and-white-uniformed janitors scurry around the clubhouse while my sister slumbered far away in a Brighton hotel room with a warm, raggy Fenja cradled in her arms.

- Welsh makes my cheekbones curl like a speeding rock," you said then, on December twenty-sixth, two thousand and three, and fell asleep with my blanket over your head. You still sleep like that; yesterday I looked in your bedroom before I went to sleep in the narrow guest bed in the mezzanine you call the attic.

Five years later, Dresser, you look and smell different, but you sleep the same way you did in my room with the window on the Irish Channel. I remember the prickly winter air and the otherworldly roll call of the ferries in the white mist. I remember getting up quietly, pulling a wool stocking with a patched heel from the dresser and putting in a piece of blueberry pie and my father's silver cufflinks.

I knew my mom wouldn't like it, but I didn't have any other gift.

\*\*\*

*History is a nightmare I'm trying to escape from.*

That day I didn't wait until evening, I just went to the movies.

Junior's note was the ash bag from the Buddhist parable: the brothers opened it in a famine year, thinking it was their last supply of flour, and died of disappointment. I didn't want to see Edna and Dresser, not because I was afraid I'd snap and make a scene, but because I can't look into a

I cover my face in people I don't like," I blush, look away and chew my lips like a retarded little girl.

Now it is hard to understand what upset me so much, because I never wanted Dresser for myself, sometimes he even disgusted me, like the loose Fernando Rey disgusted Conchita in the old Buñuel movie.

I wanted Dresser *for the others*, so they would finally get off my back with their assumptions. I wanted Dresser *for the others* because behind his narrow, straight back I could relax and not think about my facial expressions, the grocer's bill, or the obscene amount of dried wormwood under the ceiling.

I remember now: I think I was upset about the two neatly packed suitcases in Junior's room, and one of them was Dad's, with wide straps, and the fugitive had no right to it.

She laid down quietly, selecting linens and sweaters more carefully, even putting away the photographs - I opened the case, of course, and looked. She even wrapped the statue from the fireplace, a plaster ballet dancer on pointe shoes, in a woolen sock. That's how you go to school camp for the summer, not on the run. That's not how you run away in a fit of madness with someone else's fiancé - with ice-cold champagne from the neck, with an off-road chase.

A boring family movie about cheating, that's what she was going to show me, boring like the splotches of sanguine in the snow when the first car drives through the fresh snow, turning out the suckers of yesterday's mud

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... *Parisatidas, the mother of Cyrus and Artaxerxes, said,  
that if anyone wants to speak freely to the king, he must have  
silk words.*

Fifth of July.

— There's a sea of porter and a mountain of nuts the size of Ben Nevis in our bar tonight," Dresser said, finishing his coffee by the window. - This town has a way of expanding like a sperm whale's stomach during a race.

— You are going to watch the races, aren't you?" he opened the hall closet and took out a round box. - Then put on a hat, without a hat they'll think you're a servant. And your angelic pronunciation won't help you.

I looked in the box:

— Thank you. Looks like she picked it out herself.

We said *wife* and *she*, as if we avoided saying the name of the Younger. Perhaps it embarrassed the overseer that he slept with both sisters, like Anchises, king of the Dardansz

— What a snobbish place this Henley is," I said as I served him his coffee, "I read in Grace Kelly's memoirs that her father was barred in the twenties because he was the son of a bricklayer. An ordinary bricklayer, not a freelancer.

— Henley is a special place," Dresser corrected me. - There is no other place like it.

— It is not without reason that people here get so frantic that they throw themselves into the Thames and go to the bottom to the whistling and cheers of the audience.

— At the bottomz - Dresser raised his eyes to me with an inflamed streak along the edge of his eyelid.

— You told me yourself, remember, three years agoz Some navigator threw himself overboard in the middle of a race, the boat got lighter and came in first, and the navigator got tangled in the water lilies and drowned!

— Oh, that," Dresser nodded. - So what if the foursome came in first and were disqualified and withdrawn from the race. But what a character! Only in the nineteenth century, like Prince Albert.

— Why, Prince Albert got tangled up in lily stalks too," I laughed, but Dresser didn't even smile, he's always gray-eyed when he talks about royalty.

— The Prince gave the regatta a name," he said with significance. - It was said to be the second physical effort His Highness had ever made. The first was brushing His Highness's baubles.

No, Dresser's not hopeless, he can still make me laugh.

For a minute I even wanted to spare him and leave.

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*... Whoever you are who are present as I take my vengeance, speak words of sorrow, show the damned one a face wet with tears. Here, here is the altar raised for your death. All is ready for the solemn funeral.*

All morning, as the light, papyrus-like boats raced from Temple Island to Poplar Cape, I hung around Stuart's Glade, as tedious and colorful as my former French teacher.

All the nastiest things in the world are called Stuart, except for King James the Fifth's daughter. I am restless, the day is off its leash and running around like a dazed puppy, and I am sitting on the bridge by the sluice, staring into the water, brown with rotten grass at the bottom.

I'm waiting for Dresser, I have to finish with him tonight and go home. Dresser, the unrequited hostage of the denouement, invited me to dinner in the club restaurant, or rather in the servants' dining room.

There are some cracks drying under my eyes, like craquelures in old varnish. I rub my fingers under my eyes and

I look at the other shore: dirty brick chimneys, flat roofs of boat sheds, the dull shrunken profile of the foreground.

When Midah and Airmead cured the king's one-eyed gatekeeper by taking out the eye of his cat and putting it in the gatekeeper's eye socket, it did not bring the poor man any relief - the cat's eye closed tightly during the day, and at night it rotated wildly, looking for mice. Everyone in the palace aghast and pitied the gatekeeper, but none of them thought of the cat.

What will happen to Dresser when I've done what I've planned? He'll drink in his cottage in the evenings with the radio on full blast, or he'll take up billiards in the club cellar, or he'll quit his job and go to the other side of the island, or he'll roast his past on a row of branches and marry the serving girl in the pub.

And what will become of us?

The youngest will come home, and life at the Maples will be the same as it was before, full of *m i s u n d e r s t a n d i n g s*, arguments over post-it shampoo, cracked cups, and late returns. I'll see my girl every morning-but what's the use, she won't let me look into her eyes for a long time, I make her uneasy, she fears me. She chooses *me* as the greater of two evils, simply because she wants to go home and get some rest.

What I'm doing it for? To do it my way, that's what it's for.

## LOUFERS CLUB GUESTBOOK. 2008

*Levy Junior writes:*

I'm ordering you to consider the failure with the pills an unexpected success! Quit your whining and Greenpeace drooling, the dogs were old, shabby and good for nothing. As for the fake grave, that doesn't mean anything either. The grave was there for diversion, like the Emperor's empty tomb at St. Ele-



I don't. I'm sure there's a real one somewhere. We'll get to it at the end of the month when Neo and Alien return.

Don't forget that the city belongs to us.

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*Writes eye\_by\_eye:*

What if they were Dundee's ghost dogs?

My grandmother used to tell me about a *terrible pack in the night*. They guarded the graves of murdered men. Fire dogs, shooting sparks. You had to say a prayer and use a special ratchet to make them go away. And if there was a mother and a small child, then the dogs would be gone for good.

*Levy Junior writes:*

Yes, grandma's grandson, of course, look out the window, they are already barking at your door. If you heard what MY grandmother is saying, you would have been in the closet a long time ago, shaking with fear. My grandmother, if she had the chance, would send sparks flying, and she would chew up your ratchet and spit it out.

*Spiderman writes:*

A dead raccoon has been dropped off in Lamia's garden. Just as a reminder.

A police inspector is spotted at the boarding house again. He's disguised as a guest. He's not a threat to our cause, quite the contrary. Should we talk to him?

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*Levy Junior writes:*

I'd like to know what you're gonna tell him, you idiot. Tell him we committed trespassing and this, uh, whatchamacallit. vandalism.

But while we're at it, we should keep an eye on the house. Too bad our main force is away on vacation. Spider, bring me my dad's binoculars tomorrow!

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

why I am writing this diary? it chirps deafeningly and inaudibly, like a tree cricket at the basset: either that death is near, or that it's time to wake up and follow the yellow leaf.

It was not for nothing that I spent the whole night reading a book about amulets I had found in my room: in the morning I dreamed of a cicada made of brown agate; the Chinese used to put it on the tongue of the deceased to make it speak or chirp - in a word, an ancient toy for those who had lost the ability to speak to the living.

which of the dead I would talk to if I could get my hands on an agate Chinese cricket? or rather, which of the dead I have not yet talked to?

Why I'm writing this diary? is because it's *not a book*, I don't want to write a book.

books are just manuals for beginners, muddy instructions on how to build a cosmos out of ice cubes, but this is a personal cosmos! it belongs to one being, all the others will fail anyway, you cannot walk over the same burning coals (splinters, fish bones) at the beginning, overflow with the same dreary silence (rage, painful lymph) in the middle, and in the finale plunge into the same lake merging with the sky, noisy from swan wings (writer's drunkenness, grassy oblivion).

I mean, you could, but why would you want to keep a diary?

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blueberry cream pancakes! I said this morning, standing on the galleys looking down at the breakfast table, it's like manna from heaven.

Sasha turned around from the stove, found a pencil on the table and started writing with the sheet against the wall, I leaned over the stove and was shown a notebook: *by the way, manna from heaven is nasty lichen cakes with tamarisk resin!*

Sasha was standing in the kitchen, right below me, and I could see that she was smiling.

I also saw the parting in her hair, an ant's path in Umbrian clay and pine needles, and I wanted to reach over the railing and stroke her head, or-if there was a piano in this crooked little house-play her the *Maple Leaf*, by Scott Japlin, I was even ready to rename it the *Stone Maple Leaf*.

I wondered what it was: I couldn't like Sasha, I never liked a woman who looked like a tangle of shadows, like a Franciscan's cassock, like the darkest place in an engraving, not like a woman, in short, I'm telling you.

*I'm going away for a long time, on business*, Sasha wrote, when I came downstairs in a fresh shirt, *Mr. Brana, my fiancé, had taken care of the household.*

It must have been easier with your sister, I said, putting a couple of pancakes on my plate, maybe I should call her back.

*You've seen her grave. Isn't that enough?* She was still smiling, biting the tip of her pencil, her teeth stained with blueberries, and I stared at her mouth, knowing she'd be angry.

*Oh yes, you can't get enough, it's your job to understand everything, isn't it, Inspector?*

I'm not an inspector at all, why would you think that?

*What's the difference*, the red pencil scrawled on the sheet, let's do this: *I'll tell you the truth and you'll leave and never come back here again*, Sasha put the notebook on the table and left the kitchen.

Why does she want me to go away so badly? She has really taken me for an inspector in disguise and is about to put a confession on the kitchen table or put a bottle full of poison in front of me with the cork stuck on it.

and what I'm gonna do about it.

*These are my sister's letters*, Sasha tossed a thin stack of envelopes onto *the* table, her handwriting noticeably rounder and slurred—no, you can put this in your file! *The Welsh witch case, or whatever it says on your government file?*

I took the top envelope from the packet, pulled out the letter, turned it in my hands and held it out to Sasha, but she hid her hands behind her back, a childish gesture like the one I had seen a little earlier, when she licked her finger quickly and put it in a bowl of cream.

\*\*\*

when I walked up to the sleepy boarding-house a rainy day and a half ago, the name on the plaque told me more than the carpenter and the clothier had expected in sending me to High Newport Street, the plaque stabbed me in the eye with a hot copper edge, and my eye bled and my hand ached where it had broken twelve years before.

I could have put two and two together sooner, but I'd have to be sober for at least a couple of days, that's it, elderberry lou.

Okay, this investigation seems as empty to me as a rocky hill abandoned by its inhabitants, but I'll see it through.

if only because I do not intend to fulfill what I have lost, I do not wish to become a second clothier, even if this Irish shop were full of Sassanid fabrics painted with scarlet griffins and simurghs.

So, what was our deal, to sort it all out in three days, wasn't it, Hon. Stonebury?

means I have another day and a half to go, if you count from the minute the mistress of *maples* opened my door on hearing the sound of the broken garden lamp

a lot has changed since then, I know everything about her, well, almost everything, what I don't know is what her voice tastes like, but why should I know that? once upon a time, about thirteen years ago, I knew a woman with a face like *that*, as if carved with a pin on a copper board, and she had freckles on her chest, so I can put that husky, aloof voice *here* and be sure that it is so

that woman's name was Irish, she liked bitter tinctures, detailed diaries, paper letters, and Sumerian tablets, and she had the same quick hands without rings, and I suppose she was at least five years old now, but that wasn't the point.

the thing is, sasha sleepy keeps a diary, I'm sure of it now, a *real* diary, no shaky, flimsy bukos dancing in the wires, no unrequited flickering.

it's made of ink and paper, and I'm gonna find it.

\*\*\*

before, when I used to keep a diary online myself, I deliberately made it electric - I loved that it lived in every London computer, in every office and coffee shop everywhere you went

but Gerhardt Mayer said it's an addiction, and our job is to get rid of all the things that hold us back, including the habit of drinking morning añejo at half past ten.

in ninety-seven, dr. mayer treated me against my will-- if it hadn't been for him, I'd have been in jail for a year and a half, but he pulled me out of the witch's breach and threw me in.

on his hard couch in his office with a window on sommer set house.

the guy you maimed, he said, would probably die, he was a dying man before, but you, Lou, you're gonna have it a lot worse, you're gonna have to move on.

Do this: link it to alcohol, neurasthenia and absent-mindedness, then you'll have a s l u g in your memory that we can push out little by little - if we're lucky.

hell no! The ingot grew to gigantic proportions and began to strangle me like a Borgesian sphinx - probably to explain my own horror, for these sphinxes can do nothing else.

Eight years later, when I went to the doctor myself, much had changed: the windows still showed the residence of the disgraced duke, but the couch was soft, and Mayer had acquired a beard like Mircea Eliade's, and had adopted the manner of rolling a cigar in his mouth without lighting it, as if Joo Lung were his candle.

Zhu Lung also always had his eyes closed, and, according to the *Book of Mountains and Seas*, he had long ago gotten rid of his addictions - he simply lay curled up like a snake: he did not eat, drink, sleep or breathe, and if he did, the wind would blow ten thousand li around him.

## **HEDDA. LETTER FOUR**

*Kumarakom, January 2001*

Two ancient carpets were brought to the workshop, one painted with unicorns, the other with boys, a hundred boys on one carpet! This is a good sign, Currath said, because such rugs are given to wish for a large offspring, so now you will have a son for sure. And if it's a girl, you'll be in trouble, she said cheerfully.

Rajiv's uncle (I have finally learned his whole name, but I am unable to write it) taught me fine work - for three days we squatted and glued rice paper onto silk - and then he said contemptuously, "You will never be able to do that, Bala! He calls me Bala, which means young, although the hairy Currat is about eight years younger than me.

And thank God I can't. The Chinese glue stinks like the floor of a port pub, and the brown paint is made from pomegranate crusts and stains your fingers once and for all. I tried to explain to them that you need rubber gloves for this kind of work, the kind that cost two pounds a dozen in Dayland, but they look at me like I'm crazy.

Isn't it amazing, Alix.

Yes, I know you are reading this letter, for it is you who go to Ersley's to get the mail, and you can't resist opening the envelope and reading it, can you?

Isn't it amazing, you've thought me the Wicked Stepmother for so many years, and yourself the poor stepdaughter, and now it's as if we've switched roles: I'm treading cinders, and you own the palace and, I suspect, boss around my daughter.

And yet, think, my dear-isn't everything in your present life too easy in your own way?

I remember you that first year, when your father brought Drina and me to the boarding house-you gritted your teeth and endured, not saying a word, running around the house all day with a dust rag, as if you wanted to wipe away the traces of our presence. You thought we were stealing Waldo from your dead mother, and you wanted us dead, I could feel it.

One thing you never realized, Alexandra, my child, was that your father was afraid to live with *you*, afraid of *you*, of the stern crease in your childish forehead, of your witchy beginnings passed down from your mother, of all those tufts of grass over the stove, and sudden tears, and outbursts of rage.

I couldn't understand it then, just like I couldn't love your father.



I didn't cry when he died, that's right.

You can't forget it, and even now you are probably reading my letter, holding it with two fingers like a dead mouse.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*He who looks at the world as one looks at a bubble, as one looks at a mirage, is not seen by the king of death.*

Memories are not something you can rely on. Paper is another matter.

Even now, when I read the pages of the Herbalist written three years ago, I am a little lost: it seems to me that I did not write it, I could not have so shamelessly mixed it up. Poor mom, she probably can't believe her eyes.

In an old book-oh God, is there anything in my head that didn't come out of an old bookz-I read about a *spirit and a backbone*, I'd never seen that combination of words before. So the spirit in the story could move separately from the backbone, it had a kind of boneless but distinguishable flesh, it could be seen, but not as one sees a shadow on a wall or circles on the water, but fully - amber skin, shaved skull, silver embroidery on the sleeves of a kimono. There was also a story about people who come to Kyoto monastery with a bag, wanting to become novices, and they are rudely chased away, left to sit outside the gates, in the rain and snow. And then, when they are let in, they are told to sit silently facing the wall for four days. That's their test: no speech and no food for the eyes. I could handle the former, no doubt about it, I haven't spoken to anyone in days and I don't want to, except that the guests get a little nervous when you send them notes like, "*Please pay the bill for the room...*".  
*Lefon, isn't the weather marvelous today?*

But I wouldn't look at the monastery wall. I wouldn't go a day without looking out from my porch at the Westwood Hills.

*And green and gold I was hunter and shepherd, The calves Sang  
to my bugle, The foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,  
And Sunday rang slow  
In the pebbles of sacred streams.*

Anyway, about the spirit travels, I hadn't seen my parents since they were gone, no matter what the town said. I just told Prue one day that I was writing a diary for my dead mother to keep her entertained when she got back from her cold alder land. A sparrow can't help chirping, so she blurted it out.

Edna's on the run, haughty Gwen is turning her back on me, Leif, the proprietor of the Copper Anchor, has decided that lightning struck the roof of the café because his twins have climbed into my garden, and now Leif can't come in.

My dad's worried about me, I can feel it. And my mom, too. I know they're both here somewhere and want what's best for me. They hate to think of my poverty, my stupidity and my confusion. They'd like to marry me off.

As a child, they used to scare me about Miss Moyle, whom no one wanted to marry because of her masculine ways and her habit of undiluted gin.

The stocky, short-haired Miss Moyle, the old maid of the Hollow Manor, had long since died, but not of drunkenness - she had been accidentally stabbed to death at the Birmingham stadium in eighty-five, in a fight between the local fans and the Leeds lads.

Or rather, Miss Moyle was dropped on the ground there, and when she came home she began to wither, and in six months she was dead.

I never got up again. Just like my dad after the accident on the Cardiff highway - he came home from the hospital on his feet and a couple of months later he had bone pain and cramps.

I remember when Prue and Sommy and I decided that Miss Moyle had a lot of money sewn up in her mattress-maybe a thousand pounds! - and crept into her bedroom the day Ferguson took the old woman to the county hospital for a check-up. The window was closed, but Sawmie hit some hook with a spoke, and it swung open, letting us into the damp bedroom, with the wallpaper lagging from the walls. We slit the mattress with a penknife along the seam, spewing out clouds of nasty grayish foam, and then we split up and ripped through all the chairs in the living room, even the bench, covered in embossed leather.

On the way home, Sommy showed us a bronze lizard with a hole in its head:

- It's a toothpick holder, I knew right away. I don't think old Moyle needs toothpicks, but I could use it to scare the girls at school. She looks so lifelike!

Ms. Moyle's toothpicks were of no use - she died in the hospital - and Pine Hollow stood empty for a long time, for some reason with two signs at once: FOR SALE and FOR RENT.

There were no pine trees at Pine Hollow, just as there were no maples at Stone Maples.

Sometimes I'm relieved that Ms. Moyle never saw her mangled furniture.

Maybe my sister is also relieved that I never saw her spoiled Dresser again.

\*\*\*

*... No, I prefer the fresh, dewy, tight rose of Somersetshire to any of those garish and morbid wild wines that are only fit for poetry.*

Today I went into a shop in Geoffrey Road and came right out, my nose filled with the smell of onions, goutaline, and lavender perfume. The proprietress had announced her engagement, her friends were gathered, and the shop was buzzing and smelling as if harpies were torturing Phineas, the Thracian king.

*... to think that dark-faced, fat-headed, unwashed country maidens with flattened noses are "blue-eyed Rhine maidens"!* Thackeray wrote that, but what did he know about unwashed maidens, he should have been in Pembrokeshire.

I wanted fresh bread, but I couldn't bear to see the bride in her beaded dress, so I sent the maid to the Old Port, to the tea-room of a former friend of my father's. I'd love to walk to the Shamrock, but I can't, because I don't see Gweniver anymore, or rather she hasn't seen me since nineteen ninety-eight.

She used to love me and say I had hair like a Little Dutch painting, and her son Derek used to teach me to play chess, and they had an antique table with jade pieces in the living room. I once carried a transparent green pawn in my fist, giving in to a sudden urge. My mother found it in my bed that night and told me to take it back, but Derek didn't even scold me-just put it back.

When my mother died, Gweniver took me in for a few days, and then my father became good friends with her, I remember it well - she sent us fresh baked goods in oiled paper every Sunday morning, and that went on for a year, until Daddy's new wife came to the house. I wish he'd married the wolfish mistress of the Shamrock, she had a wavy braid around her head then - like the bronze bust of Juno in the British Museum.

God, then Phineas and Thetis, now Juno-why am I thinking all morning about the Greeks and the Romans? Maybe it's because I have an ancient history teacher in my head, a shepherd king who can't smile, an imaginary policeman,

an uncaught thief, a crazy Londoner picking up trash on the shores of the Irish Sea,

Or perhaps it is because my ship is rudderless on the stormy sea, full of over-drunk Thracians, while my left hand sleeps and dreams *undisturbed* dreams of Ithaca.

If my father had married Gweniver the pastry chef, her son would be my brother, his late wife would be my sister-in-law, Edna A. would be living in the middle of nowhere, going to dances there and not knowing about the purple Lake Vembanad, and Fenya would not have been born at all.

\*\*\*

*I am Like a peLicav iv the wiLdervess. I am Like av owL iv the desert.*

I don't know why these sweaters are so stiff to the touch when you buy them at the store. Probably the yarn is treated with goose grease to keep water out. Or vegetable oil.

I don't even know who I'm knitting this sweater for, I was just walking by the shop a week ago and I liked the name in the window - *fine merino sheep's wool*, there was something slow, herbal, soothing about it.

Deirdre taught me how to make Aran patterns when my mother was alive, and I wanted to make her a sweater for Christmas. She showed me the *Jacob's ladder* and the *fisherman's tourniquet*, but I only remembered the *tourniquet*, which is the easiest.

Deirdre said that in the old days, every family had its own patterns, that sweaters could identify a fisherman who died in a storm, and even the prophet Daniel had one, she said, but of course I didn't believe that, though Deirdre swore, folding her fingers together.

I didn't have time to knit a sweater for my mom, I only got a sleeve, and that was crooked, Deirdre then put it under the

a bunch of garlic in the pantry, sewing up the bottom end and tying a loop.

I don't think I'll ever finish the sleeves of this sweater, and there's no one to give it to. I must not stop, however, for I would be furious with Norn Verdandi, who does not like abandoned knitting, and she does not like tangled knitting any more.

I can't write a book either, but I've started one and I can't stop. Norn Urd would be angry with me, because she doesn't like a tangled past, and she doesn't like a forgotten one any more.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

2000

*There is a herb Polish mint, its juice to put in ears - worms will die, the same juice we anoint ulcers, in which worms, and so those will die and fall out. Which herb mint grows at watery places, and that herb is accepted by wives according to reason.*

When Sasha missed her mother's Wedgwood meal in August, she didn't think anything of her sister. At first she blamed it on an elderly Canadian couple who had sneaked out at the end of July without paying the phone bill, but later she realized that the Canadians would have had to work hard to get two gilded tea pairs, a biscuit vase, a menagerie, and a few other small things out of the Klevs.

By evening, the kitchen table was filled with a list of sixteen things that the clever thief had collected from various corners of the boarding house. The biggest loss of all was the dish, black jasper porcelain with white relief, the high lid wrapped with a bulging vine. Mother's favorite.

Hedda tried to sell it back in ninety-seven, claiming that her father's funeral had cost too much, but Sasha silently took it out of the cupboard, wrapped it in newsprint, and put it under her bed. There it remained until Heddy's departure, which was not long in coming. As soon as the theatrical Hindu lover took her stepmother to Lake Vembanad, the dish was unpacked, washed, and placed on the dresser in her parents' bedroom.

And now it's gone for real.

After thinking for a moment and rereading the casualty list twice, Sasha put on her raincoat and went to Heather Hill, uptown. There she asked the desk clerk to call Branagh's receptionist and waited on a wide windowsill under a yellowed palm tree. An anxious Saunders came in about ten minutes later and sat down beside her, his light-colored uniform pants tucked under his file.

— Oh, I thought something had happened at home, with my brothers," he said, looking at Sasha in surprise, his lips pale, his innocent smile trying in vain to bloom.

— It happened, you're right," Sasha took a handful of smooth, artificial stones from the tub and began pouring them from palm to palm. - Only not at your house, but at mine. Why do you want our porcelainz Edna stole it for you, I know.

— She didn't steal it, she took what was hers," Saunders said calmly. - I was buying diving gear, and I was a few hundred short, so she helped me out. It's cheaper to buy all this stuff in England, especially the wetsuit, or you'd have to have it shipped to the islands, you know.

Sasha had heard about the islands for the first time, but she didn't show it.

— It was my mom's collectible Wedgwood," she said. - Edna stole it, and I'll report it to the police tomorrow. Give me the dish back, Branagh, or I'll be in a lot of trouble.

— You're still cheap," Saunders said, smiling faintly. - You know how much it costs now for a low-aged blonde in a Cardiff brothel? I don't ask myself, but the customers tell me.

— Cheap? - Sasha unclenched her hand, and the palm pebbles spilled out onto the floor with a rubbery thud, and Saunder's face swam before her eyes, white, with a lush, smiling mouth, like a snowy merry-go-round with scarlet horses. She swung to knock the carousel to a halt, but held up her hand and shoved it into her cloak pocket.

It was the same way she'd held her on the school porch in He-verstock when Cynthia Bohan had given her a *treat* from the crumpled brown bag the shopkeeper used to sell toffee in.

— There's some left at the bottom," said Cynthia, "get what you're waiting for.

Sasha reached down and pulled out a handful of sticky burdock fruits, and the girls around Cynthia laughed and rolled the taffy around in their cheeks. Dora Crossman even spit hers out so she wouldn't choke on it. A few turnips clung to the sleeve of her knitted sweater like nasty green bugs, and Sasha unclenched her palm and dumped the spoils on the stone floor. An unfamiliar squeamish fatigue flooded her from the inside, making her squint and press her lips tighter.

— Don't pout," Cynthia patted her on the shoulder. - We'll play another trick. Here's a cone," she took a pink lump out of her mouth and handed it to Sasha. - This is a kiss for you, because you love me.

— Don't sulk," said Saunders, rising from the ladder and shaking his pants free of dust, "they only gave me three hundred and change for your china. When I get rich in the islands, I'll buy you a new set of china, even a whole set without a scratch in it.



1999

*There is a grass cormorant, good to give to cows and horses, which is decrepit does not lead, and which a man is difficult and forgets - sa - drink and bake, steam and body, and fold the head, God will help, and sweat will go terrible, and sorrow will go away.*

They spent the spring as if in a dream: everything was going well, everything was in place, everything was enough, and at the end of March they even had a real lucky break with a random group of tourists who had bought a Welsh tour and were stuck in Wishgard with their orange bus. The bus had broken down on Sunday morning and the driver had to wait until Monday: the garage owner had gone to his mother's for the weekend and help from Penfro was not promised until midnight.

Nine travelers stayed at the Maples, the rest were taken by the pub owners in the neighborhood. Every self-respecting establishment had a few damp, dark rooms above the beer hall, and they were cheaper, but in the "The Maples had a terrace overlooking the deserted spring shore, and authentic Welsh rhubarb jam was served for tea.

In the morning, Junior came into the kitchen, rattling a clay tip saw:

- Two hundred and fifty pounds! - she said. - I've billed the agency for South and Lander. And at least twenty in change in our jug. Now we can buy a baca, can't we, Alixz?

At the end of spring, Sasha did not go to Snowdonia, where her teacher, who had paid in advance for a week at the White Lion, was waiting; she sent a postcard apologizing, but received no reply. So she sent him a ring, and in return she received a Monmouth family heirloom in a long rosewood case with a note at the bottom: *That's right. Bala does not repeat.* Also in the case were tacks, spare flints and a vial of thickened bone oil.

They had been to Lake Bala in ninety-six, in the early fall, when Monmouth's teacher had stopped being a teacher and was working on a commentary on Dante that had never been finished. That's where he bought Sasha a ring, smooth and thin, like the kind they put on a tea paw in the wildlife refuge.

— It has your phone number and a request to return to Monmouth House," Sasha said, opening the velvet box, but Deffydd didn't even smile.

Later, at breakfast-they lived a mile from the lake, in a cottage called Cartref, and cooked for themselves-he said that he had given a girl a ring once before, twenty years ago, but it had ended badly, and now he considered diamonds a bad omen.

— There was a pinkish stone in a carved setting," said Daffydd, not looking up from his plate of omelet, "I remember it well. I had to take almost all the money out of my account to buy it. I'm sorry to tell you this, but you have a right to know.

The beginning of October was cold and dry, the heather had withered and the woods had bloomed once more, golden and dense, the lake was covered with a fine ripple, as if chilled by the very thought of winter. At the beginning, they went for many walks, went to the market in Lannuishlin, wanted to take a ride on the toy railroad - an old-fashioned steam train pulling several wooden cars along the shore - but it turned out that they were a day late, as the railroad closed on the second of October.

— It's not the season," the station guard in a knitted vest explained to them, "come in spring, spring is a different matter. But now there won't be a soul here until April.

Sasha considered it a bad sign and remained resentfully silent the whole way. She spent the remaining three days with a book on the shore, perched on the flimsy board steps leading to the water. The teacher read, too, the memoirs of some old warlord, but more in the evenings, in bed.

There was only one bed in Cartref, a spacious one with many small embroidered pillows and a lace bedspread. Sasha slept in woolen socks found in the owner's closet, the window blowing hard on her feet. The first night at the cottage, Daf-fidd had tried to hug her as soon as they went to bed. That is, first he lay with his head against the window, then he stroked her legs, and then he got up, pulled off his funny flannel-left T-shirt, and lay down next to Sasha, face to face, with his hand on her stomach.

— How thin you are," he said, "I can count all your ribs. Mrs. Bow will have to feed you pudding from morning till night.

*Chicken ribs*, Sasha remembered. Chicken ribs, my father would say, running his palm over my mother's side, and my mother would squirm, arching her thin eyebrows, pretending to be angry. She didn't know how to get really angry, but Sasha did, and she did.

Teacher Monmouth pressed his palm a little tighter, and Sasha pushed him away and sat up sharply in bed, feeling as if Deffydd's fingers would be imprinted on her skin, as if on a wax tablet, forever-as the fingers of the boy who had made the pigeon's nest were imprinted on the stone from Llan- vaes.

— Not now," she said, not turning around, knowing that Daffydd was staring at the back of her head. In the darkness, lit by the receiver's scarlet light, his body - shiny, pink moles, like a river trout - seemed too tight, too rigid, filled with some nasty, elastic life. Sasha sat with her head down, feeling the chill dripping from the cracks in the window frame, Daffydd's silence trickling down her shoulders and back.

Mrs. Bow feeds him puddings from morning till night, and I shall have to do it till I die, she thought, and cried.

## TABITA. FOURTH LETTER

*2008. South Lambeth*

I've got a terrible cold, terrible.

Mr. R. made me look for some rubbish in the basement, and it was damp, I came home and came down with a fever - today I had to call the Archives and say I wouldn't come for two days, R. picked up the phone and was terribly displeased, although he knows it was all his own fault.

I got dizzy and broke a thermometer in the kitchen.

The mercury balls rolled all over the floor, imaginez I sat on the floor for half an hour crying with impotent anger. Then I got cold, got up and collected all the mercury with a vacuum cleaner, and now I have a poisoned vacuum cleaner for all my troubles, and there is only cheese and two balls in the refrigerator, I don't know how I will live, and I don't know who will send you this letter.

Aunt Jane, why am I always alone?

I didn't have any friends at school, so I made up a friend, Doris, with green hair down to her shoulders, and I walked around with her and talked to her, and we were so well matched. Then you and your uncle caught on and took me to a child psychiatrist, Dr. Barbra.

Dr. Barbra wore velvet gowns that were too tight, and as she sat across from me, I counted the folds on her stomach, each time there was an odd number of them, and they were arranged differently.

See, I didn't forget. You shouldn't have done that.

Doris disappeared, and no one has come forward since.

Meanwhile, Luellin had been gone four days, twelve hours-  
owls and twenty-three minutes.

*T.*

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

Why did I fall for that stupid betz? Why did I let them take my word for itz? As obediently as I used to color in the geography class in my hated Guinness, with my tongue out and red ink all over my face?

For nothing, I wrote on the first page of my diary: *no woman, no man, no life, no sentient being, no - all these dharmas are insignificant, like dreams, like thoughts, like the reflection of the moon in water.*

what, what do I care about that freckled Welsh moon in the water; besides, she annoys me with her dumbness, as deliberate as the dumbness of a Venetian prostitute who wore the mask of the maid Moreta, the one where the short rubber band had to be held with the teeth, which meant keeping silent until the end of the carnival.

And so she remains silent while I walk around, tamed by her *likeness*, a little timid and driven by my curiosity, just like the three hundred knights of the Mabi-Negion: *three hundred knights live with her, and everyone who comes to her must listen to stories of their movements, by which they try to win the mistress's favor.*

so it is, between me and Sasha it is only stories, told or withheld or not, between us it is only *a s t o r y*, humble and merciless, like a chivalric novel, full o f monsters and utter innuendo - in chivalric novels everything was possible: if you wanted to cut off a knight's head four times, you cut off his head four times, such was the fervor of the medieval imagination!

one day Sasha will talk to me, or at least laugh.

It's no surprise, nor is it surprising that a mute maiden conspired at the table in King Arthur's palace, just to tell Percival where he should sit.

\*\*\*

I could not sleep, having read the ferocious *armies prydeiv* found on the shelf for books forgotten by guests, and began to think about the ritual initiation of the king: it was like the Indian Ashwamedha, except for the gruesomeness of the spectacle - the brothers would never have thought of such a thing!

What it is like to sit on a horse carcass full of blood and paw from it in front of you, with your hands behind your back, unable to refuse or even take a sip from your throat, knowing that these people around you now will tomorrow be your subjects, vassals and women.

this is the essence of Celtic patience, going back to the graves of the Magh Tuired, the blood runs down your neck and stomach like sticky hot beer, but you are having fun, the windy closeness of death blows on your face, you are waiting for an endless night with a heady steep-sided epheb of boundless power, the ka- mene has not yet shrieked under you and the lake has not run out of the eye of the balor, but you already know how it will be, and you know why.

Toward morning I dreamed of a clothier on a Wishgard hill talking to a carpenter on a shiny red device that looked like a police woki-toki

I had my first dream about a clothier!

I'm not such a bad boy, he said, pulling his bluish lips apart with difficulty, I've even forgiven him the damn cat.

\*\*\*

In the afternoon, Sasha knocked on my door, and I stepped out into the darkened hallway, a sheet from her notebook strung on the doorknob: *I'll have to leave for about an hour, if you need anything, come down to the kitchen without ceremony.*

Okay, I'll make my own potion, I said after her, but she was already down the stairs, a thick Icelandic sweater hanging over her shoulders, the door closed, the draft kicked up fluffy dust on the steps, a window frame rattled somewhere on my floor, I walked along a wall with five identical doors, trying to figure out which one the wind was playing in the window, the frame rattled again, and I pushed open the unlocked door at the end of the corridor.

Judging by the decoration, this was the master bedroom; in the guest rooms there were sepia-framed views of the streets of Vichy Garde a century ago, but here there was only a picture of a half-naked girl in faded curls.

I put the latch on the window, pulled back the curtain and moved closer to the portrait, the girl was on all fours, like Ann Chrysostom in a Dürer engraving, looking at me over her shoulder - the photographer had obviously told her to lick her lips before clicking the shutter.

Well, that's alexandrina, the innocently murdered beauty.

Yes, indeed: he *multiplied thee as the plants of the field; thou didst grow and become large, and didst attain excellent beauty: thy breasts were lifted up, and thy hair grew; but thou wast naked and uncovered.*

similar pictures are posted on dating sites: jessie from dorset looking for a friend, privacy guaranteed my boss whitehart takes these girls to a cheap *lamb and flag* somewhere in covent garden, every now and then he calls me over to his office computer to to show another Atalanta slum.

\*\*\*

A large mirror shone dimly above the dresser, all aging brown stains that must have been left by the previous owners.

for some reason they often leave mirrors behind when they sell a house, and I'd be careful, by the way.

I had a woolly bear, stuffed with buckwheat groats, leaning against the glass; I had a rabbit like that, but not a white one, but a spotted one - that's probably why I haven't fallen down the rabbit hole yet, though I've done a lot to do so, I still think: the *Duchess will be furious if I'm late!*

*The maple* mistress will be furious too if I get stuck here, I must hurry up.

the barefooted ghostly reader stopped at this door, so the *quarter is* kept here, and my curiosity will not rest without it, expectatio eludendi beats me like a cold shiver

Sasha Sonley's diary will tell me about the death of the ship's crew as well as the stern-sleeper Palinur, and she certainly has a diary, if she doesn't speak, it means she writes, otherwise it shouldn't be.

I took the silk robe from the chair and smelled it - there it was, the faint smell of mint and fennel, so I wasn't imagining it, the robe was like a salamander's skin and unpleasantly cold on my hands, Edna Alexandrina was squinting mockingly at me from the wall, wait, I said, you'll get your turn, and I started pulling out the small drawers of the chest of drawers that looked like bee honeycombs.

where a woman can hide what she can't get rid of, even though it reminds her of what she wants to be-z

I opened the bug-ridden oak closet, and it smelled familiar - moth balls, that unsteady breath of stale fabric that makes you think of your mother's dresses with tight yellowish armholes and cottage pillowcases with broken buttons.

I peered behind the heavy mirror, rummaged under the chair, lifted the mattress, shook out the green quilted blanket, and the



here-the diary was found where it should have been found from the beginning, under a narrow French *oreiLLer*, like a Christmas clapper, g o o d heavens, how she sleeps on one of thesez

I opened the disheveled notebook, looked at my watch, sat down in the master's chair, and prepared to read

I still had seventy-odd minutes left.

*Участь  
Вторая*

ВЕДЬМЫ  
И  
МЫ





## FACIAL HERBALIST

1999

*There is a water navel grass, drown it in milk or kvass, and bake and chew it - you will not hear any sorrow or pain inside, and it will be the same old way in the same place.*

One day, in late autumn, when she found a forgotten chair in the yard - it had been raining all night - her mother told her to bring it inside, but it was already wet, Sasha said, bring it inside anyway, her mother said, but it wouldn't get any wetter, right, Sasha said, she was in a bad mood after the silly pigeon fight at Mrs. Mol's school.

A thing that got wet once must dry to get wet again, Mom said, looking at Sasha with narrowed eyes, or it will get so wet that it will become water and you won't be able to find it later, because very, very wet things don't notice how they become water, first halfway through and then completely and forever.

And I, Sasha thought, writing it down in her diary twelve years later, had gotten so used to Junior that I had become Junior myself; I had absorbed her completely, the way the molecules of a tree, according to my mother, are replaced by molecules of water; I had had her Welsh rain in me for so long - prickly, thorny, solid, knowing no rain rules, but just going wherever it rained - that I could no longer see the line between the counties where it was dry and the counties where it was dry and the counties where it was dry, thorny, thorny, solid, not knowing any rain rules, but just going wherever the eye can see, that I could no longer see the boundary between the counties where it was dry and the counties where it was wet, I could not see the boundary between her and myself, why didn't I bring that damned chair from the veranda, why?

1997

*There is a herb eindrink't, and who doesn't love you - give him to drink, and he will love you and can't stop until death, yes to be, and you will teach a beast - give him to eat.*

The new hotel cards arrived at Ersley's chemist's three days later in a thick yellow envelope - instead of *Waldo Sonley, Stone Maple Guest House*, it read: *H. and A. Sonley, Breakfast and Rooms, Wishgard, South Wales*. A red maple sprig was embossed in the top corner.

After twirling them in her hands, Sasha, who had come for the mail, looked up at the apothecary:

— Who do you think she meant, me or Junior?

— I suppose she meant Alexandrina," replied old Ersley, without hesitation, "for you are moving to Suffolk Woods in the fall, and they are staying here.

He ran his hand into a tall candy jar, pulled out an almond breadcrumb, held it out to Sasha, and said for some reason, nodding finely:

— Your father was a good man, he never did anything bad to anyone.

To be considered good, it is enough not to do bad things to anyone, Sasha thought as she crossed the Lower Bridge with a heavy bag over her shoulder, on her way to Dora's for cereal and biscuits. You don't have to do good things at all. You can just sit there, silent and still, chewing on almond breadcrumbs and be the object of everyone's affection. People love you because they don't have to strain to make sense of your words and actions. The distance between you and people should be tightly closed, Sasha thought, walking down Har-bor Road, people want to lean on familiar dressers, to jump over familiar chairs, to pass over familiar mirrors. People don't want to see the void between themselves and others, they fill it with a hot, loose substance-the oatmeal of their indifference, the condensed milk of their explainable heavens, God knows what they fill it with, I don't even want to think about it.

They'll never love me, they don't love me anymore. When she came back, she put the cards on the living room table, and, when she heard loud voices, she looked into the kitchen and there was a nimble Head-

A young woman in a tin apron was catching sluggish autumn wasps on the window sill and throwing them into the high flame of the gas burner. The youngest stood beside her and watched without stopping to look. The wasps crackled like little clappers, mother and daughter were flushed and looked perfectly happy. The clock on the wall showed half past five. The oven was glowing with a honey muffin for the afternoon of four guests.

Sasha entered, silently turned the red switch on the gas pipe, and began unloading oatmeal and crackers from the canvas bag. Her hands were shaking, and the cereal rustled in the cardboard box like dry wings.

The fire went out, and there was silence in the kitchen.

Hedda took off her apron, hung it on a chair, straightened up and looked at Sasha carefully, the blue gas flame still buzzing in her eyes. Sasha stepped back. Two surviving wasps were lazily crawling along the window frame. The air in the kitchen had thickened like a honey filling, and it was impossible to breathe for another minute.

But the minute passed, Junior grabbed the crackers, scarfed down the cellophane, her stepmother grinned and left the kitchen, and Sasha took a cautious breath.

## 1990

*There is an herb of black bullock, which grows together with sprinkles; this herb is good for black sickness; put it together with weeping and bog bullock, it will help. And give it to horses in spring, when they are combed.*

Ever since Deirdre had left the boarding house, Sasha had tried to do things Deirdre's way. Not to spite Hedda or to reproach her father, though she might have done a little of that, but because Deirdre knew so many interesting things about home life that you could make another Herb Book out of them if you sat down and wrote them all down.



Deirdre of the Maples was gone, but across the strait lived Deirdre and Pomme, the new name of the servant Sasha had forgotten, or perhaps had never known, because the stubborn Irishwoman had not sent her wedding notice. "The Maples had ceased to exist for her since August of eighty-eight, when Master Sonley had brought a new wife into the house.

Sasha had always liked Pomm, the name of Deirdre's *boyfriend* - ew, my mother would have cringed at that word! - Pomm, a Breton chef, a gnarled, balding, laid-back Pomm who couldn't cook anything good but could taste any Irish beer. He was even a betting man, and he would talk about it, sitting on the porch of the Copper Anchor and jingling his winnings in his pockets. There are different kinds of bitterness, he said, and Sasha remembered that.

— A Breton is a little better than a Welshman and not much worse than an Irishman," Deirdre said, but Pomme didn't like him much at first. Whenever he appeared at the Maples, Deirdre would rattle the dishes, or worse, take up the laundry and stand firmly across the hall, leaning over the baskets of laundry, not even turning her head at Pomme's quiet greetings.

Once Sasha saw him stand for five minutes behind Deirdre's back without waiting for a word, shove a languid bunch of daisies into her apron, spit in his heart, turn and walk away, and the Irishwoman sat down on the floor between the two bedsteads and wept. She sat down so hard she almost collapsed, and Sasha thought it was because the daisies were no good, and she walked up behind the maid, took the bouquet out and threw it into the sink full of soapy water.

Without Deirdre and her mother, Sasha had a hard time. She thought her old habits could keep the house warm during the long winter: she remembered adding lemon to the wax when she waxed the furniture, cutting apple peels in serpentine, and washing her sister's hair in a barrel of rainwater-because she had to be careful.

Deirdre claimed there was nothing like sea foam from heaven.

A stool would be placed in the backyard, and Junior would sit on it, with a towel around her neck and her head resting on the edge of the oak barrel. Sasha laughed at her sister's upturned face: her half-open mouth seemed like an eye in her forehead, with the moist pupil of her tongue and the pearly iris of her teeth, her darkened hair floating in the water like kelp leaves in the ocean surf.

When her hair was washed and wrung out, Junior threw off her dress and climbed into the barrel, splashing soapy foam to *keep the water* flowing.

One day Sasha found her there, in tears, freezing to the skin, furious like a Chinese water spirit, Gong-Gong, who had lost a battle with fire. One of the neighborhood boys had opened the garden gate and pushed the stool back three steps to watch the naked Drina struggle out of the trap.

Sasha grabbed the shaking girl by the arms and pulled her out of the barrel like a resilient vixen from the damp moss.

— My God, what are you hiding there," she said, "invisible charms, I don't think they'll blind anyone.

— I'll get him," repeated Junior, shifting shakily from foot to foot and wrapping herself in a wet towel, "if I wasn't Ed- na Sonley, I'll get him, that brat, and I'll pull his red ears, no, I'll make it worse for him-I'll get his cat and cut off its tail!

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

*Elderberry, elderberry, Greek puffball, rune fehsh - the tea of its flowers purifies the blood and the decoction of its bark soothes the heart,* so Sasha wrote the night I broke her garden lamp, she went to her bedroom and wrote this while I was taking a shower, hanging wet clothes on chairs and watching from a

windows on the black corrugated roof of the shed - I was given a room with no sea view, that's ten pounds cheaper

what she thought of me when she went to bed, braiding her hair, looking out of the window at the linden branches bending in the wet wind-~~z~~ since I read it- hurriedly, listening to the footsteps on the stairs, to the rustle of gravel-since I read it I cannot rest, the

London apartment seems to me a dark Welsh cave full of stalactites, I trip over boxes and drawers, from one drawer I took out a sketchbook and I've been flipping through it like a lunatic for half an hour.

Looks like he's met a lot of women who look like Sasha.

look at his barefooted beggar, no - at his suckling skinny girl sleeping in the briars, no - at Andromeda leaning over the well, ugh, what has the Pre-Raphaelites got to do with it! everything in the maples is seen through the *confusion of the garden*, that's what it's about, everything has an opium-like lethargy and cruelty to itself, everyone has armor covered with blackberries, dark circles under the eyes, a heavy head, thick snares of hair - that's what it's about.

if she writes about me now that I am gone~~z~~ I want to read it, but I don't want to read anything else, nobody ever wrote anything about me, I didn't even know that my left eye is blue-white-gray, like wet moss in the sun.

I imagine her diary, day after day filled with ink birds: it *would be good if louellin e. came again*, I see the phrase as if it were written on the wall of the king's palace, I look at it, touch it, and feel like Ulysses at Penelope's gate, discovering that he had only fought ten years and spent the other ten years getting home like the last fool.

\*\*\*

Epicurus writes that all men pass their longing on to each other like a contagion.

it seems Epicurus wasn't as profane as many people think.

When I got home, I organized the books that had been lying on the floor since the day of the move into even stacks, cleaned the carpet, and even poured coffee and tea from torn bags into two  
glass containers

the jars found in the storeroom

That wasn't enough, and looking around, I ripped the curtains off the owner's and threw them in the bathtub - I'll never have a washing machine, I lost a puppy as a child who fell asleep in a drum full of dirty towels.

the water in the bathtub was the color of burnt ochre, for the sake of this color a French painter had used up two royal hearts thrown out of a tomb in the Abbey of Saint-Denis, I don't know where I read this, but I remember that I was not surprised, although I should have been.

dragging the curtains back and forth across the scratched bottom of the bathtub, I thought about time-maybe because the blood rushed to my low-slung head.

time, I thought, is like blood, they say it *runs*, or *stops*, or *your time is up*, and it's like everyone has agreed on how much water, proteins and lipids there are in it, that is, how much movement, absoluteness and irreversibility there is in it.

a strange man claimed that time was eating him, naturally, like a dragon, while its three heads - *past*, *presevt* and *fshtshre* - were obviously eating each other as well; yes, of course, who could be a dragon but a substance that everyone knows about but no one has ever seen?

Gnawing is a useful practice, like the dragon Nid-heg, who gnawed the bones of the dead so that they would suffer and be reborn, and my *past perfect* gnaws at me so that I don't have time to puff myself up.

\*\*\*

I picked up my first student at 9 a.m. today and drove him around an imaginary Lancaster Alley, slowly, unbearably slowly, and I saw not his chubby, uncertain hands on the steering wheel, but others with dark freckles on their wrists, white and fast, without rings or bracelets, I think she's got me hooked, I said aloud, and the boy let go of the wheel in surprise, the screen flashed a restless red dot - pip, pip, pip according to John Damascene, evil is nothingness, empty space, that is, simply the absence of good, I thought as I drove through the traffic circle on Bayswater, according to Thomas Aquinas, everything is good, and evil is a small part of it, a necessary component, there is no right turn on Clifton Place, I said as I pressed

the reset button, let's go back to Stanhope Terrace, London from a bird's eye view seems more real to me than the one that people walk on, I own a London stretched out on my back, sitting in my tower with a display and two pedals - if I get on the real Lancaster Alley, I'm bound to get lost on it according to leibniz, evil is an underdeveloped good, he argues that evil becomes essential when it is irreparable, that is, when men do not fly and birds have no speech, now drive through paddington to st. mary's hospital, I said and let go of the wheel

*by sasha sonley* there is only her awareness of evil, nay - rather, a sense of evil, imperceptible as cum grano salis - the unspoken remark of paracelsus, without which the antidote will not work

For example, the drought in the upper Ganges leaves her indifferent, the evil does not touch her, and therefore it is just a speck on the map, a fleeting prick of pity, but the murdered terriers Hugin and Munin is an evil directed at her, it gives birth to a reciprocal evil, even if disembodied, not realized, but it raises in her an ashy, hot wind.

between her and the restless red dot of the first evil, there is a connection, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, and that first dot will not be happy, by golly.

\*\*\*

The black lacquered tea boxes are not to be chosen, they are like the gift boxes in the temple of Setos, where they stand on rooks and store gifts that no one needs any more. I was worried that it might disappear, like a Middle Kingdom spell written on a clay vessel.

it will take time, tabitha said importantly, we don't have a Russian translation program in the archive, I'll have to ask someone, you know.

Tabitha's pupils and mouth are dark and round, like the openings of a socket, and she looks straight and steady without averting her eyes, and she stands too close, but it's a London socket, and **t h e r e a r e** passionless brittle wires leading to it, with mosquito's annoying electricity ringing in them, so the lights are not on, and they won't be.

but it shimmers, damn it, in every scrap of p a p e r I find on the streets of Lambeth, I look under my feet every now and then, as if I were a vagrant looking for some money dropped by a passerby, I am quickly accustomed to intermediary paper, I look at the sticky wrappers and wrappers carried by the wind, as if I were afraid of stepping o n Sasha's writing or on a letter I couldn't read, and so I stole it.

what the late Mrs. Sonley would say to that, if we met again.

**SASHA SONLEY'S LETTER, STOLEN BY  
ME,  
BY LOUELLIN ALDERBURY, AT HER HOUSE.**

*Wishgard, July, 2008*

Edna A., what are you talking about? I'm not mad at you at all. I just haven't had much time to write lately. There's a fungus in the Maples again, and it's making yellow bubbles on the living room walls. That would be all right, but it's spread to the furniture and is now trying on the china rack.

The gate had to be repainted after the fire, the living room wall was also burned, and the furnace had cracked in the very spot where the acanthus leaves and cornucopia are.

The guesthouse has been empty for a week, due to rain and stormy weather. Plus, the guests have been choosing Westwood hotels because we've had power outages all spring. They say the new passenger terminal is to blame, but I think Old Town is slowly sinking to the bottom of the bay.

The Everton girl is not good for anything at all, she and I are like reseda and rose - withering when we are in the same room, but I bear it all patiently and smile like a guinea pig.

The worst thing happened at the end of June - Hugin and Munin died, having fallen asleep and not woken up. My mother always said that dogs were a necessity and a *reality*, like a house or a forest or a rocky shore. So now I live with a slice of reality taken out of my flesh, or rather two. But I'm thinking of you, don't doubt it.

Dresser won't give you a divorce, which doesn't surprise me. Your husband is as predictable as a rowing race at his grand club. He's not letting you go because you're running around with the boys on the national team or because he wants to punish you and lock you up. Oh, no, you never broke him up.

He won't let you go because you'll come back to *me*, which means he'll suffer two defeats at once: at Dunbar and at Stirling.

I know what I have to do, but you must turn off your crazy curly head, close your eyes and obey me blindly. It'll work out, Drina, don't worry, you'll be home soon. But first we have to unscrew everything back to the starting point, the beginning, you know? The year two thousand and three.

Get your papers and all the money you can find. On the twenty-ninth, before the races start, you will take Fenya, toys, a week's supply of things, and go to Brighton. I shall go to the keeper as if nothing had happened, and tell him that I had warned him by telegram, which seems to have been lost. And that I intend to have a good time in spite of your absence.

I assure you, he'll just shrug his shoulders, he's got his hands full. Leave the rest to me. I'll make him afraid of the scandal and let you go in *peace* with the child, even if it means coming to Lions End in a torn shirt and bruises, crying out for justice. All I have to do is get him to wake up next to me with a dry throat, a heavy head and love marks on the sheets.

Let me know if you like my plan, and don't forget my condition that you come straight to me from Brighton without showing up in Henley for a minute. I'll have all the necessary papers by then, even if I have to plant the entrance to Dresser's cottage with Yemeni khat and mad cherry bushes.

And if that doesn't work, I'll kill him.

## **TABITA. LETTER FIVE**

*2008. South Lambeth*

Aunt Jane, say what you want, but I called Luellin, got his number from the concierge when she came in with the bill--



by the phone. Would you believe it? He was really upset: Tabitha, he said, you're not taking care of yourself, there's nothing worse than a single cold!

Half an hour later he knocked on my door, good thing I had time to powder my nose and put on a long robe, and I put the thermometer on the lamp to raise the temperature - I wanted him to be scared for me, but it didn't work, I had to keep it on longer.

Llewellyn brought in an empty bottle of rum, went into the kitchen and put the kettle on the fire. I was so confused, Aunt Jane, that I couldn't say a word when he added the kitty heel to the bottle, sat me down on the sofa, wrapped my robe around my knees, and rubbed the hot rum firmly, firmly on my legs.

- Do you have any woolen socks?" he asked, but he looked at me and waved his hand and went into my bedroom. He didn't find any socks, of course; he stood pensive for a moment, then looked in the bathroom, took two terry cloth towels from the dryer, and wrapped them around my feet.

He had been in my apartment for forty minutes, so funny, in his thin sweater over his naked body, with his home-made glasses - these were different, with black horn-rimmed frames! He behaved like a husband, that is to say, without ceremony: he walked around the apartment, turned on the gas fireplace, poured the rest of the rum into my cup, and in response to my protesting gesture he only moved his eyebrows: *Come on, Tabitha! It's necessary!*

But most importantly, as he was about to leave, a hurried Donna showed up with oranges and a message from the Archives, and she was frozen in the hallway when he opened the door for her, so I could see her face stretch out from the couch!

She asked him something in a concerned voice, deliberately to get a better look at him, he answered, and I looked at his slender back and his shaggy hair, which seemed light in the darkness of the hallway, looked at his back and couldn't breathe, as if the artificial flames had drawn all the air out of the room.

Care killed the cat, you'll say. Let it go.  
I'm ready to spend the rest of my life with an in-fluenza.

*Your Tabitha.*

## **SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008**

*surrender your Landrin Roland floating  
south in a shell.*

Fifth of July. Why did I pay twenty pounds for lunch at the "The Red Lion" ? Just because I read about it once from Jerome Jerome. I always want to merge someone else's famous text with my own reality.

I had promised Younger that I could get Dresser to do what Oriental fairy tales call *last favors*, but the closer we got, the more I doubted. My anxiety was gnawing at me, and the excitement had left me; here in Henley everything I had planned seemed awkward and incomprehensible, like a French game of marbles.

So Dresser will sleep with me and have to give Junior a divorce - that's one.

Dresser will sleep with me but won't be afraid to blackmail me and give me a divorce - that's two.

Dresser will sleep with me, but I won't have the courage to threaten him - that's three.

Dresser won't sleep with me - that's four.

We spent half the evening in the club's dining room, the only room that didn't have gobelins of hunters and pheasants on the walls. The waiters came here to take a break, the table was littered with dirty glasses and dishes with slices of cheese and salami. That's exactly what he meant

The caretaker, when he invited me to dinner, would have been strange to suppose otherwise. He went back to the kitchen for a wing of duck or a couple of spoonfuls of garlic sauce, and was *l a s c i v i o u s l y* surprised at my lethargy.

Come on, he said, try it, it's a good meal here, with a Rablezian scope, not like the Henley Town Club - you could wipe yourself with a caterpillar after dinner!

We quickly drank a bottle of sour champagne, then whiskey stolen by a hired garçon from Bisham-Greinds, and then Dresser poured brandy from the other men's glasses on the tray into his pocket flask and suggested a walk. Or rather, I said that it was getting stuffy, and he remembered that he had promised me a walk to the Hennerton channel. Before I did so, I went to the bathroom, ate a piece of butter from the table in a napkin, and walked briskly down the club corridor, overlooking through the open doors of the guest bedrooms.

I don't know what I had hoped to see, but probably Junior in the arms of a Danish rower, the winner of the Red Grave itself, who was *breaking the waves*. For some reason I imagined the rower in love to be a muscular berserker with an oatmeal beard down to his eyes, though why did I think the rower was in love?

Most likely their coitus was brief and took place somewhere in the gym-I'd just come down the spiral staircase, for instance-on the leather seat of a clunky rowing machine.

\*\*\*

*O taker! Don't take.*

Fifth of July.

We did not reach the channel, my heels clinging to roots and grass, and Dresser thrashing heavily from side to side as if-

like the pendulum in a castle clock. But we reached the last pier, where a large boat was bobbing on the water with a dock on the deck painted in blue and yellow, the colors of the Maltese fishermen.

There was no light in the windows of the cabin, for the owners had not yet returned, and there was a wicker bench and two pots of kalahoe on the deck. As I climbed over the rail, I tore my tights on the chain, and, going to the sliding door of the cabin, took them off with my underwear, crumpled them up, and stuffed them in my bag.

— That's my dream," Dresser said as he walked around the teak deck, "to have a boat like this and sail all the rivers and dock wherever I want. Too bad it's dark in here, I'd like to get a better look.

— I said, "The rivers will run out quickly, and in the ocean you'll sink in a couple of hours in a boat like that.

— It's a normal dream," said Dresser offended, "you'd think I'd be here, a sharpener in a shabby apartment, husband to a useless girl, father to an unknown daughter. If I had a houseboat, I'd set the sails and wave to them all. I would dock at Penborgne, fish and read the latest newspapers in the sunshine.

— In Penborgne, you'd be hit on by the local hairdresser in a week, and it would start all over again," I said coldly.

— Are you saying you have a better dream?

— There is," I took the flask from him and sipped for show, I was still sick of butter, "but I won't tell you, you'll probably laugh.

— I wish I had grown donkey ears! - The viewer swore, putting his palms to his head.

— Okay, I'll say it. Dresser, I want a calf from you," I stepped up close to him and put my hands on his starched shirt, which had lost its former gloss. He shuddered and pulled back a little, but he wasn't wearing a shirt.

— Don't be afraid," I said, sliding my hand in deeper. - You know what they call a cow in Ireland, loz *Green Pussycat*. That's because she never had a calf, but she never had a calf. Come on, let's a t least try," I added, smiling in the dark.

Dresser shook his head and licked his dry lips. In the moonlight, his face looked unusually gaunt to me—he must have been wasting his time mixing hard liquor with red wine and beer.

— Alix, you must be drunk," he said uncertainly, "you're talking nonsense. We'd better go home; I'm dizzy, you see.

— I have no reason to go home," I said, taking the hairpins out of my knotted braid. - S i n c e you left, I've been passing the time, not living.

— There you go - you're just as good as before," Dresser laughed embarrassedly and took a sip from his flask. - If you only knew how tight these patent shoes are on me. I hate Lions End. I hate the regatta.

— Take off your menial shoes and go barefoot," I shook my head and loosened my hair. - Take everything off. We'll go down to someone else's cabin and lie on someone else's sheets. Come here, you stupid boatman.

— Alix! - Dresser began, but I spoke quickly, not allowing myself to be interrupted:

— That's why I came here. To hear you call my name. When you say *Ali-i-i-i-x*, it's like a blossom branch being swiped across my face. Why don't you touch this one here? No, let me do it.

I knelt on the rough teak planks and looked down at him steadily. He shook his head reproachfully, but closed his eyes and leaned against the rail. There was no zipper on his pants, and I was suddenly frightened—I thought Dresser was *solid*, like a celluloid puppet, and not unbuttoned anywhere.

I sobered with fear and, guessing that the club pants had a zipper on the side, pulled the zipper down. Dresser's legs tensed and shifted tightly. I yanked harder, tugging at the pockets, and the white uniform cloth slid down to his ankles, and I could see his knees, covered with stunted wool. The old pity rushed up my throat, and I choked and nuzzled my nose into his thigh, which was covered with sharp goosebumps.

- Oh, God, damn gravy," Dresser moaned, shoved my head away, leaned over the rail, and hovered down. The languid Thames parted and accepted the free treat from the Royal Club's dining room.

Cooks Oblige, Obglodyte, and Obsosi couldn't stand the sight: the caretaker's back shuddered, he growled and squelched, and I stood on my skinned knees on the edge of the deck, stared at his ass, covered in tight nylon briefs, and laughed softly.

It was exactly like the underpants I'd seen on the stripper who'd climbed out of the big cardboard cake at Prue's birthday party last year. Her friends had given her a sewing machine and a cream-covered boy from a Cardiff nightclub.

Then I stopped laughing, crawled up close to Dresser, grabbed his bare legs, just below the knees, and pushed him up hard.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

For my birthday I let my beard down to my eyes and walk around my neighborhood invisible, pure Edgar, son of the Duke of Gloucester, *fedLam feggarr* with a tin plaque on his arm, even the ice cream man on the corner of St. George stopped talking to me.

though I'm surprised no one notices anyone in our bread-and-butter town, whether you're a crying loki or a ve--

lykansha tökkk, no one notices anyone, it's a real mess - and everyone in it is equally poor.

meanwhile it is getting colder in the city, the shrill kaleh is already rinsing her cloak in the corryvreckan and, judging by the forecast, on the twentieth will begin to shake out her blankets for July london at two o'clock in the afternoon I have a lesson with a young man named *cresevt*, and lo and behold-I have been thinking all morning of the white mistletoe, which on the sixth day of the moon was cut with a golden sickle, because the that it can't be touched with iron

I can't be touched with iron either! Once upon a time I was afraid of any touch, but now I'm only afraid of the sharp and out-of-bounds.

\*\*\*

I hadn't realized that the new tile in her bathroom was covered in sprinkles, the ceramic had looked smooth, but now, after spending a hell of a lot of time on the floor, I could feel cheese crumbs or sesame seeds, and my right arm was stiff and numb.

it's deliberately done that way, she explained, so her foot wouldn't slip, her feet were against the wall and her head against the base of the shower, I tried to pull my hand out but her head was as heavy as a Welsh ivy crown, I've wanted this for a long time, she said, to be honest I knew it would happen when you brought me that Russian paper, I knew it was a sign! there you go, I muttered, I never would have guessed.

Yes, yes, that's what it said: *I'm going to kill him*, but you said it was just an excerpt from a crime novel, and I believed it, I'll believe anything you say, you know it, I know it, of course, I know it, I lifted myself up and fumbled for my clothes, my back ached dully, and perplexity filled me all over like swamp water: how did I get here?

Help me, she said quietly, the lights went out and I hit a bump!  
The fuses must have blown! I went in and ran straight into her, she  
sobbed, wrapped her arms around me and pulled me down.

I thought she was resinous and heavy, like a lump of Himalayan  
cedar, then I thought she was crying, she must have had a bad  
bump, I thought, I hate those dingy washbasins in old houses, if I  
had my own bathroom there'd be a hole in the floor and an  
earthenware jug beside her We sank down on the floor, I was afraid  
she'd bump again, and I thought she'd be in a bad way.  
holding her head

her skin smelled of cheese mushrooms, the kind of mushrooms  
that don't grow in England, a smell I know from somewhere else,  
and she pulled off my sweater and unbuttoned her dress, that is,  
the dress disappeared a l t o g e t h e r , rolled into a warm woolen  
roll on her belly, then she lay on top of me, still sobbing softly, and  
stale cheese crumbs dug into my back.

her weak, half-open mouth was everywhere, she seemed to  
become lips, a good hundred lips, and they crawled over my skin  
like snails over glass, and I did glaze over for a moment, then I tried  
to twist away, to push her off me, but she was so shaken that I was  
confused, it seemed that if I did so, the woman would fall to pieces  
like a steel bridge from a company of soldiers marching on it in step  
with me

I imagined her disintegrating into all her snails, or not into a  
pinch of cherry tobacco and a bundle of angora yarn, or not into a  
pair of stilettos and a handful of scaly cedar husk! I smiled, let her  
do whatever she wanted, and started thinking about my dream  
from last night.

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I dreamt I was talking to Sasha in the barn talking! Now I know what  
her voice is!



I need to send a letter and check my mail, I told her at breakfast, you probably have a computer? yes, but it's not very comfortable, she replied, we walked through the garden and she opened the shed, the chain on the door was for some reason outside, did they lock you in here? I couldn't resist and she laughed, twirling her disheveled head.

in this dream she had her maple syrup colored braid loose, I don't know why, and also in this dream she was laughing.

Ms. Sleepy's computer was perched on a rickety Chinese shelf in the corner of a poorly lit shed filled with broken garden chairs, watering cans and chamotte pots, an old model, I noticed at once; in the middle of the room, a workbench stood beneath a round ship's window, unmarked shavings beneath it; on the workbench lay a blue satin smock, a dovetail hammer, and some flat thing with a wooden handle.

This is daddy's chisel, said Sasha, please don't touch it, she moved the wicker chair with the burned- She pressed a button somewhere downstairs behind the cardboard seedling boxes stacked one on top of the other, something buzzed under the shelf and the screen flickered, the connection is pretty slow, she said over my shoulder, I can't get anything decent.

I turned around, the greenish light from the skylight fell on her forehead, her face was barely visible, but her hair shone as if under a theatrical spotlight, she bent down, picked up a full handful of dried shavings and held it up to her face-it still smells, really?

In this light your hair looks like shavings, only brass, I said, when I finally loosened my lips, you already said that, she said, looking around, if it's too cold, wrap yourself in my blanket, she waved her hand towards the sofa, I didn't see it right away, there was a neatly rolled up tartan plaid on the sofa.

For a moment I thought I saw a little girl curled up there, no - two girls! The second, the smaller one, had two pigtails the color of raw cotton, but this vision was from another dream - it was embarrassed and quickly disappeared.

## HEDDA. LETTER FIVE

*Hochin, March  
2001*

Jesus, Edna, when is this heat going to stop?

Everything here is smoky, ancient, and the bright sun makes even new things faded, as if they were completely worn out.

I had a fight with Currat yesterday, and now I regret it. She always agrees to go out with the girl if I don't have time. I also regret that we left Tottayam, there were two old churches on the hill, and I used to go there when I could get away from the workshop. Two stone crosses with Syrian inscriptions-the Syrians were Christians, to think of it! - and a real altar, but it's closed most of the time and you can't ask for the key.

I also regret that I married Rajiv at the English town hall, in a hurry. We could have had an Indian wedding and gone to Guruvayoor, as is the custom here - maybe things would have turned out differently. Indian weddings are so funny - people rub mustard powder on their palms, recite poems and splash water. And they give the bride red bangles!

Today we spent the whole day tinkering with the tabletop, there were lots of little squares, like children's secrets, and each one had to be lined with silver leaf and nailed together. The nails were so small they were monstrously small - my fingertips were peeled off and my nails would probably break.

but I don't have fingernails anymore, Mr. Appas cut them down to the pads.

A lot has changed in those three years, in ways you can't recognize.

Our dates with Rajiv - in Swansea, in the room behind the bar - were secret and fun, with him lighting dozens of candles in glass cups just like in the movies, spreading blankets on the floor and all that. I had several men before him, but none of them would get up in the middle of the night to cook me rumali in an empty restaurant kitchen. Now Rajiv comes to my room once a week and is as careless as a drunken dock laborer. Besides, he takes your pounds from me, I didn't want to say, but I will.

Don't send any more money, I won't see it anyway.

But now I can think that he does not show me letters either. For it is impossible that no one should write to me from England.

Rajiv keeps saying that I have no one to go back to, even if he buys me a plane ticket and drives me from Ernakulam to the airport. He says I have lost two things: the house of my first husband and the respect of my second husband. What does he mean, that I only gave birth to his daughter or that I didn't bring home the money for the Maples I sold?

His name in Sanskrit means *striped* - maybe we just have a black stripez now.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*Happy is he who falls upside down:*

*The world is different for him, if only for a moment.*

Dresser's head seemed to nod at me from the darkness. His body, dragged under the pontoon jetty, was stuck between two be-

His hair was wet and clinging to his forehead, and seemed blue-black under the hospital light of the boat lamp.

I sat down on the bollard and thought for a while. In some Chinese book on suicide I had read a b o u t a drowning man who had tied two stones in a scarf and p u t them around his neck and jumped off a bridge. I took the scarf off my neck and looked around for a heavy object, but there was nothing on deck except two pots with stunted sprigs of kalanchoe.

The wind blew in from Temple and it was noticeably colder. The morning fog began to gather over the zero-cut club meadows - *the* Chinese call this green the *color of a kingfisher*.

I wonder if Lions End will believe that the c u c k o l d Dresser killed himself. No, suicide is not an o p t i o n , a n d Junior would lose her insurance and be left penniless.

It was getting colder and colder sitting on the cast-iron bollard, so I got up, tied my handkerchief, looked around, and walked along the slippery larch planks to the shore. *I didn't kill him*, I said aloud, *he slipped and fell into the water*. The current had pulled him under the dock, and he had bumped his temple against a piling, and there was tina and seaweed. If it hadn't been for the piling and the tina, he would have swam out, of course. If it hadn't been for the pile.

Where, in what book was it: about soldiers in the Bois de Boulogne, one of them shot himself in a sentry's box, and then some more in the same box, and the officers had to burn the box down, for g o o d m e a s u r e . They also thought: if it hadn't been for the box.

If I were to throw myself into the warm swampy water, this dock would be feared, and the boat would probably be sold out of sight-no, I should not do that, there is such a marvelous view of the high latticed windows of Greenlands College.

I squatted down and peered under the jetty-the Dresser's head had disappeared, the poisonous lantern had faded into a pre-dawn haze, and the Thames was once again an innocent Victorian body of water surrounded by willows, reeds, and cattail.

When I tried to paint with colors, I remembered a n incredible number of shades, and I had a Chinese book - about ancient amulets - and I wrote out the words and complained to my mother about the poverty of the Russian and English palette.

The mist over the grass might have been indicated by paint the *color of hoarfrost*, the water by the shore by paint the color *of Chinese dates*, and the blood now congealing in Dresser's veins must have been the color of *carcass*, it is spelled simply, in two characters.

Well, so be it, I thought, as I approached the empty tents of the Remenham Club. It would be nice to have tea and honey at the inn and crawl under my comforter, but I couldn't - I'd have to go back to the cottage, pack my things and take the first bus out.

Back to the caretaker's cottage with no one else to look after it.

Here you are, you unfaithful underdog Dresser, here you are, here you are, it's a pity you don't have a bee-hive in your stunted, overgrown garden, or I'd tap it with a stick, saying, as beekeepers do: *bees, your master is dead!*

\*\*\*

*For what is a wife? A net made by a demon, a serpent's rest, a devil's color, a fierce goat, a north wind, an inclement day.*

Sixth of July.

In the postmaster's books found in the attic, one was untitled and completely falling apart, but I read it all, and I still remember one line.

*Thinness has exhausted her whole body, her eyes do not look straight, Bile is in her bosom, and her tongue is laced with poison.*

That's exactly how I came home from my walk to the Henner-Ton River. Only shaggy as a Welsh pony, and with a kind of wobble in my legs that I'd been trying to get rid of by sitting down on park benches all the way.

When I unlocked the cottage door, I immediately took off my shoes, took my wet tights and underwear out of my bag, wiped my ankles gray with coastal mud, and put them in my valise at the very bottom.

No prints, I told myself as I walked quickly around the comments, no shoes to spare, the coastal mud is full of your footprints, my coat and dress to be cleaned, no napkins, no scrap paper, no fluff or wool.

Of course we were seen at the club, but who today would remember Dresser's goo-powdered companion, the Tenisson rose of the hot, tipsy crowdz

Under the wide straw hat - blessed be the English tradition - you can't see any hair or eyebrows, which are the only features of me worth remembering. No, no one in Lions End saw me, and I was rarely looked at.

But how did it come outz I crouched down in the kitchen for a drink of water and to catch my breath.

In ancient Rome, slaves were slapped when they were set free. The Dresser was kissed firmly between the legs and set free forever. A freedman is a freedman with his pants down.

I laughed in the hum of the empty kitchen, and then I thought I heard someone laughing with me. I had to get up and walk around the living room and bedroom again-no one was there. In the bedroom, however, I could hear laughter-not laughter, no, not laughter, but a laughing humming, like an indistinguishable conversation behind the wall.

I went to the window: the meadow was empty and silent, the still, dark Thames like a newly tarred road. The lights were on in a few windows on the second floor of the club, but the maids were awake; they had to tidy up for breakfast, or the caretaker Dresser would play his dreary record. If they knew where that record was spinning, in what a whirlpool it must be at the Hennerton lock.

I laughed quietly behind me. Oh, no, that's enough. I jerked open the closet, threw out the racks of dresses, pulled out the drawers of the dresser, pulled the curtains, threw the bed off the bed, and there it was, under Dresser's pillow, the yellow cell phone giggling and shaking. It was the club, so it was six o'clock.

They're about to run out of patience and send a messenger.

I went back into the kitchen, pulled out an envelope from my bag, and took out a sheet of paper in the caretaker's grainy handwriting: crumpled notes, like failed origami, that had lost all meaning one January morning.

Notes of a Dresser in Love.

When I was coming here, I took the whole pack in my shoe box without thinking, because I'm like my mother - I never throw anything away. I didn't know what they would be used for.

\*\*\*

*For even the scarlet  
maple of the Sacred  
Temples,  
Where the priests pray to their  
gods, And the one who, shedding  
leaves on the ground, Bypasses,  
they say, the forbidden sign.*

It was a fool's errand, Drina, and you shouldn't have believed it, letting me have your husband and your house for three days. I was going to get him drunk, get into bed with him, and then scare him with a scandal-a letter to the club boss, a gossip in the local paper, anything I could get my hands on. I even took his letters, a whole herbarium of withered evidence, musty testimony-no pride in me, Drina, no prejudice.

I could show up at the Stewart Lounge in a tattered nightgown, tears streaming down my face, claiming I'd been raped by a lust-crazed brother-in-law, a raging *goat, a northerly wind, a rainy day.*

What a suicide note looks like? Something about a toothache in the heart, voices in the night? No, I won't write anything. It's enough what's already been written.

After some more thought, I put on my rubber dishwashing gloves, found a suitable note in the envelope, took the earthenware bread board off the wall, put it on the sheet, and carefully tore it along the fold.

I *slipped* the bottom half of the sheet signed your *hungry, abandoned dresser, eager for a pint or two* back into the envelope.

Dresser liked to make dates with me by leaving messages on the kitchen table, pressing them down with a cup or a flowerpot as if they might fly away; on Christmas morning I found such a note stuck in a cut orange, the ink completely blurred from the juice.

What a boring handwriting he had, and what a way to abbreviate names: *dear a.* And he had a disdain for capital letters, which I can't stand. But I'll need everything today, including "dear a."

I'll leave it on the kitchen table and press it with the sugar bowl to be sure. Six hours and seventeen minutes. They won't find him until--



At eight o'clock, the first runners appear on the road leading to Hennerton.

So at half-past ten the local constable will pick the lock of the cottage, go into this kitchen, take Dresser's farewell letter to his wife and read it:

*dear ah!  
I can't wait any longer,  
I'm leaving.  
meet me in the garden of heaven.*

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

little tabitha translated for me the letter stolen in the *maples*, though her translation cost an exorbitant amount of money - my back, temples and conscience are breaking at the same time

*And if it doesn't work out, I'll kill him, that's what it says, that's what it says, I thought, as I reread the beautifully printed translation on the tabithi printer, with Sasha's letter pinned to it by the corner, I hadn't seen such large archival staples in a long time, why did Sasha write to her in Russian? Edna, or whatever her name is, Alek-sandrina, is probably not even fluent in English, why did her sister write to her in a foreign language and, if she did, in a foreign language?*

that she didn't send

Sasha thinks in Russian. I used to think in Welsh, too, till they put me in the three-damned Guinead Point. Now I think in two languages, and they're both coming apart under my feet like bridges over a bog.

or perhaps all that is written in the diary is a pas-limpsest written over real life, with the old ink still showing through on the poorly scraped parchment?

Clearly, I should go to henley and see for myself.

to see it and stop it, and if it's too late to stop it, to help it escape, and if it's too late to escape, to help it run away, and if there's nowhere to run away to, at least to feel sorry for it.

I'd make a lousy policeman, despite my light-colored coat and belt.

I fear for the killer, and I don't seem to care about the victim.

\*\*\*

... on a friendly basis, says Whiteheart and pats me on the shoulder, we gave your watch to a colleague Jones, you've been gone four extra days, Lou! Not even the union could help you, and you're drunk tonight too, and I told you!

*on friendship, lu-there is* no such thing as friendship, and the word is not a good one, it's a slip from under a stone, fish oil that they make you lick off a teaspoon, the shivering of bluish mittens at the school skating rink, what kind of friendship do you want, whiteheartz?

All these people, met in a chilly crowd, in an ochre-painted corridor, caught on to you by the burr of pity, the moon of inexpressiveness, the ragged edge of envy - all these people are only good because you can have a word with them, but with others there is nothing to talk about, only good because without them you would forget what it would be like to smile, sipping coffee from a dull carton, to press with an indifferent cheek, pretending that you are in a hurry, leaving anxiously, but where are you in a hurry, wherez?

or another: come and sit down, they say, and there they have a pool of raspberry molasses, and a cloud of fruit flies over it, climbing into your eyes, into your nostrils, or another - on friendship, they say, doing this favor, a small and weak thing, squinting with significance, what are friends for then, they say, wrapping around you like a snake around a bishop's caduceus,

turning you into a friend?

They tapped you on the shoulder and went away preoccupied, and you looked around the cafe, ordered a still warm, vile an echo, went over the coins on the wet tabletop and thought about Kleobis and Bithena, as they were harnessed in a chariot to take their mother to the glorious Argos for the feast, they died on the stony road - sons because they were sons, not friends of any kind, not a bugle, not a jug, not a rouge, not a shiver.

\*\*\*

I reread Sasha's letter once more, cold-blooded as if it were the books of the Sibylline - not for nothing did the Roman priests keep them under lock and key, and my hands even burned as if I were weaving nettle chain mail.

leave, edna alexandrina, if you haven't already, you've been given good advice, leave.

you and I are alike, one July day you wanted to change your name and you changed it, only you wanted to look like your sister, like Clytemnestra, and I wanted to hide, like Nemesis, but there's no difference.

I remember the lightning and lion-faced carousels of Brighton, the palis pier with its cream-colored turrets, the coarse rolled pebbles of the beach-where you wander, Edna, I mean Alexandrina, dragging your daughter dressed in baby lace by the hand, and whose daughter is that? You must have a sturdy, athletic gait, Edna, not like me, my mother was always telling me I was slouching, and my father used to say I looked like a *garav*, that is, a heron, probably the one King Gwyddno turned into when the sea flooded his land.

name and gait, that's all that stays in the memory, people agonize for years to become like their names, but sasha son-li is lucky - she looks like sasha son-li like no one else, she has *noise*, and *dream*, and *doubt*, and *fox* in her

a name is pretty damn important, lou  
maybe by changing your name from briarberry to elderberry  
you not only hid, but disappeared altogether.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*... I see my soul's first face, fluffy and  
glorious and rare.*

When I was a child, I loved to look at my mother's album of clay museum pieces; there, among the boring Scythos and amphorae, was one pink - I think Mycenaean - cup with a serrated edge, on it walked black-armored archers with faces turned in profile, followed by a chariot without horses. I stared at them, holding the book close to my face, trying to make out their true colors, to hear the sounds - t h e dusty hubs beating, the damp, minty straps of sandals rubbing against each other, the road smoking with hot clay, and never ending, curling in a loop between the Corinthians and Argos.

I showed the picture to Sommy and Prue Sparrow, but they didn't see the clay smoke and started looking at the picture of a half-naked Aphrodite.

I was not surprised. They could neither see nor hear a lot of things: the interjection of the chestnut grinning with its cracked mouth from the grass, the way the yarrow pokes its wet puppy nose into my knees, the sticky fluff of angel's featherbeds littering the shore, the way wet pence laughing on the orangade-splattered counter, the petite wings of the newspapers left in the city for the winter.

That made me love them just as much, Sommy and Prue. I held them in a part of my heart where being different was an asset, and being able to whistle in a pod and build a fire out of wet fins was the best of all skills.

I also loved Saunders Branagh. Saunders was the brightest boy in Mrs. Maul's school, his hair white as bleached wool and his eyelashes black as a pinch of black-winged moths, the only flaw being a weak mouth, but we didn't understand that then.

I was a fifth-grader when he came to school, and I tried to patronize him, but I soon noticed that there were plenty of sixth- and fourth-graders who wanted him. The girls quickly discovered that little Branagh was a cotton candy lover, and they would meet him on the school porch with bags bought at the grocery store on the corner.

Saunders accepted the offerings with the air of a young Prince Tami-no from *The Magic Flute*; he kissed some of the girls on the porch at the risk of being caught; some he left for later. Either way, they were all in his power, even Cynthia Bohan, the dazzling cousin of the plain Dora.

Summer Cynthia: thick mica and Cynthia at the soda stand, sweet water running down her clear throat, her sticky hands wiping on her sister's sleeve, a happy grimace of displeasure on Dora's face. A scarlet pound of squelching cherries in Cynthia's Christmas hands, juice dripping onto her white nylon knees, Dora jumps up and runs into the kitchen to fetch the soda, Cynthia smiling tiredly after her.

Autumn Cynthia is in moss: an Aran sweater, her hair in a curl, she spreads her arms and looks up at the sky, the *clouds are like unhurried oxen*, she says.

— Purple oxen pulled by a cart of ashes," she added, thinking.

— Why with ashz," asks Dora.

Oh, God, why did Cynthia have to bring her along.

— Because the ashes are gold, and they drop them, you see," I say hurriedly, pretending to answer Dora and seeing her cousin's condescending smile.

Dora turns to me in Ms. Stewart's class, a whisper making her thick lips even thicker:

- Alix, she's got a date with your Branagh! After class, in the gazebo. You'll go peeping

No way, I say, as the black apostrophes stick in my throat like bones. I've never seen a kiss, I say, and my mouth is sealed with sealing wax and a stern thread is pulled through my heart.

*God, how I want a sister, I write on a blotter, circle it with monograms and hide it in a French textbook.*

*Let me have a sister, if I can have an older sister.*

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*... I, a dead man, don't have a cock that isn't a god.*

Seventh of July.

When I came back from Henley I found that the savages had been in the garden again and had broken the glass in the greenhouse, the lilac medinilla tassels were charred, everything had been ripped out and broken - dracaenas and camellias, everything, everything. So much for a morning in an English garden, dear Mommy.

And somewhere far away, thousands of miles from the Bristol Channel, Hedda was staring at the palm trees, walking out into the hot courtyard of her restaurant with that what's-his-name dancer under the wire mesh, wiping her sweaty face with a kitchen cloth. No, it was too much, Hedda always had a fresh handkerchief tucked between her breasts.

And there she stood, thinking of the withered leaves in the grass and the bluish stone gates, if she could see those gates now, and what was written on them in black acrylic. Hedda wouldn't look long, though; she'd take her rag and wipe it off, muttering dreadful Welsh curses, but I don't.

— He's not such a bad man," Hedda told me when Mr. Appas arrived for the second time, and I shut myself up in my room all day, leaving her to attend to the guest and Junior to attend to the four lodgers.

— Alix, you're there? He's only of a different race," said Hedda, standing at my door, "if he were Welsh or Irish you wouldn't be so angry, would you? You know what he said to me at dinner tonight? *I'll take you to my country. Would you like to be buried next to my family?*

Nice, I thought, listening to Heddy's heavy breathing. If he dies first, you will be sprinkled with water from the Ganges and burned with the corpse. If he's a Parsi, you'll be put out on the street to be eaten by vultures.

— We won't sell the inn if you don't want to," Hedda said, scratching at the door. - Open it. We've got to discuss terms!

They can't do it, and they say they won't, Mom would say. There is nothing to discuss with them, she would say, there are people with whom it is better not to discuss conditions.

It's like playing checkers for moonlight: you lose, and the moon rises at the same time, no matter how hard you fight. Unless, of course, you are God Thoth, the Lord of Time.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

I read Sasha's letter for the last time, put it in the filing cabinet, drank some tea and left for Paddington Station, taking a flask with me: the clever Dutnapishti, anticipating the top, built an ark and stocked up on wine, because the *gods flock to wine like flies when they smell it*.

I think Sartre wrote somewhere: to remind the French of the horrors of the occupation, it is enough to depict a concert of German military music in a Luxembourg garden, so, to remind the French of the horrors of the occupation, it is enough to depict a concert of German military music in a Luxembourg garden.



to tell me about my stupid job, just see the inept chauffeur covered in nervous spots.

I gave him our office card, so he could come for a ride on the simulator: maybe once he knows artificial London, he won't be afraid of the real thing.

As I got on the train, I thought that the words of *our office were* probably out of place - Whiteheart would hardly stand it for another three days, and I certainly wouldn't come any sooner, so to hell with the office, I'd go to Wales and get a job in the *maples as a* gardener for a night's lodging and almond breadcrumbs.

now sascha is in henley, I thought as I unsealed a carton of coffee, wandering in a smart crowd through stewart's meadow, can she slash a man's neck so that blood gushes from the open hole as from a wide-open mouth? can she slip powder into a glass of wine and watch the victim's eyes roll back and foam clump at the corners of his lips?

what I'm actually going to do: make the caretaker laugh? make the club security laugh? make myself laugh?

in an old novel by evelyn waugh, about mr. pinfold traveling on a steamship, the hero is laughed at by all the passengers and crew, even the captain and the cook, but he doesn't care, he stands his ground: *there's a murder on the ship, he says, and more than one!* well, at least mr. pinfold had a reason to stand his ground - he saw and heard, and i just read it, it's even funnier.

though if I were asked what exactly I read, I would say: words I would *kill him* in a letter dropped out of someone else's notebook, written in Cyrillic and never posted

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As we drove along the sea, the bus smelled of rotten vegetation, and I thought about what Sasha's neighbor had said, in the way of

like the goddess Thoeris in the form of a hippopotamus with human breasts.

I remembered how we used to play Russian games when we were little, I was ten and Alix was fourteen, and instead of a coffin we had a tin box, a very small one, and we didn't want to bend our legs at the knees, because the dead lie upright, so we always put Edna Alexandrina in it, we always felt so sorry for her, I even cried! I remember how strong the smell of woodruff was there, in that clearing, we kissed the dead woman on the forehead, read the retreat and piled the box with leaves and ferns - Edna lay there so quietly, closed her eyes and tried not to breathe, poor little thing.

then, as the bus passed Swansea and the hills stretched out of the window, I finished my rum, screwed back the flask and began to think about Samuel Pepys.

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Four hundred years ago in London there lived a certain Samuel Pepys, a lover of good food, and his diary contained many words - a million and a quarter, and in the diary of a certain Robb there were twenty times as many words, and he lived almost ninety years, because words prolong life, like kisses and red wine.

whether I write my diary to bring *down the sky, to suspend the earth, to bring out the dead, to bring down the gods, to extinguish the stars, to illuminate tartarus itself*, or for something more informativez.

and whether my diary will replace everything I've lost.

but I know why *she's* writing hers - she's lost her voice and she doesn't need an interlocutor anymore.

and she doesn't need a reader, but now she seems to have two entire

\*\*\*

I spent six and a half weird hours in henley.

Before leaving Henley for Wales, I bought two postcards with a view of Southwark Bridge, took a seat in the bus station café and sent the carpenter a quote from Yeats: it is *possible to communicate innocently with spirits - as long as you do not conspire with them, do not harm anyone through them, and do not show excessive curiosity about the secrets they hold in reserve.*

and I wrote to the clothier separately: *in H. empty, empty. I'm losing the bet. I'm going to W.*

by the way, neither has responded to me, it's never happened before - something changes and I get not-so-much uncomfortable.

Armstrong's receptionist had the dark, close-set eyes of a liar, he met me at the threshold of the office, blocking the door with his large, heavily perfumed body, you need a *caretakerz* he said, looking me over from head to toe, but we don't have one, the last club caretaker died before the war and is buried near St. Mary's Chapel.

... Come on in, inspector, I'll show you around! Over there on the left is our new pontoon bridge, it's easy to clean and safe, you must have received a complaint.

Why do you have a bridge made of blue plasticz I asked, getting into the pleasant role of an inspector, a wooden one would look much better.

after the Glen story, the board decided to replace the old bridge, hadn't you heardz Armstrong shook his head, and there was so much talk... poor Glen tried to get to the bridge in the dark, overturned and couldn't get out, he was pulled under the pilings - the bottom was worse than the Dartmoor!

there was a certain dresser... I started, but the administrator interrupted me, no, his name was Glen Levey! He was a nice guy, he shouldn't have gone to the airlock alone, and even after drinking

I haven't heard that for a long time! Nobody in London clucks their tongue! - the board of the club are very strict about such infractions, and if he had not drowned he would have been expelled, I assure you, Inspector.

Inspectorz no, I look like a policeman - I must buy a new coat, and throw away the fancy casula, though it is a substitute for a house in bad weather.

You seem to be mistaken, Armstrong," I said dryly. "You see, I've come here to learn more about the Lions End Club, and as I intend to leave my club soon, my friend Bradley said the caretaker here would show me all there is to see.

Bradley's sponsor's name was emblazoned on one of the golden signs at the club's entrance, and judging by Armstrong's brightened look, I'd made a good choice.

## **TABITA. LETTER SIXTH**

### *2008. South Lambeth*

Auntie, everything's fine!

Luellin came back, he brought me a Welsh souvenir, a stone sheep, I asked why it was stone and he said stone was the best thing about Wales.

We have the Talking Stone, he said, the Hip Stone, the Educating Stone and even the Thief's Stone on the desert island of Mon.... we've got all kinds of things!

Why, why did I study German and Latin, because if I had chosen Welsh in college, I could have spoken to L. in his language, I would have been the only one on the whole street, in the whole neighborhood! He's so lonely in Hobart Station, and he used to live some other life, I know he did, and now he has no friends or acquaintances. I don't even think he has any parents.

And another thing: he brought me - yes, yes, he knocked on my door himself! - a piece of paper written in Cyrillic. You seem to work with dictionaries, he said, smiling that woeful smile of his that makes me want to scream and throw myself down a flight of stairs. So, he said, I need to translate a page of text, a rather unusual one.

From Russian, Aunt Jane, imagine that.

I was afraid at first that he was corresponding with some Slavic bride, like that guy from our college, Tom Stonewall, who then went God knows where with her and disappeared, but it turned out to be simpler: Luellin had been asked by someone, too, and the li-stock had nothing to do with him.

I couldn't translate it, of course, so I gave it to Breukenried, who had a translation program on his computer, so the whole thing took a few seconds. It was a little rambling, but it was entertaining, about a sister and her husband, like an excerpt from a cheap detective novel, the kind I take on the train when I visit you in Worsall.

Luellin was terribly happy when I came in to say that the translation would be e-mailed to me, he just didn't know where to put me. Not surprisingly, his living room has cardboard boxes of unpacked junk instead of chairs. The whole place looks like a railroad pile full of war booty.

— Why don't you unpack your things? - I asked.

I know you won't approve, Auntie, but I just couldn't help myself. He got upset and looked around as if he were seeing his living room for the first time in his life. He has that look for hours-even when he's looking at me.

— If you want me to help you," I offered, realizing that this was probably too much. But, Auntie, you have to start at some point!

— No need, thank you. It's just a temporary home, and I expect to move into my own house soon," he said.

I guess L. has seen better days since he moved into Hobart Plantation, and he's clearly not comfortable. He speaks too cleanly, his bedroom has piles of books on the floor and cardboard boxes filled with ceramics and gallery bronzes not at all appropriate for Salamanca Street. Don't ask me how I know this, yes - I've been in his bedroom, and yes - I've looked in his boxes.

But I'm not the least bit ashamed, because soon it won't matter anymore. I'm going to be engaged to him in a month or so, you'll see.

At the latest, by August Day.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1993

*There is an herb of spontaneous growth, which grows on old husks, a foot tall, with a white root at the top. It is good to drink it in moloka or in vinegar, if someone is seized by it, if his heart grows weak and his chest breaks, he will be healthy and easy.*

...and then, they would ask her, then, when her father brought in his new wife, Hedda, an unflappable flour and sugar saleswoman, how things turned out?

As it happened, Sasha would say, Dad and I hardly spoke: now he had to go to the road office to keep the empty Maples afloat, and he stopped even coming to the workshop. If there were tenants, he would linger in the dining room and look through the guest book, always with a strange expression on his face, as if he hoped to see a familiar name, and when he did not find it, he lost all interest.

In the morning his father would drink a full pot of weak coffee, carefully rereading the bills, stroking his beard - Sasha never-

I couldn't get used to this new sharp beard, like Henry the Fourth's. Then he would take his lunchbox from the kitchen and go to work, to his *orange vests*, as he called the workers, Sasha always wondered what the workers called him-the Navarre neuroticz bearded bourbonz.

Hedda said that if it weren't for the two hundred and forty pounds a week, they wouldn't even have coffee in the house, and Sasha knew it was because of the hated Heather Hill, with its tennis courts and fountain. They said there were cashmere plaids on the armchairs, and in a special drawer under glass a collection of pipes in carved wooden cases, each pipe with a soft cloth, a silver stand, and a brush.

The Maples was still frequented by antique lovers looking for an authentic *Welsh house* and those who wanted to save a tenner, but the dreary harbor area with its two bars and a tearoom was slowly falling out of fashion.

Sinclair's Under Milk Wood, filmed here in seventy-one, had long since disappeared from television programs, the rooms where Barton and Taylor had lived were no longer to be seen, and the play's author, the heady Welsh genius with his sloppy chorus full of salt foam and viscous coastal sand, was slowly being forgotten.

He was buried nearby, but in the early nineties nobody cared about that anymore.

## 1981

*There is an herb that grows on rivers and in old places, the root is white like peanuts or peas, and the leaves like dewy fir-trees. It is also good for sore and puncture wounds, and it is good for a man's broken bones.*

By late spring, Mom was feeling better and the Maples were getting ready for the hotel season. In the morning, Mom and Deirdre went out

They would send her father out of the house for the whole day, open the windows, run up and down the stairs, talk loudly, trying to shout over the radio, splash soapy water and chase S a s h a up and down for nonsense. Sasha hated loud music and draughts, but it was impossible to hide, she was found, shamed and sent to the cellar for mastic or turpentine.

When the floors were cleaned, rolled carpets were brought from the basement, which were removed for some reason for the winter, even though they were so thick and warm. Sometimes Sasha *did* not understand her mother's pre-mother's experiments, but it was useless to ask - that's how her *mother did it* and that's all. One rug, on which Dad's dog Trida died, was never unrolled again, no one remembered its pattern, but Sasha did: red flowers on a dull woolen sky.

The chocolate leather of the armchairs in the living room was cleaned with a special mother sponge, like a holey wood mushroom, and the wallpaper nails always pulled long threads out of it. A year after her mother's death, Sasha tried the same thing. As she pulled the threads out from under the ribbed copper caps, she habitually thought about how long the sponge would last, and suddenly realized that when the sponge wore off, her mother would leave Sasha for good, she would have to solve everything herself, and there would be no one to ask.

No one knew what Mama knew: no one in Abergwyne, no one in Swansea, no one at all, no one. In Mama's head everything that was brittle, slippery, incomprehensible found support and explanation, and if I told her a terrible dream it became simple and amusing, which was surprising, for sometimes Mama lived as if she were living in a dream.

The things that lived in Sasha's head were different, unpleasant - once they were called to mind, they slipped slowly into the past, into the lower stratum of life, only to return to the top a day or a year later.



It was just like that device in the window of the Brighton pastry shop: a silver wheel rotated ice-cream tubs all day long to the tinkling of a built-in churn, topped with marzipan, vanilla, and t h e strangest of all, pistachio. Sasha knew exactly what it tasted like; it was enough to look at the fogged up bowl and listen to the hissing of the roller to make her tongue both salty and sweet at once. Then the grocer's daughter told her that the ice cream in the window was not real ice cream, but wax balls, j u s t l i k e t h e wax pig in the butcher's window, but S a s h a only laughed.

Maybe so, she said, but the green is definitely real - I've tasted it and smelled it.

### 1988

*There is an herb cornflower, naturally hot and fragrant, and that spirit is firm to those who suffer the main brain.*

One day she heard one boy say to another in the school corridor, "That Sonley would be pretty if she weren't such an unmitigated moron!

Hearing this, she leaned against the wall and for a full minute she couldn't breathe.

She knew for a fact that she was smarter than all her peers in her class, at school, and even in the city. It was self-evident, wasn't it?

She started reading at three, wrote poetry at nine, kept a diary as an adult at ten, she knew three languages - her mother's, father's and English - even Father Luke called her an *unexpected child* when she asked him if God was doing the error work as he did for anyone who did poorly on a class assignment.

So to them I'm a fool, she thought, trying to breathe evenly, calming her furious heart, so my mind is to them at all

It's not intelligence, it's some other intelligence that they have that makes them feel good with each other. So I will always feel bad with them.

In their eyes, I'm no better than Dorothy Toiler, Doe's scraggly rabble-rouser, with her dirty glasses and mousey armbands. No, I'm a little better-- I'm *prettier*. But that's all.

And if I were as illiterate as a singing shepherd, but if I had their peculiar mind-what it is? dexterity? guile? the ability to climb a gymnasium cord? the ability to weave a cat's cradle on my fingers?-if I had that mind, I would be their princess, their victorious Rhiannon. But I do not have this mind, and my whole life ahead of me is a *plain* of *failure* like that which poor Cuchulain met with.

Well, she thought, returning to the classroom where the lesson had already started, she would have to live with it somehow, the main thing was not to show it.

It's an ancient Anglo-Saxon principle, my father said - *no complaining, no explaining* - but, unlike all things English, it works for us Welsh. Just add another one to it - *don't show your face*.

When, a year and a half later, curly-haired Paul, who looked like a grown-up Bernini angel, told the whole class that he had pulled Sonly's sweater up over his head, and all that - while stretching his lips, rolling his eyes, and managing to remain as handsome as a sleeping putto - Sasha remained silent all day. She didn't complain, didn't explain, and didn't show it.

When she ran out of patience, she came up behind Paul and struck him on the back of the head with a crystal paperweight taken from Miss Stewart's desk, and then, when Paul fell and Miss Stewart screamed, she threw the paperweight at her and left the classroom.

Then it turned out that it hit Ms. Stewart in the shoulder, the shoulder turned blue, and the teacher wore a knit sweater for a week despite the heat.

In ninety-four, she met Paul at Dolphus's pool hall, where she had come at her father's request to find out how much a not-so-new green cloth table cost.

Paul noticed Sasha first, nodded reluctantly, and turned away, revealing a wary, shaved back of his head. He had an ebony cue in his hand, his flannel shirt unbuttoned over a round, wheaten belly.

— Hi," said Sasha, coming close to him, "how's your cornz

The guys around the table fell silent and stared at her.

— What do you wantz," Paul asked indignantly.

— Nothing from you," Sasha answered, looking him over slowly from head to toe, "I'm just curious to see if you've grown anything real since then. Try the cob, it works for some people.

He drew his cue hand back as if he was going to hit her, but changed his mind and hissed:

— Get out of here, you fucking witch, you Russian brat.

The guys l a u g h e d , and Sasha went to the door, feeling her hair fill with electricity under the dim lamps, and they all stared at her back, and her back straightened as if a cue had been inserted into her spine, and not just any cue, but a cue set.

With brass tip.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

the sheep here have an inexplicable charm of indifference, I said, hoping this time I would hear her voice, today my bus was stuck in front of the flock, on the bridge near the turnoff to Illings, eight cars piled up behind us, the air filled with dense honking, and what were the sheepz.

they kept coming and bleating unhappily, as if we were the ones who were bothering them, not they us

*Yes, the sheep are the masters here, Sasha wrote, the red pencil changed to blue, which made me think she was speaking more quietly and coldly, but you seem to be from here, don't you?*

my father was born in Wales but later moved to Ireland, I sat next to her on the bench, and your father is from Chester, that's why you serve Chester cheese for breakfast, right?

*That's right, Inspector, the blue letters jumped a little, I also have a question: why don't you settle on the hill this time?*

I looked her straight in the face, her skin was the color of dried sphagnum, no, the color of rice paper that absorbs light, the Japanese say it reconciles them to reality.

The water on the stove was boiling, Sasha stood up and threw in some herbs, plucked from a dry bundle hanging over the stove, the kettle smelled an unfamiliar bitterness.

In the meantime, in the copper cauldron, the mighty remedy boils, and rises up, and whitens with bloated foam, I said with importance, she wrinkled her nose angrily, took a piece of clean gauze and began to strain the herb into an earthen bowl.

We sat in silence for two minutes, then Sasha threw away the yellow gauze with the soaked grass, washed her hands, wrote a few lines, put the sheet on the table, put the key on top and headed for the stairs

*I was just asking, I read, you'll have room four for one night, Inspector, if there's an emergency, ring the bell*

I took the crayon left on the table and wrote at the bottom:

*I usually write a diary in the mornings, inspector, because if I don't write at least a couple of pages, I get angry, if anything, ring the bell.*

\*\*\*

A muffled whirring could be heard from my bedroom on the second floor, the vacuum cleaner marks on the blue carpet in the living room glistened satin-it looked like Finn Everton had started today and was moving upstairs and to the right-if she saw me, I'd tell her I was looking for a place to crash while my room was being cleaned.

I noticed last time that Sasha disappears as soon as Finn rolls out a red, prehistoric device with a corrugated proboscis, which means I have time, twenty minutes at least.

I took off my moccasins and went upstairs, holding them in my hands like a thief, and I was a thief! I opened the lock with a bent steel wire, remembering a student of mine who always carried a bunch of hooks, like a burglar's mignon to his wife.

Sasha's bedroom smelled familiar and disturbing, like my mother's medicine box, I walked around the room, sat on the bed, walked around again, something prevented me from putting my hand under the pillow and taking out the diary, it happens, when you come across a nest in a fork of a tree in the woods and can't take a spotted, rough egg from it, though your hands are itching to do so - there is something attractive and repulsive about bird eggs at the same time, just as there is something repulsive about thievery itself

I finally stuck my hand under my pillow, picked up the notebook, and opened it to the right place:

*climbing over the rail, I tore my tights on the chain, and going to the sliding door of the cabin, I took them off with my underwear, crumpled them up and stuffed them in my bag.*

I lay down on Sasha's bed and read two pages, almost breathlessly, the vacuum cleaner buzzed in the hallway and fell silent, then the door slammed and footsteps on the stairs - Finn had finished her work, there were still six pages left, or seven, I couldn't bring myself to flip to the end, as I used to do as a child with Agatha Kristi, tortured by impatience.

What's there to scroll through, it's clear enough - *my soul rages in the darkness of her tongue.*

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I read from Sasha about what she did to her sister's husband to get her home.

Or rather, I read from Sasha about what she did to her former boyfriend, Dresser, a lowly traitor, a scavenger of scraps and a drinker of sawdust.

No, not again - I read from Sasha what she wanted to do with the caretaker of the rowing club, buried, by the way, near St. Mary's Chapel, long before the Second World War, and his name was not Dresser, I could make out the letters on the stone between two dead bells.

No, not like that. I read to Sasha *what I wanted her to do to me.*

two years ago, in an office with windows on Market Place, Dr. Mayer said there was nothing wrong with my head, I just needed to get over the shock.

The death of an innocent person, he said, is always a burden, even if you had no malicious intent, just relax and get over the shock.

now I think the shock will probably outlive me.

## **SECOND LETTER EDNA ALEXANDRINA SONLEY. 2006**

...you're not answering about the restaurant, either you don't believe me or you're still angry.

I'm telling you, there's nothing to regret, he only took you on because he doesn't like to mess around for long, and also - he's not so scared with the quiet ones, and I've always made a lot of noise.

Remember he was always grumbling about my pictures all over the house, saying that cat poses weren't appropriate for such a white-haired girl and all thatz Well, I saw him take a whole stack of them quietly in the living room and carry them up to his room, wiggling his whiskers like a wood-boring beetle. Yeah, I guess it's not that simple. That fall, I was mad at you, but I kept quiet, waiting for a chance to pay you back. I found my mother's letters in the attic, and I realized you'd been lying to me all along, just out of spite. I know now that it was out of fear: you were afraid that I would go away to her and you would be alone, yesz I couldn't see you, and I cut your stockings, too, and no one else, but that's clear enough.

Do you want me to tell you how it was?

I had a date that night with a guy from a dating chat room who'd come all the way from Newport for two days and was waiting for me at the Anchor. His nose was like a ripe strawberry, all puckered up.

Photos are such a thing, unreliable in general.

I came home, and I was standing in the garden with my last cigarette, the rain was dripping, there wasn't a penny of money in the house, and not a single person in the house, of course, and you and Dresser had opened a window upstairs, smoking there and laughing - I somehow thought it was at me. I went into the kitchen and ate my cold supper straight from the pot, and I looked at his cloak, abandoned on the chair as if it were at home, and I felt as if I were going to burst with anger.

I took off my dress and bra, put on his cape and started to make faces in front of the mirror in the hallway, and open the cape and smell, you know, like those crazy guys in the parks, and then he just came down for wine and froze at the refrigerator - standing in his pants and T-shirt, dumbfounded, and looking.

I thought, "What movie suspenders, nobody wears those anymore," and I laughed like a fool, right in his face. And he shook his head sternly and went upstairs to you.

But I knew he wouldn't tell you, and he didn't, and then in the

morning you--



## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

... *I laugh, but it sounds like a mouse or a bird being strangled.*

What I'm thinking about nowz

My sister was gone, my mother and father were gone, and now Hugin and Munin were gone, and they were the last people worthy of talking to me. Only flowers remained, like the sunflowers by the fire, gnarled, random friends that grew from a handful of seeds dropped by someone.

No, it was no accident. Was it not Clytia who turned into a sunflower after she had failed to get Apollo's body? The ardent nymph who yielded to her lover's sister-or was it a niece?

I remember reading about it in the attic, stretched out on an old carpet smelling of sheepskin, hurriedly flipping through the pages, returning to the same embarrassing carrot with the divine loins - I even remember running to ask my mother the difference between a sunflower and a heliotrope, but I never understood.

I remember looking at the naked thighs in Wensam's engraving, feeling an unfamiliar and disturbing tugging in my lower abdomen, and imagining the furious father burying the girl alive. He tidies up his Levkotoya deeply, wraps her in a Sidonian-colored blanket, pours a mound over her grave, covers it with sod, and writes her name on a tablet made of peccano. And Helios looks down on it from above and his head gets very muddy with anger. Just like me now.

By the way, the bust of Clitia, the one in the British Museum, turned out to be *an unknown Roman*. Does that say something or not?

Losers lose their name, that's what it's all about. So do those who are suddenly unloved. My sister had two names, and

Now she's an unknown Roman, a female portrait of Trajan.

Why do I keep straying into dramatic pauses? Why do I keep seeing naked thighs? If Deirdre were here, she'd be wagging her finger at me, saying, "You've got a boyfriend, my child, Alexandra?"

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*... can the mind anticipate and the will change the course of events?*

In Tang times, each writing method had its own name: the writing of slanted streams, the writing of leaves eaten by worms - very expressive, you can not even read further.

My correspondence with Junior is the *letter of a berry-swallowing redbush*. You see things when you walk around with dilated pupils and a racing heartbeat - even Rübetzal picking herbs in the mountains. I write in nowhere, because nowhere always answers, unlike everyone else.

I make mistakes for Edna, mess up commas for her, turn whole sentences inside out, and her letters to me have north and south fighting, like medieval Pisans on the bridge over the Arno. It was the bridge where the toughest guys from the left and right banks came to fight, to drive the cold winter out of Pisa.

And what am I kicking out of myself when I write these letters?

Maybe I really am the creature the Germans called *Hagazssa*, *the one who sits on the fence that encloses the village from the world*, and I shall have no rest until all my delusions are realized and the chimeras come to life. And if they do, what will I do with them?

If my half-sister were to come back from wherever she is, what would I do if she were to show up on my doorstep right now?

Hello, Kryncochlop, I would say. That's what our maid called her, five years old, though not for long. Poor Edna, the white-bearded *CLap-Cavs*, she dreams of a restaurant on the banks of the Thames, puts an ellipsis instead of a dot, and still thinks a mistletoe is a tree growing in a field.

Poor Luellin, he reads my diary secretly. I should have known long ago that I was writing for him and not wasted so much effort.

At least, I've been writing for him since the day Luel-Lin walked into The Maples in his inside-out raincoat. Or rather, since the day he broke my last lamp in the garden by throwing a handful of gravel over the wall. Or rather, since the day I looked into his right eye, the color of wet moss that hopelessly pretends to see.

\*\*\*

*ELiza, ELiza£eth, Betsy avd Bess,  
They wevt to the woods to get a £ird's vest;  
They fooshvd a vest with fooshr eggs iv it;  
They took ove apiece, avd Left three iv it.*

Fourteenth of July.

A monster - dusty, stale hair, narrowed eyes, shiny skin - that's what I see in the side mirror in Sommey Crossman's car. He drives me to Tredegar to his uncle's wallpaper store, and I write in my notebook, looking in the mirror, wondering if this is who I am, if this is how everyone else sees me.

There's a reason I brought my diary with me; it will absorb my reflection. Everything I write about here disappears sooner or later.

late. I wrote about the caretaker Dresser, and the dark waters of the Thames closed over him.

I wrote about Inspector Llewellyn, and he was disgusted with me.

I wrote about the amaryllis in the greenhouse, and they withered, twisted into wire. Ten years ago I wrote a poem about fresh snow on the sand, and the snow melted in the morning, and it was so beautiful - white on a black beach and water the color of cooled ash.

I am no better than the ghostly laundress Ben-Niyeh, who washes the clothes of those who are to die tomorrow. They say the laundress has red webbed feet, and also that she asks questions that must be answered with the whole truth, or you will be hit on the legs with wet linen. If I had met her on the shore, I would not have found anything to ask her - why I need the whole truth. I don't know what to do with half of it.

In the morning, dazed by the influx of lodgers, I entrusted them to Everton, retired to my bedroom and listened to my mother's old record: *Ov v'osh£Lie riev, ov s'ha£itshe.*

At Heverstock School, my French teacher, Stuart, used to make fun of my pronunciation, it scratched her ears like sandpaper. That's how she put it once, and I got really angry. Principal Morris wrote to my parents to take me away because I had attacked Miss Ann Stewart, but I only took a swing at her, I remember everything.

I wouldn't be so angry if Paul wasn't laughing, but he was laughing too.

Two days before, he had taken me to the grove and, unbuckling my father's heavy belt, told me about the corncob used to rape a girl in one book, now that I knew which one. His face was red and puffed up, his lips swollen, and he looked into my eyes to see how scared I was.

- That's a big one! - he said, showing his hands. - Can you imagine how much pain she was in?

I pretended to be scared and squinted incredulously.

- Why are you writing there?" asks Sommy. - You're still rustling around with your papers, poor thing. It's about time you started talking. Paper costs money too! You'll see, Hugh will give you a good discount, he's my kin. It's a shame your wall's burned, I liked the old cornflower wallpaper. I always liked your house, and I liked your mother, no matter what they say in town.

Sommie looks so much like his sister Dora - both boneless, laughing, with tight, mobile cheeks - that I want to write something funny and show him. Or just give him the finger.

Suddenly he can laugh too, like the triumphant king of the alvesz

## TABITA. LETTER SEVEN

*2008. South Lambeth*

Aunt Jane, you shouldn't have worried so much.

Remember you told me about the girl who stole the ten pence - how she pondered whether to confess or buy ice cream. In the end she decided to call **h e r** mother and ask her, so she did - for the same ten pence!

I feel like that girl, honestly!

You should *look into it*, you wrote in your last letter, *maybe you're wasting your time with the wrong guy*.

But, Auntie, I'm not wasting my time on him at all!

I wish I could spend every minute, night and day, on him, but I only see him twice a week: when we run into each other at the mailbox or in the laundry room, at the round mouth of the washing machine, the only one in the whole house.

In April, I was doing laundry right after him and found a gray wool sock left in the iron drum, not too much of it

elegant but without a single hole, I dried it and keep it under my pillow.

It's as inconspicuous and a little worn as its owner, and I press it to my face, and even taste it, trying to imagine it's the big toe of Luellin's left foot. I'm pretty sure it's a left sock. It smells like laundry detergent and old wool.

A drowning man will clutch at a straw, you say, and I know it myself.

At the Archives, they ask me why I'm looking so pretty, suggesting a love affair. Mr. R. even stopped by my desk and stroked my head.

You should be happy, little Tabitha, he said, **f o r** we were beginning to worry about you. God, I wish I could look at myself, a monster in a shabby suit, the kind of thick cloth no one's made since the Plantagenets.

Had they known that in six weeks I had touched this man twice and his left sock a thousand times.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

My foot cramped from impatience, which is often the case when I'm too focused on something, I took off my *shoe*, put my foot on the bench and rubbed it hard with my palms, *your shoes are too damn tight, aren't they?* A strange voice said behind me, I slowly put on my shoe, tied the laces and only then turned around.

There was a short, fair-haired man standing on the garden path, smiling at me as happily as if we had parted in a pub yesterday, hugging and patting each other on the back, I'm Saunders Branagh! He held out his tanned hand to me, but I took my newspaper from the bench, nodded to him carelessly, and walked towards the house.

it is not my custom to be rude to strangers, so I walked on and wondered at myself, and only when I reached the porch, where Sasha was shaking out-

I realized what it was: I simply could not, physically could not see him.

his hair, teeth and skin shone in the sun like a coffee cake with meringues, my lips even stuck together, poor, poor Sasha.

I stood under a cool jasmine bush, trying to get the two entwined bodies out of my mind, I saw them on a thick Persian rug in the living room, sepia-colored for some reason, my high school buddy Allan had a picture like that, folded into an accordion and tucked away in a box like a cigarette case.

the picture was well worn on the folds, the man was not thunderous, he hid his face between the woman's knees, but everything else was in plain sight, Allan would point his finger at it and say blacks are *not like people*.

Would you like to go to the sea, Miss Sleepyhead," I said, as I found myself on the porch.

*I have to go to the baker, Sasha wrote, sitting down on the top step, by the way, there in the garden, that's Saunders, my fiancé, just as she finished the last word, the sun faded, curled up in the clouds as a murky, blood-soaked protein, and a disturbing, piercing wind blew in from the sea - just like Dylan Thomas: with a bunch of stray, hoarse honks picked up in the harbor.*

*Isn't he good?" wrote Sasha, grimacing at the lecturer bringing a fragile snuff box to the lamp, "I don't know what I'd do without him.*

when you went to henley, did he also replace you at the office? I asked and suddenly I was soaking wet under my shirt, Sasha looked at me, frowned slightly, and stood up with her hands in the pockets of her dress.

how small she is, I thought, we've never been so close, if I held her against me, her stubborn white forehead would press right into my collarbone, so small, but she holds on like a big one.

We stood like that for a while, not looking at each other, the wind increasing, then she slowly wrote in capital letters, I DID NOT GO TO HENLEY, WHY DID YOU TAKE THAT? out of my hands, so a competent cop shows me his own-- tone with a license plate number.

She was looking at my face now, and I was deliberately looking away, at the white willow tree, which the wind was now whipping, showing the blue underside of its leaves-it had been broken by a storm last year, according to the maid, but it had survived and stood in the middle of the clearing in a precarious arch, its branches tucked into the ground.

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There is no traitor Dresser in Henley, I am ready to accept that, it is a phantom, I thought as I tossed and turned in my uncomfortable bed, the last keeper of Henley lies under a granite slab with the numbers *1899-1937*, but why was there no mention of me in the last entries? on the other hand, what is there to write about me? I remind myself more and more of a chladni-figure made of sand, glass and other people's vibrations, my circles and curves do not obey formulas, they are good and useless, like Plato's knowledge without grace, or not, like the mahatmas who live in the world.

out in the world

When the manager Armstrong showed me the abandoned cemetery overlooking the *Red Lion* Hotel and I read the lettering on the stove, squatting down and wiping my glasses properly, I felt sorry for the desk clerk, who had crumbled into the dust I had grown accustomed to.

I felt sorry for Glen Livy, drowned in the mud, and for Junior, lost either in the lakeshore or in the swamps of Alapulai, and for Hedda, trapped in the Kerala trap, but most of all I felt sorry for Mrs. Sonley, forced to wander the corridor of the



of *stone maples*, trying to reach out to her cloudy daughter.

I felt like the guy in Yeats' book who was supposed to make a book out of parchment, take it to the crossroads and call out the spirits he knew - *ask the first one his name and write that name on the first page of the book, then ask the second one and write that name on the second page, and so on - until he had enough demons*, only I wasn't going to make the parchment, I was going to steal it.

I was going to do it tomorrow: take it out of the drawer, out from under the pillow, out of the hatbox, take it home and read it from cover to cover, outlining the moon circle with wheat flour-let the spirits tramp over the white line, hurl fireballs or roll around like shreds of scorched wool.

\*\*\*

I won't lie, I realized what force was dragging me to Wishgard like the body of a slain Hector behind an Achilles chariot surprise, that's what it is!

Sasha surprises my mind-because it is inflamed and curious, as if it were oil from a poor earth-and my body-because it responds to the smell of mint and fennel-or corianderz-with a silly galvanic persistence.

how surprised I was, good heavens, when yesterday, sitting across from me at the tea table, she took my hand, took the cup out of my fingers, put her left hand next to mine, on my elbow - the way heated customers do in pubs, intending to wrestle - and slowly, button by button, fastened her sleeve to mine.

for some time we sat connected by our sleeves, not looking at each other; it was so quiet that I could not stand it, and said something hoarse and insignificant

Isn't it strange that you, with your Florentine braid and freckles, wear men's shirts? I said, as hard to believe as it is to believe that the knights of Charles the Fifth wore linen bonnets embroidered with buds and birds," and I said it straight out, without once straying, and she rubbed her temple against my clasped wrist.

I immediately became bolder and reached out to her hair, the kind of paint Vermeer mixed with whitewash to mark the shadows on the old plaster, the hair was softer than I thought, and I was surprised again

I felt the dragon's head rolling in the water, the striped sail crumpling into a rag, the shiny shields are crumbling with coins, a second more and the dracar will sink in the mud up to the waterline, I thought, so that's what Marcial meant when he said, "Cerede mini, non est mentula quod digitus", but I couldn't move a finger.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1992

*There are four colors of grass: black, green, blue and scarlet. If you go to a battle, take it with you: God protects vain wounds, the horse is not afraid; or if you go to a trial, take it with you: people of great ranks will love you.*

Hedda had been a drowsy, melancholy woman before, accustomed to a measured day in a country store, not ready for the hassle of a hotel, not ready to tolerate a sullen stepdaughter at home, not ready to love Sasha's father as she *should*, and now that the Maples were falling into disrepair, she had become a grief-stricken woman.

Now Sasha was suffering from two rough, gaping black holes in the familiar wall of her childhood-unlovedness and shame for her father, who had accepted unlovedness and, apparently, had accepted it without difficulty.

The alder trees cut down by her father for the arbor - Sasha was always afraid to see the alder trunk turn red under the axe - were wasted in the shed, the roof was eaten away by dry rot, the thorny branches on the porch scratched Sasha's bare knees, and the bed never really dried out. In the absence of love.

The house seemed to crumble with lime and black dust, the mossy planks of the bridge wobbled and fell underfoot, the breadcrumbs of the heather, bulging and pink, dried to dust, the fiery tongues of the beans barely smoldered, the white lomonosus fluttered along the garden wall, forgetting its wire support - in the absence of love.

There was a familiar flat despair, a morning sense of doom, especially when the Maple residents sat down to breakfast as a threesome, having seen his father off on the bus to llowhora. If the morning was warm, Hedda would set up in the garden: a folding table, three checkered napkins, an enamel teapot with lilies, not like her mother's.

Why get up, why have breakfast? thought Sasha. It used to be different: they sat down at the long garden table, laid a fresh tablecloth, took out the white *avant-garde* earthenware. In fact, there was no other, my mother didn't keep dishes for every day. She loved fragile things, but was not too upset when they broke or shattered, throwing away any cup with a barely perceptible chip without pity.

On good days my mother would grab everything at once, looking at her watch in horror, burning and confused; on bad days she could leave the house and wander all day along the wet, dense strip of coastal sand, along the pebble slope, sticking her hands in the pockets of her tarpaulin jacket and looking out for a stone in the surf or a white-cheeked tern perched on the rocks.

On good days, she would sit knitting in the garden, but would suddenly pick herself up and go to her bedroom, as if remembering something important. She would give up halfway through any long task, get tired and go to bed. An unknitted piece of wool would be left in the grass, soaked by the night dew and in the morning completely unusable.

The bad days ended monotonously: in the evenings, Mom would be found frozen at the stained-glass window in the dining room or on the cher-dak, the round window that looked like a loophole. S h e w o u l d sway quietly, staring at the glass, fingers of one hand clutching the index finger of the other.

That was Sasha's cue to give her the pills from Dr. Ferguson's bottle and get her to bed quickly-quickly-before the guests started whispering anxiously.

## 1980

*There is an herb of magpie and sheep sorrel, small, leaves like money, and this herb is very good, which a man is eaten by a white dog, or a snake is killed, or put with human feces, it will heal in three days.*

When you were born, Mom said, you were so weak, I was confused.

In a village in the Volga region, where your grandmother was born, we would take you to a witch and *bake you*. We would put you on a bread shovel and stick you in a warm oven three times, as if you were a kavya, saying: *As the bread bakes, so will the dog's old age bake!*

It gives children strength, so Sasha's mother had been told as a child, unless of course she made it up herself. Mom was always telling stories that happened t o *her*, but if someone incredulous put them together, it would take more than two lifetimes to tell them all.

All through the long spring, boys and girls would come to the house with music folders, Mom would close with them in the small living room, and Sasha would look at the clock and, when the hand reached two-thirty, bring them lemonade and cookies.

By the middle of the summer, the Maples had been remodeled and began to let people in, the instruments were sold, and Sasha became bored. She so enjoyed looking at the piano hammers, *tinkering with the* sliding pods of new words - *vibrato, tertia*, sitting on the floor and pressing the pedal with her hand to hear a hoarse dog sigh.

Even more she liked the apple barrel of the cello, the shivering morning light, the smell of warmed rosin, the taut fan-like essence of Haydn's exercises, but in the summer the pupil Donovan started coming back, and Sasha soon forgot both the sound and the smell of his instrument.

In eighty-one she began to see less clearly and loved to touch things-everything in the house had submitted to her and lived now, waiting for her fingers: the tabletop in wax, the marble balls of the doorknobs, the dry scales of dead moths, just everything, everything.

She was *squinting*, stretching her neck and coping by guess and touch, blind spots floated in her eyes, everyone was pitying her, rubbing her cheek and fixing her hair.

She saw the January Christmas tree, taken out of the house, blinking with dry glitter, but did not see the trunk or the needles; she saw the sun bunny on the sleeve of her mother's robe, but did not see her face; she had learned to listen to light and dark. It seemed to her that she could hear everything - the draughts rinsing the saddle lace in the garden, the sunset sprinkling golden ash on the windowsill, the acorns scattering away from the old oak tree behind the house.

Dr. Ferguson would appear and disappear, Sasha would have a stinging potion dripped into her eyes, causing her to throw back her head - so often that years later, when she looked at the

the sun, she thought someone with a glass pipette was coming.

A year later, Sasha got his sight back, but then his mother fell ill, and the old days at home were gone forever - the invisible clones swayed, the bark cracked blue, and the foliage shriveled and changed color.

And after another six years, all hell broke loose.

## TABITA. LETTER EIGHTH

*2008. South Lambeth*

It's kind of a fool's day, and I feel like a complete fool. Mr. Elderbury is becoming intolerable, I'm going crazy-  
of his cool politeness.

*Good afternoon, Tabitha, it's going to rain today, Tabitha.*

Auntie dear, why can't he see the obvious-we're both orphans and must stick together! Yes, he's almost twice my age, but he looks and talks as if we were born on the same day.

And the strange thing is, Auntie, it doesn't seem unnatural to me.

I went over to his place in the morning to ask him to walk to Peddler's Park and get ice cream, the rain was over, the morning was so bright and clear, and he wouldn't let me in the apartment! He came out onto the landing and shut the door behind him, as if I had come to offer him a subscription to a tabloid newspaper or to read aloud from a Mormon book. I was terribly confused and asked the first thing that came to mind - if he had any ice in the refrigerator. My God, why on earth would I need ice at eleven o'clock in the morning!

I just swallowed my tongue at the word *ice cream* and the ice stayed on the tip of my tongue.

No, he said, I don't keep ice, I'm cold all the time as it is.

As if I didn't know it, I gave him my little space heater at the beginning of March. Well, I said, trying not to cry, then maybe we could have some teaz.

I can't, Tabitha, he said, I'm going to the sea, to Cardigan Bay, if I could leave you the keys, I've got finches and a flower that needs watering quite often, if you don't mind.

A flower is just an azalea in an earthenware pot, and finches look like ordinary city sparrows, only with white stripes on their wings.

But of course I took the keys and I'll go to his place in the evening with a book and sandwiches, and I'll sit in the kitchen at the pine table and read, and I'll put on his sweater, as if we've been living together for a long time, and I'm waiting for him to come home from work. What else can I do?

*Your T.*

## **SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008**

*From my house to the threshing floor  
there is earthly silence and dead dogs.*

Every year the word *happiness* gets smaller and smaller, I think, looking at Prue Sparrow, who always has a happy face, even when she is angry. Today she has brought her knitting with her and is sitting in the shade of a chestnut tree, on a folding chair she also brought with her. Prue could knit anywhere, even on horseback on the fence in our half-submerged cemetery, where only a couple of tombstones remain on dry land-the rest have gone under, along with the chapel and the bones of the local residents.

of the leagues.

Since we'd been running around the Westwood heaths, Prue had grown up and down, like those giants in Rabelais's book who ate dogwood berries. I remember her, small and light, running ahead of me down the hillside when my mother sent us out to gather a table *runner* for the table on holidays, or if a young couple had booked the bridal suite.

Prue was always quicker to pick briars - rose hips, variegated portulaca, red nettles, ivy, field m a l l o w s - and then she'd move a few of them into my basket to make it even.

She's not married and lives with two cats. I'm unmarried and I live with two dogs. Well, I did until they were killed, but now I live alone.

When the writer James Jones died, his book was left unfinished, but it was published anyway. A friend of his had carefully assembled the two missing chapters from tape recordings and scraps of conversation, from some rubbish, in short. Such a man would fit into my cramped happiness box without difficulty. I'm talking about a man who is not ashamed to show his drafts. I'm talking about a friend who sucks his thumb like Finn to get the gift of foresight, but if you feel you lack it, he puts his thumb in your mouth.

— Come here," I say, waving my hand at Prue, "what do you think of the grave in the north corner of the gardenz

— Oh," said Prue, blushing, the way she always does when you take her by surprise, "oh, Alix, when are you going to forget? Nobody thinks your sister's lying there, people aren't as stupid as you think they are.

— Then why do they kill my dogs and set fire to my gates?

Prue shrugged, and right, she wouldn't know. If her mother had been here, she would have explained it all in a heartbeat; she had this town in the palm of her hand, from the fishing pier to the top of the damp purple hill.



To see my mom just one more time would fill my happiness cell from the bottom to the top. And to see Dad sitting upright on a bench, as if on a low Asian horse, his head bent over a large newspaper, and the red-and-white dogs running toward you as you stepped off the porch with a bone in your hand. And Gweniver's husband, and Dr. Ferguson, and Saunders's mother, and the writer James Jones, and his friend, too, perhaps.

But there's no one, they're leading me around, they're just specks on the smoked glass, soot left on my fingers, and the solar eclipse is only in my head, and the quartz moon is forever nailed to the heavens, and there's no reassuring answer, and no convincing rebuttal.

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*When our pencil goes white, we draw stars.*

Somewhere in Chesterton I read about how he went to paint on a hill near Chichester and, on reaching the top, found that he had stocked up on wrapping paper but had forgotten a piece of chalk. After some thought, he broke off a piece of the ledge on which he was sitting and began to draw, thanking South England aloud.

What I always envy is the ease of maneuvering; if I were him, I'd berate myself for being absent-minded for a while, then take the lack of chalk as a bad sign and go home with a stack of blank paper.

It's a pity that I haven't painted for a long time, I could still have a portrait of Hugin and Munin in charcoal or ink, although they are worth more than that. On a hunting tapestry these dogs would be embroidered in silver thread, like the unicorns in the Chateau of Chenonceau. I might also have a portrait of my father, which I could use to

to hang in the bedroom in place of the picture of Junior, which Branagh returned unframed and badly creased.

I have Mom's portrait, an old watercolor of her hair in burnt sienna and her eyes in green and blue cobalt, but I remember that she didn't like it, so I don't take it out of the cardboard folder. Mom comes to the Maples now and then to read my herb book, and it would annoy her.

Ever since Prue told me that Llewelyn was going to Ireland-or, rather, trying to go to Ireland-I've been thinking about what Mom said about someone coming from Ireland and changing everything in our lives.

— No one came on the ferry - she'd ask suddenly at dinner, and Dad and I would flinch - that always meant hard times were coming.

Deirdre, unlike me, always knew what to say.

— Not today, Mrs. Sonley," she said, for instance, "the wind is wrong today, and it blew the red fly across Ireland for seven years, until it wore itself out.

Mom always smiled when she heard that, and I was mad at Deirdre-she was always telling her fairy tales, and whatever happened in the house, she had a mysterious reason for everything.

And now I am one myself: untangling thorn branches, seeing Cuchulin's spiky hair hitting the attic beam, remembering the Chinese water spirit who broke the celestial pillar, and even thinking of Gwyddno weeping for his lands when I hear the heron's painful cry.

Myths have gotten under my skin and taken up residence in my alve- als - I guess I read too much and take things too personally.

But the verbose Deirdre would be pleased with me, I know that much.

Just as Ptah was pleased when he conceived in his heart all things and all God's words.

## LETTER FROM DAFFYDD MONMOUTH. 2000

... I'm sixteen years older than you, I was your sister's teacher and I could have been your husband.

And I know that you refused me not because we slept together in that cottage in Snowdonia - and I bore that without complaint - and not because I was going to live at Monmouth House, and you don't like the surrounding marshes, but because shame was eating away at your heart, and guilt stiffened your tongue, so dangerous and quick at other times.

Oh, forgive me this dramatic manner of speaking-I know you can hardly bear it, though you are not without sin, I remember the school essays you used to write hastily for your stupid sister. A sister I remember vaguely, except that she was small and plump as a Rhodesian jug.

At school I always laughed at her hair, which looked like shavings coming out of a pencil sharpener. The yellow shavings of her head flickered somewhere in the back rows, and I tried not to touch Junior too much, lest I flinch at her condescending, understanding grin.

I thought she knew I was unsuccessful in love and that you wouldn't let me near you even though you accepted my ring. She knew I was ridiculous.

She'd been given a delicate palatial name that belonged to Queen Victoria, but I couldn't call her Drina-she was Junior, that's all, she'd always been just Junior. Okay, you were doing God knows what in your house and you couldn't tell me about it, it was easier for you to be alone. But I could make at least two arguments in your defense, listen to this: you were left without a mother too soon, and your father was not a good protection for you, that's one. There's no place for a pretty girl in a hotel, even if she is the hostess. That's two.

You wrote me that I'd be scared if I knew *certain things*. You still should have tried it.

I am not afraid for you, but for you, whatever happens in your bed, in your house and in your garden. What's more, I believe it's all *less* than you.

Remember, I told you about Heinezs last day, when he was lying in the sheets of death, weakened by morphine, he was asked to reconcile with God.

He grinned with his blue lips and said: *Dieş me pardov- vera. C'est sov metier.*

God will forgive me, it's his craft.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

When I awoke, and I slept soundly, as if I had swallowed a witch's smoke, there was no one in the house, a brass coffee pot on the kitchen table, covered with a towel, and a note beside the plate: *I will be there at noon, if you think of le a v i n g, leave the key under the porch, fifty pounds.*

I drank the cooled coffee, put on my guest jacket and went ashore, somehow feeling cheated, the garden gate I had propped up with a stone - an experienced traveler always thinks about how he will return

The sea seemed as heavy as mercury, and the heather on the cliffs was unusually bright: The long ridges of sand covered the piers, t h e scraper at the pier, once bright yellow, was rusty, the paint peeling off in fish scales, the night rain had turned the path up the hill into a stream of glistening mud, and I wished I had worn the rubber boots I had kept in the hallway of the *maples for emergencies.*

in the same viscous mud lay b o a t s deceived by the low tide - in the old harbor two guys were walking around one of them, pulling some shabby cords, I heard a couple of strong words, in a minute both fishermen disappeared into the darkness,

the wind ceased, the sky joined the earth in a hurried and joyless manner, the earth was covered with sprawling wisps of darkness, and everything disappeared, covered with a gray, layered mica

can't be helped, I thought as I headed for the suspension bridge  
- where there are witches, there are bubbles of earth!

I knew what I had to do to calm down.

A hawthorn bush whipped me in the face with a wide branch, I slipped and scooped up the night water that stood in puddles along the barely visible path, my wet boots immediately became heavy

Wishgard scowled in my face and wanted me to leave,  
but I didn't.

\*\*\*

I heard Sasha walking around up there.

something fell and rolled, then the barefoot slapping changed to the clacking of heels-I already knew those webbed shoes of hers-some latch clanked, heels clattered down the corridor and up the stairs.

Knock, knock, I thought, the way the mine goblins knock on the rock when they want to show the miners where the rich vein lies-it won't be an hour before I open the mine with your secrets, whether it's empty Christmas tree gold or chocolate silverware

I sat with the newspaper at the kitchen table, hoping to be greeted, but Sasha passed by with a faint nod and took a green apple from the vase in front of me, she stood on the porch for a few minutes, I could hear Finn's obedient, cracked voice, then a car pulled up to the gate, the door slammed, and the *maple trees grew* quiet.

the fire last night has done a great deal of damage to the wall, you saw it, yes? Finn Everton asked me, so Miss Sonley has gone to fetch the wallpaper, she said to serve tea properly, but there are only three guests in the boarding house, you and that Cornish couple, so if I

if I don't go to the tearoom for pastries, I'll be just in time for business, it's not far, okay, Mr. Elderberry.

Finn is a mermaid after all, she walks around the house swinging her skirt so hard it looks like she has a scaly salmon tail, not two neatly molded legs with cracked heels.

I don't mind, I said, especially as there's candied fruit in the shamrock tonight, and I've had it, go on, Finn, I don't need anything, I'm going to lie down with a book, or even sleep - you can even lock up the boarding house

waiting for her to take off her apron, go out and turn the key in the lock, I went upstairs, joyous bee swarms ringing in my head, *Miss Sleepy had gone to get the wallpaper, tea as it should be*, I had a good forty minutes till five o'clock, I would finish the bitter stuffing and lick the cover.

\*\*\*

under the pillow was empty, the drawer of the dresser was empty too, that is, it was full of silk handkerchiefs, lace and rolled-up tights, but the diary was not under them, nor was it behind the closet, nor in the pockets of the winter jacket, nor among the folders of accounts stacked on the mezzanine floor.

By the time the lock clicked downstairs, I knew I wouldn't find the manuscript; the room with its yellowed ceiling and two colonial windows had given up all its hiding places, **r i g h t d o w n** to a wicker basket of dirty linen, at the bottom of which lay a pistol with an ivory handle.

what you don't find in a girl's bedroom, I thought, twirled it in my hands and shoved it back, feeling like a delicate old Miss Marple, why would Sasha want this gilded requisite? something that suddenly rich bachelors hang on the wall, Whiteheart would have put up for sure

The maid rattled tea-cups in the dining-room, and I went downstairs at once - elderly Cornish people returning from a long walk were sitting at the table, smelling the teapot of brew, Finn was laying out biscuit-cakes on a plate, and I found myself rejoicing at the sight of the guests, as if the fifty-eight pounds for a room overlooking the Irish bay were supposed to be in my pocket and not in my garden apron.

When I went out into the garden, a late bee buzzed in my right temple - a box of cookies? I had already seen one of these, just a week ago! I had seen it in the hands of the *maple* mistress, coming out of the garden with the look of a child who had just buried her best-kept secret.

My mother used to keep sewing machine needles and a pile of buttons from nonexistent coats in such a box; women love round boxes like a tin moon I walked briskly along a long lattice gallery, passed a greenhouse filled with moist purple leaves, like pudding plums, I came out onto a familiar unmowed meadow, walked to a sod-covered mound, bent down and lifted a slab, it was lighter than I thought, ants splashed from under the slab, I pulled at the uneven piece of sod and laughed: I remembered the Irish tale of the pixies throwing a *cursed turf* on the road, and if you step on it, it's all right. the circle will seem unfamiliar to you, like a foreign land.

in the grave mound, a round cookie box, slightly touched with reddish rust, was buried in the black greasy flowery earth poor maple squirrel, I opened your hollow tree.

I took off the tightly lapped lid, took out a small notebook, and felt pity and shame catch in my throat, nothing, it will be over by tomorrow, I thought, stuffing the booty into my pocket - today I will drink shamrock tea and catch the evening bus to London, and tomorrow I will read her diary, lying in my bed, and at last I will know everything.

I will learn how she turned her lover into a beaver, her cabaret-keeper neighbor into a frog, the judge into a ram, and prolonged the pregnancy of her lucky co-worker for eight elephant years.

I want to hear, O Apuleius, of the darkness of her shenanigans.

## **HEDDA. LETTER SIXTH**

*Hochin, January 2002*

I haven't written to you for almost six months, I've had a lot of unpleasant things, including health problems.

From here, from the godforsaken, elephant-infested and truck-painted Hochin, our old life looks different.

I'm sorry that we didn't talk enough with Elder and couldn't love each other at all. I'm scared because you're nineteen, Edna, and I don't even know what your face looks like.

Rajiv, his sisters and all the children and I went to Jammu, across the country, to see Goddess Durga, and there we had to walk uphill for a long time, and I was quite out of breath. I have recovered well here, you would not recognize me, I think. The Goddess used to be an ordinary girl called Vaishnavi, she ran away from a man who wanted to rape her, then she cut off his head and was petrified. At the place where the head flew off, there is now a small temple too, it was a long walk to get there.

In the temple, everyone was given coins with the portrait of the goddess and a red tikka on their foreheads. When we got back to the hotel, he was kind to me, kissing me and stroking my head. Sometimes I look at him when he is asleep and think: What am I doing here?

I generally think a lot about what happened to me and in what ways, I think back to Llandeilo where I was born, the brewery where my father worked and, especially, the school in Pontypridd where, according to the story, fifteen years before me Tom Jones went to school and even sang in the school choir.



This is what happened to me at this school.

I arrived in a new class in early fall and immediately saw a tall, dark-haired boy sitting by the window. He's the prettiest boy in school, I thought, and threw my briefcase on a nearby bench. He was in the top ten on the class list and knew a hell of a lot of poems and stuff. A week later he walked me home, bought me ice cream, and even gave me a glass pen in the shape of a goose feather. Bertie's mouth always smelled good - licorice caramel. All the girls were jealous of me, whispering behind my back and grinning in my face.

I curled my hair at the beauty salon and felt like the first beauty of September and October - until one absolutely unbearable and wild thing happened.

Bertie came to class upset, frowned and was silent all day, and after class went out into the schoolyard and pulled down his pants.

He was standing in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by schoolchildren, his trousers lying in the dust, not out of them, just down to his pads. The boys were laughing and teasing him, and he was smiling a hazy smile, looking up and touching himself all over, you know.

I stood behind fat Mary Maysworth so he couldn't see me. I felt scared and funny, but I didn't feel sorry-as if it were a strange, sick, unfamiliar boy. Then I realized, of course, that they *all* knew about him, they just didn't tell me because it was more interesting.

The next day I sat in the back of my desk, and I couldn't even lift my eyes to Bertie, but he acted as if nothing had happened. He came up to me after class and asked me if I would go with him to the Waters Cinema to see a new movie-the *Devil's Advocate* was on. We were being watched with all eyes, and I said loudly: No, because you're a freak.

I opened my briefcase, pulled out a glass pen, and threw a

at his feet. One of the boys came up and stepped on it with a heavy, fluted-soled shoe.

A week later, Bertie's parents came to pick him up - straight from math class. By spring he was forgotten, and I went to the movies with Sibyl from the sixth grade, which wasn't very interesting.

Why am I telling you this? Because here in Hochin I dreamt of poor Bertie twice. And both times I woke up with the taste of licorice on my lips.

Anyway, thanks for the 300 pounds I got for Christmas.

I hope it didn't cost you too much. I bought a lot of new clothes for Gauri and soft toys for Phanindra: before that he had been playing with what his aunt had taken out of the chest, boring painted wooden cocks.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1999

*There is a herb Tsar Ivan as big as a cubit, and there are two hundred and one different colors on it. There is a herb Tsar Ivan is a cubit of his elbow, and there are two hundred and ten different flowers on it.*

The day at the Maples began now with Junior going into the kitchen for her sweet, heavily whitened coffee, taking a cup and then disappearing, trying not to be seen before eleven o'clock. By noon Sasha was calming down, as if turning over her hourglass, and by evening she was visibly cheerful, especially if the wind came up, so she could run down to Abbey Rock and then walk the evening beach with the guests, wearing tarpaulin jackets and handing them each a pocket flashlight.

- You see, over there," she said proudly, stretching out her hand in the direction of Ireland, "it looks as if the wind is blowing small pieces of paper. They are sails. The wind is rough today, there are white lambs on the waves, and the birds are returning to the shore, which means that tomorrow morning the storm will come to Wishgard!

The guests squinted into the darkness, shrugged their shoulders shakily, and looked toward the guesthouse, looking forward to an evening in the heated drawing-room, where they could pour themselves sherry and listen to the radio forecast for ships on their way to Belfast and Warrenpoint, to Belfast and Warrenpoint, to listen to the creaking jambs and crackling floor joists, to the century-old Maples talking to the storm - hoarse, weary, unafraid, but with the usual caution.

Sasha would go home, get the obligatory *Milk Wood*, where Mrs. Owen still shook her skirts and Richard Burton glittered with groggy eyes, turn on the new VCR for the guests, and go upstairs to her room. Now she had her parents' bedroom, which she called her mother's bedroom, although-except for a trundle with peeling amalgam and a Rouen dresser-there wasn't a single thing of her mother's in it.

Ten years ago, my father took everything out to the barn, put it all in a trunk and set it in the far corner.

## 1987

*There is a herb Machokha, and it grows in the garden, along the Volga, and on the islands, like cabbage, and its leaf is wide, green and white, and whoever grinds it and applies it to sores and wounds, heals them, or sprinkles it on dry - it will heal soon.*

... oils, powders and essences to cleanse the blood of black bile: rose petals, violets, molasses and saffron, it was written in the book Sasha was learning Russian from, contrary to the ma-

Sasha's favorite advice was to start with Afanasyev's fairy tales. There were nine Russian books in the cabinet, but this one was the thickest, written by a man with a long name, of which Sasha remembered only *Bombast*, she even named her favorite bear stuffed with buckwheat groats.

The Russian language was worse than English, because not all the words were understandable, and my mother did not allow me to interrogate, but Russian books had engravings covered with tissue paper, and several times there were bookmarks with portraits of mustachioed men with high epaulettes and twisted cords.

In the second chapter of *Bombast's* book it was said about black bile - Sasha could hardly find this word in the dictionary - which distinguishes thinking people from ordinary ones, and about the fact that its vapors give rise to melancholy, i.e. belief in the occurrence of unfavorable events.

Her mother was still alive, and Sasha did not believe in unfavorable events. But she admired the cozy legibility of the middle-aged author - when he listed the plants, he seemed to scatter them, brought from the forest in a bundle tightly tied with a stiff thread, on the stone table in the kitchen, where the children's hearth was barely warm. He would bend over them, picking them apart with his quick white fingers into petals and stems, removing the root or the core of the flower with a sharply sharpened blade, giving a decisive knock that would send a shudder through the door and startle the author's thin, unloved wife.

She was the one he did not want to help, there was no cure for her illness, peppermint put her to sleep, rosehip kept her bewildered, calendula dulled her resentment, wormwood took away her hope.

1994

*There is an herb, its name is Levuppa, small in itself, you cannot find it on the day, you have to look for it at night. When*

*you get up early in the morning, wash yourself with it, and that man will appear before all men, and he will be honored by all men.*

Hedda's smooth serene warmth, her loose cotton dresses and flip-flops without heels, her tobacco-scented hair and thick white fingernails all seemed surprisingly ugly to Sasha.

Sasha seemed ugly to herself, but she had at least a little of her mother's lightness, everything else was gone, dissolved in her father's blood, unable to overcome Sonli's heavy chin and Sonli's earthy complexion,

The youngest looked like her mother, but not in face, but - like a cat looks like a cat - she even liked clams and laverbread, the red seaweed that made Sasha's cheekbones curl, and drank water straight from a plastic bottle, lazy to reach for a glass, and jumped on a bicycle just as clumsily, kicking her right leg up high.

She'd been fat as a child, and Sasha had teased her, saying that Edna reminded her of a seal they'd seen together from a cliff in Pembrokeshire Park, lazy and sleepy. It had been lying there since early summer, waiting for someone to come and turn it over, Sasha had said, and Junior had believed her. She always believed her, that's the wonder.

Sasha remembered the day her father and Hedda had sent them for a walk along the daisy-lined path along the shore, and they had stayed in Tenby to shop and have breakfast.

Sasha had gone down to the water to walk barefoot on the wet sand, but Junior wouldn't take off her new shoes and was capricious, for which Sasha had frightened her on the way back with ancient crypts hidden in the Preseli hills. The youngest clung to her arm and looked around, as the quick twilight of the area, a pearlescent haze of the same inexpressible, almost absent color as the shell flaps on the beach, faded over them. The twilight merged with the smooth, heavy sheen of the sand, gradually hiding the beach cabanas and the fifty-pence-an-hour iron benches, the sea receding gently, revealing a white band of pearl moss and the scarlet gums of carrageenan.

They forgot about the appointed time and were almost an hour late, and they were really hurt, especially Sasha.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

I robbed sasha at eleven o'clock in the morning, and at five o'clock in the evening I'll be drinking tea with her in a half-empty boarding house, and following the pencil with my eyes

now I go to the date with prue, appointed in the shamrock, I go there along the shore, hiding my face from the north wind, clutching in my cloak pocket a notebook smelling of earthy dampness

July, too! for four days now the sun has not shown itself in its entirety, only a reminder of it, melted in the warm saffron haze, slowly shimmered over the jagged edges of the hills-my Wishgard days, too, shimmer from one vessel to another, and in both vessels the impenetrable waters of misunderstanding

*I think like an idiot, I wish like Zarathustra, I dance like Dionysus, I aspire like a lover, I'll cut off the last one!* falling in love with Sasha is like falling in love with Brigitte of Ireland, *nicknamed the fiery arrow*, one half of her face was white and smooth, the other half was all scarred, and no matter how many times you follow her, she always tries to turn her ugly cheek to you.

But what a forehead Sasha has, what a forehead, like that of the blacksmith goddess Brigitte, the French call such a forehead *Le frott LomLé*, in which smoothness means *fierceness*, and shining convexity means stubbornness, I had to meet the owners of such foreheads before, and I was immediately wary, from the first minute!

It's funny that in this story, before it started, I met two people with perfect *le frott LomLé*, and they don't seem to be stubborn or hateful.

they're the bride and groom.

\*\*\*

I was about twenty-two years old when Saunders got hold of the youngest, said Prue, bringing her flushed face close to me, she used to go to his boat shed instead of school, and I'd meet her in town, her eyes wild, her lips swollen, her feet in the dust, shameful to say the least.

and when he left, she and her sister started a war, you know, an underlying war, first small meannesses, then bigger ones, like in that old poem:

*teffy from wales is a fraud and a scoundrel,  
one day a cucumber came into my house and stole  
it, I went to the teffy, knowing there was no one in  
the house,  
and clayed his socks and shoes.*

Well, why are you laughing? They were not laughing, they were only flying feathers, for instance: one day Alix was properly angry with the youngest, because of an Irish m e r c h a n t , so she broke the glass in the dining-room with her fist! - She sent Edna to the glazier, and went up to the Irishman's room with a bloody hand and told him that her sister was a minor and that she intended to put him in jail no later than tonight, or even now!

The merchant, of course, disappeared without even leaving a note, and Alix sat down in the garden to wait for her sister, when she returned with the glazier and the glass, there was money on the kitchen table: the paid bill for the room and three shabby pound bills on top - a pound to Edna Alexandrina for each night, so to speak.

she's the one who planted it, you bet she did.



\*\*\*

... I brought them a dog, inspector, Prue said proudly, it looked like a healthy dog, fat! They took the dog and closed the door in my face, but I'm not offended, Alix sent me cookies later, and in the box there was a note: she *named it Koo-shi. Thanks, Prue!* They got the cookies from Cadbury, they're good, she doesn't skimp on the risers, and her mother was like that, don't look like a foreigner.

and you, Inspector, think I envy Alix for marrying Saunders. I wouldn't look at him, Saunders, for he has ears like eggshells, and not only has a girl's mouth, but he covers it with the palm of his hand when he laughs.

Tell me, Gweniver, why do they take me for a policeman here?" I asked, when Prue had gone home with the uneaten candied fruit in a napkin,

because it's not a place to ask questions and wear a light-colored coat and imagine God knows what about yourself, Gweniver waved her hands and blew on her palms, first on the right and then on the left, I don't know what that means, and it's not a place to move your lips when drinking alone, she added, because in the books that's what an inspector or, at least, a Metropolitan Constable looks like.

or a cunning assassin, right, a gweniverz

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there are three things I can't stand: the crackle of tearing Styrofoam, the foam on school cocoa and *driving to nowhere* - the latter of which I have to do for hours a day, dressed in a washed-out indigo uniform and spinning a fake steering wheel in front of a London map on a screen.

There are two things that give me peace of mind: the white earthenware on the white tablecloth and the moment at low tide, when the sandbar slowly joins the shoal - as if a big yellow fish with a knobby back covered with tattered fishing nets is surfacing.

After watching the tide from the veranda of the shamrock, I returned to the hotel, hoping to pick up my things unnoticed, but found Sasha setting the table in the living room: Five o'clock, the sun shattering through the glass, a serene picture in the spirit of Alma-Tadema - sit down, Lou, prop your head with your hands, watch the old fingers, the sun's husk on the linen tablecloth, but no way, the grave notebook was burning my coat pocket, I couldn't even raise my eyes to Sasha: *a rapist of my neighbor and his property*, that's what I'll be from this morning, a room thief from the seventh circle, and I was no better before - a hapless murderer from the second circle, and now she's this will feel it, read my lips, and point me to the door.

*Sit down, Lou*, Sasha wrote on the scrawled sheet where she had previously given orders to the maid, *the jam is still warm, Everton made it this afternoon, why do you look so sleepless?*

I saw a beautiful woman here last time, I said cautiously, like a cheat laying cards on the table, she looked like you, but taller, I saw her in the room that was the worst hit by the fire.

The red lead froze over the sheet, Sasha looked up and furrowed her brow.

sitting down at the table, I thought that such a forehead should be cool to the touch, like the side of a milk jug, *don't wrinkle your forehead!* my father used to say to my mother, but she didn't wrinkle it, wrinkles were already part of her face, and she smiled guiltily.

*you're imagining things!* the pencil's gone back on the paper, *I think your time here is up, Inspector.*

How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not an inspector, I said nonchalantly and handed her the cup, trying to keep my hand from shaking.

Well, this woman was barefoot, in a striped dress, I tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't have anything to do with me Sasha got up and poured me coffee, *I guess I'm getting too tired*, she continued, turning over her paper, *you know how it is, running around the house all day, pulling down the edges, fixing knots, it makes you terribly rude - and stupid too,*  
*don't ser-*

*You're gonna have to look at me*

I was even wary of whether the phrase was too detailed and friendly.

her businesslike despair reminded me of Socrates' dying words: "*Kriton, we owe Asclepius a rooster, so give it to him without fail, don't forget.*"

### THIRD LETTER EDNA ALEXANDRINA SONLEY. 2006

... Saunders Branagh never asked me what had happened before. But the first time we were in bed, he seemed surprised-said that girls my age were awkward and too serious.

— "What am I likez," I asked.

— "Pliable, like a vanilla bun," he said, and laughed that fizzy laugh of his that always makes my throat feel like bubbles.

It wasn't really a bed at all, it was the back seat of a car, and then again in his kitchen while his mother watched TV, and twice more in the hotel laundry room, in the "Heather Hill, right in the dirty laundry container. There was a tin pipe above the container through which the maids dumped the laundry into the basement, and someone's wet sheets and towels fell on us several times.

We laughed and gnawed on apples stolen from the cupboard, and then Saunders was called upstairs, who was working part-time in room service, and I lay in a pile of stale linen and thought that the years

In two years, he'll probably be a receptionist, like the guy on the first floor who sneaks computer games behind the tall cherry tree counter all day long.

But he went to the islands, I decided to kill myself, and you made your usual face, which means, "There, I told you so.

Yes, you did. You told me Saunders was too easy and now you were going to marry him, you told me Hedda was a bad mother, and you hid her letters from me, put them in dirty shavings.

You also said Dresser was flattered by the Maples, and that's a lie, too!

Half the house is mortgaged, and the other half is about to fall into ruin, not even an old, hungry gigolo could be lured to this hotel! And Joe Berger, the real estate agent, told me that the paperwork was such a mess of liens and mortgages that it would be easier to sell a sacred cow to an Indian butcher.

Although I know for a fact, Alix, that if you wanted to, everything would magically fall into place, the papers would float over the lawyer's desk and fall into order-but you don't want to. You're obsessed with these tattered walls!

It seems to you that the first Mrs. Sonley is still in them, and if you see her one day in her rocking chair, or in that stuffy greenhouse of hers that smells of humus, what a joy it will be! I hope Saunders gets rid of the family ruins as soon as possible after the wedding. I hope he gets rid of you, too.

## **SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008**

*The thought stops and floats above attraction and repulsion.*

July eighteenth.

When Junior showed up on the doorstep, I almost dropped the tray of dishes - I thought my

Hedda's stepmother, and it starts all over again, like a horror movie.

She was even wearing a knit sweater, like the one Hedda had once worn when she puffed out of Daddy's car and pulled her curly-haired daughter out of the backseat, and then an angular, stone-filled bag.

The youngest and her daughter had come on the Cardiff morning bus, and instead of a bag, they had an orange suitcase on wheels. I stared at them for a while, placing the tray on the kitchen table, then I took out my notebook and wrote: *Come in, I'm glad to see you in good health!*

The youngest gave me a brief nod, as if we had parted hours ago, and pushed a russet-haired girl, as fluffy and unassuming as a partridge on the heath, toward my belly. A bunch of pansies dangled from her buttonhole. *Heart soothing*, I remarked absentmindedly.

The girl held out her hand to me, clenched into a fist for some reason:

— I'm Fenja. And you're Aunt Alix, we'll live with you.

For a moment I felt as if the bones in my body were pulling, as if I were running along the shore with lead blocks on my arms and legs, like Mr. Glynn, the owner of the moss shop.

— Hi, Fenya, would you like some tea," I wrote, trying to smile.

— God be with you, Sasha, she can't read. You don't talk to people now," said Junior mockingly, unbuttoning her sweater. - You are sick of the sound of your own voice.

Wow, *Sasha!* She never called me Sasha. Only three people called me that, one of them dead, the second I know nothing about, and the third writes me letters, one or two a year, but doesn't want to see me.

Hedda and my father were diligent in pronouncing my full name; in school I was an incomprehensible *Alix* - I can still hear Cynthia Bohan pronouncing that name in a raspy voice - and I remained *Alix*,

when I grew up, a name like the sound of a candlestick falling to the stone floor. I was an *eita*, or *eisla-sheesh*, to Junior, but not immediately, not until about ninety-nine.

She tossed her sweater on the chair and walked past me toward the stairs, the room smelling familiar-not over-ripe grass, not slightly weathered brie.

I wanted to stop her, to ask her where she was going, but the morning light, yellowish as a cheese crust, illuminated her face, and I realized she wouldn't read my questions, even if I ran after her with a notebook in my hand.

Junior is no longer Junior, I thought, trying to keep the despair at bay; she turned to Hedda in eighty-eight-year-old leather flip-flops. Knit sweater. A serene stubbornness. Only her eyes remained the same-two small, icy aquamarines without frames.

Her stepmother's eyes were faded, huge, just like the blue-haired Buddha in the Todaiji temple, with each eye a meter long and a face like a room, which must have taken all the Japanese bronze and a whole hill of charcoal.

When I was a child, I used to look at this Buddha in my mother's al-boma, and there were deer in the park begging for cookies, Japanese women with twinkling smiles, and a red lacquered temple floor. I practiced my Japanese smile for a long time in front of the mirror, wearing my mother's clips, but it didn't work, even if I tugged the corners of my eyes with my fingers.

On the first page of the album were two English lines, angularly written from top to bottom: *a thousand golden body-sattvas - a thousand golden smiles.*

\*\*\*

*How from the clouds you can see  
The whole kingdom suddenly: borders, hailstones, rivers.*

Why I write about the past in the third person, about the present in the first person, and about the future not at all? Because the past and the present are literature, the pathetic mystery of fiction, and I write about my character as I should: with a cool alienation or a hot approach. The degree of heat does not matter here, because we invent a new reality in order to gently destroy it, tree by tree, bird by bird, satiating ourselves with the silence that has come.

Writing about the future is like whispering with death, because all the unknown is, in a sense, death, right? A dialog without an answer, hopeless, like the movement of horsemen on the edge of a terracotta vase.

You see, death is not a fight, but *a* surrender of arms, *asta est facta* - *La*, the play has been played - in the ancient theater this was how they announced the end of the play. That's why I write about it in the second person, and in *you* - speaking politely to a superior opponent.

Politely, but without humiliation, *doLce ma vov pederasta!* as one Bolognese conductor used to say at an Aida rehearsal. Maybe there was no such conductor at all. Before you can remember anyone, it turns out that there was no such conductor.

Why do I write diaries instead of talking out loud?

The same reason why the Gauls, when they appeared at a funeral, threw letters addressed to the dead into the fire.

Because the words are choking me, unable to escape from my body, unable to get out of my swollen, heavy, resentful tongue. What is the use of letting the words go when you are not free?

Why Hamlet delays and does not kill the king? Is it not because he would be mortally bored to live without hatred, life with hatred is like a cramped French café, the multiplying mirrors make it unsightly.

I'll burn the first diary, and the second one will be stolen. Or vice versa.

So be it - by then Hamlet will have killed the king, and I'll have a new character in mind. Or two. I could think of a whole city if I got my hands on it.

*Après tosh, c'est shv movde passa£Le*, said Voltaire when he ran out of ink.

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... *With the same woman who has a calendar in her hand, greasy and shiny as amber, you avoid meeting her.*

I didn't miss Edna A. much, although I wrote about her a lot. I seldom miss people I know well, because you can always make them up again. When Junior left, I made up a few Juniors and played with them as I pleased. It seems that one day I shall have to make up Louellin Al-derbury, but it will not be easy, much harder than making a wax doll with malachite buttons for eyes.

The other thing is stuff, stuff I miss a lot.

The Wishgard of my childhood is emptying before my eyes, the things I loved are long gone and their owners have died or moved away. And yet I see them when I pass the places where they used to live: the glass ball of crushed ice on the counter of *IL Terrazzo*, the park bench on lion's feet, the bronze pecan on the porch of the china shop, the aquarium of immortal fish in the window of the drugstore—all these things were before me, and will be when I leave, and I will leave very soon.

The owner of *IL Terrazzo* sold his cafe to the Starbucks chain, and the newspapers on splintery sticks and sepia frames disappeared, Ersley the pharmacist died, the fish must have been splashed into the sea, and now there are colorful flasks of tinted tea in the window, and as for the ice ball, it rolled away down the yellow brick road, as Monmouth's teacher would say.



Things disappear just like people - once and for all. In very sunny weather, however, you can see their shivering, thin outlines in the air or a shadow on a whitewashed wall.

And on rainy days, I sometimes see my mom's barefoot footprints on the wet garden path.

## **TABITA. LETTER NUMBER NINE**

*South Lambeth. 2008*

Aunt Jane, I know I shouldn't tell you this, but I can't tell Donna, and if I keep it to myself, I'll burst like a balloon in a vacuum.

Auntie, I have a confession to make. I was in bed with Luellin. I mean, not exactly in bed, but it doesn't matter. It wasn't what I thought it would be. It wasn't what I imagined.

Ugh, I can't write about this, it makes me hot with anger. Over-educated men have no idea about love, you were right. Especially the ones that aren't of this world. I can't help it, I'll have to accept it, because I'm going to marry him.

I even know where we're moving to! Don't be frightened, but it's far away - in Ireland, by the sea. I've known it for a long time, although he hasn't told me much, we haven't really talked at all. I realized it myself the first time I went to water his flowers, in early March.

On the wall in his bedroom are two identical framed photographs, torn from a magazine, judging by the quality of the paper. One is of the Church of the Assumption in Baxford and the other of the Immaculate Conception, so similar that one photograph could have been enough.

I knew right away that this was the city he wanted to live in, you don't just hang church steeples on the wall. At work.

I got on the Internet and read a lot of good things about this Baxford: for example, it has a harbor, and in the harbor there is a bird sanctuary where Icelandic white geese winter!

I don't care where I live, Aunt Jane, I'll live wherever he wants me to live.

Or I won't live at all.

*Your T.*

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

An ancient papyrus says: *god created dreaming to show the way to a sleeper whose eyes are in darkness*, what an unknowing egyptian! I could say: god created thievery to explain to a discouraged detective who he is dealing with.

Now that I'm back, having discovered on the bus that I hadn't stolen a diary with merciless plans, but a twin notebook in the maples, now that I'm back, I can't keep my eyes off my prey, it's a diary I'd like to write myself, myself! Only I've never had such ink before

women don't have desires, it's all just wiggles, wrote virginia wolfe in my favorite book on women - well, no, virginia, baby, you should have read a *personal herbalist* written by a woman who is made up of nothing but desires, but lives in an iron fetter.

I saw this in one of Walton's churches - an *iron witch's doo-doo*, *that's what it's* called, though it looks like something gnarly, indecent, like a muzzle and gag from a sadist's store.

It was explained to me that this was the way of punishing disobedient, wicked women in these parts, and I immediately thought of Sasha - what would have to happen for her to take out her spigot, undo t h e iron brackets and stop punishing herselfz.

\*\*\*

my grandmother, who was Irish, was fond of old sayings, I told Dr. Mayer when I went to see him without calling, and she used to say, "A man's mind is like a dog's tail, if it's a pretzel, no matter how much you straighten it, it'll bend.

Imagine, doctor, my mind bent like the tail of a green Scottish coo-shee dog-it lay curled on his back, and the dog was as tall as a calf, silent and deadly, walking only in a straight line, and hiding in rock crevices in bad weather.

Well, what's your complaint about your decayed mind? asked Gerhardt Meyer, sitting down in his chair; he had become a little more lax since I had been late in paying my bills.

I cannot perform any of the things I have in mind, I said, instead I perform a Sinhalese ritual dance wearing the mask of the *lord of eighteen diseases* - *the mask is* covered with a strong varnish and my face cannot be seen behind it

nonsense, what masks, said Meyer, the time before last you were overly sensitive to touch, the last time you didn't answer your letters for a long time and you were sweating with uncertainty, you just seem to like lying on this couch, lou, and that's understandable, I ordered it from Conran and it cost me four hundred pounds plus two hundred and fifty for the chair.

Your couch is not cheap for me either, I said, stretching, but I believe the Irish grandmother and I'm trying to bend my bagel! Tell me, doctor, what must be in a girl's head to write letters to her estranged sister in a language she doesn't understand?

Meyer sighed noisily and took notes.

no, this girl is on her own, I said, looking up at the dull doctor's ceiling; last time I read in the maples her

I tried to read the diary to the end and took it home, and whatz it turned out to be was another diary, as similar to the first as two churches in Baxford are to each other - that is, from a bird's-eye view.

\*\*\*

took home, Mayer interjected, do you mean stolen?

No, I said indignantly, confiscated as evidence! this girl has been numb for weeks, I can't ask her, I haven't heard her voice at all, maybe it's not there at all, I said, carefully marking commas with pauses, - well, yes, I had a little añejo from a flask on the way to Meyer's, so whatz

Alcohol keeps me afloat, the way concrete beams keep a pontoon pier afloat - I always thought it was strange that these piers don't sink, shouldn't the concrete pull them to the bottomz interrogatez judging by the distortion of the sound, Mayer put his cigar in his mouth and chewed it, and why would you interrogate her?

if you're a private investigatorz

why do all psychoanalysts answer a question with a questionz you know I meant to *ask!* they just tell me so insistently *Inspector*, that I'm forced into the role - so Loki turned into a mare, got carried away and gave birth to a warhorse

Loki gave birth to a *whoz* ah yes, myths, I see! you are in vain to be so fond of myths, lou, it throws you back into your past, and our method of treatment is to...

to forget what happened in Swansea, to replace it with a new, more significant story, I interrupted him, a formula I had already learned by heart!

You've told me a hundred thousand times, doctor, but to do that I'd have to stop talking to him, and I can't: he and the clothier buzz over my head like a bifurcated Krishna in the form of a bee, and sometimes I think they're exhausted, but for some reason they can't stop.

Oh yes, bees! From the creaking sound, the heavy Mayer squirmed in his chair, bees are associated with tears, a Breton tale - since you like it so much - talks about a bee born in the tears of our crucified Lord.

I didn't answer that and just closed my eyes.

You see, Mayer remarked with importance, after a little silence, I'm no stranger to bees and tears: bees and tears are one and the same.

maybe you should have a good cry, luz

\*\*\*

it is said, men followed Ogma, the son of etain, chained by the ears to his tongue

not by chains, but by amber chains, which are so easily broken,- why did the people follow him, howling with painz

sometimes you have to do things voluntarily, you can't help it.

I have read forty-nine stolen pages and am now attached to Sasha's language with writer's envy - which is stronger than Varuna's hook used to drag the deceased to the source of the underground waters.

who was Sasha's motherz a foreigner who read Chekhov mixed with Verlaine and got lost in the *landscape of the soulz* it's not hard - a drunken ship, clairvoyance, silence, disorder of all the senses and, finally, a season in hell.

I've seen her once and I'd like to see her again, she's got a mouthful of underground water, she reads herbalism too, we'd find something to talk about.

Who was Sasha's father? I saw him, too, as recently as yesterday, but there's no need to talk, I know what he'll say.

I am glad I mixed up my notebooks, this diary will not satisfy my curiosity, but it will satiate my hunger for words, Sasha's herbalist tickles my palms like the golden bristles of a Gullingbursty boar - see, Lou, you're already repeating her, you've got it! - it stuns me from within, like the bell that the Chinese used to torture each other with in the old days, I am shaken by the rumbling under the swinging bell skirt.

I was tamed like a boy - my eyes squinted as if I were looking at seawater under the sun, golden ripples running through my body, the smell of fennel filling my nostrils when I think of this woman's words, the way she probably bites her pencil, the way she arches her eyebrows, rigid and stubborn, the classic widower's daughter, the way she wiggles her fingers, flicking her squiggly dots and commas onto the paper.

I'd like to think she has a sippy cup, even though I know she doesn't.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1990

*There is a herb of Adam's head, and that herb should be taken on Ivan's Day in the evening and pierced through gold or silver, or through a silver cross. And if the herb is acceptable, which a man is spoiled by evil spoilage, give it to drink, drowned in vinegar, that hour he will be well. And its root is as a human being.*

Sometimes she would go to the second floor, to her former nursery, and sit on the window sill. From here you could see a piece of the garden, where the guests had breakfast in good weather; in winter, she would set a long table in the kitchen, where the fire was stoked in the morning.

The living room, decorated with a blue carpet and a faceted vase of oculus branches, was mostly empty. The living room, decorated with a blue carpet and a faceted vase of oculus branches, was mostly empty, and Sasha could not understand why guests were so reluctant to enter it.

Honey, these are the lungs of our house, every house should have one completely empty and clean room, Mom said, but Sasha just shrugged her shoulders. There was no point in arguing with her - she would turn her back on Sasha and walk away with her head hanging down. Mom's silence was heavy, curdled, and strangely occupied the whole house, impossible to imitate, just as it was impossible to imitate the heartbeat of a whale - ten beats a minute, that's all, that's ocean life.

Looking at her mother's hurt back, Sasha always felt the same thing: a quick, sharp prick in her heart, like the rosehip prick she had read about as a child, which made everyone in the kingdom fall asleep - the queen, the horses, the dogs, even the cooks and cooks.

From time to time my mother would go to Cardiff to visit her acquaintance and stay there for a week or two; on such days my father would stop noticing Sasha and speak to the people through his teeth, the house would be in a state of disrepair, the oak table would be covered with glasses left by someone or wet circles from them, and the lace curtains would be covered with red stains as if by prearrangement.

When she returned, her mother always allowed Sasha small liberties-reading in the bathroom, eating breakfast in bed, even putting on records in the *perfectly clean living room*. Sasha especially liked the violin concerto in an envelope with a young operatic man wrapped in a scarlet cloak and Russian lettering across it.

The music was scarlet and swaggering, too. Sasha sat on the floor and closed her eyes. What she was hearing required sitting on the floor, the draft from under the casement doors, the hoarse coughing in the threaded gut of the turntable, and even the tapping of drops in the tin gutter.

The past and the future seemed to her to be connected by this music, by tonight's twilight, by the rustle of someone's footsteps on the garden path, by that peculiarly sparse English silence, instantly recognizable, as one recognizes the walls in a nursery: the smell of wallpaper glue, nail holes, and long-lost pencil strokes on the doorjamb - so many feet, so many inches, and Sasha herself was exactly in the middle, on the thick blue carpet, with her ears full of music and her mouth full of monpencier.

### 1996

*There is a companion herb that grows along the way, its leaves are like tongues, its leaves are like veins, and its top is like a hundred horns. There is a herb that will help you, who will go on a journey, take it with you, what will make you sick on the way, drink it with water, God will help you.*

When Sasha's father finally collapsed, Hedda grew fat and aged as fast as if she had lost a whole chunk of her life overnight. The whites of her eyes became pink veins, and her hair darkened and straightened.

Sasha thought it was from grief and began to look sympathetically at her stepmother, but soon realized that Hedda was simply dying without love, the very bodily love about which Sasha had a special opinion, although no one asked her about it.

She was nineteen when the pianist Nathan Waterman took her to his room and bathed her in a bathtub full of eucalyptus foam. Nathan's cob was nothing like the one Paul Dolphus had used to scare Sasha in the grove behind the school-it was like a chilled bird and not scary at all.

Sasha caught herself that she was not ashamed of Nathan: with him she did not even think about her breasts, or rather about the fact that they were almost invisible, as if her belly extended to her collarbones, with a slight swelling above the diaphragm.



— I don't know if it's pine flakes or alder buds," Dora Crossman said one day in the gymnasium and snickered pitifully.

Since then, Sasha had always been embarrassed to undress in front of other people's eyes, but in front of Nathan she undressed herself as soon as he asked her to. Maybe it was because he had called her into the bathroom and was so funny and ridiculous, with steaming pink knees and wet dark blond hair on his belly.

Wrapping Sasha in a towel labeled *Millennium*, he placed her in front of him and began drying her hair with a hotel hair dryer on a short cord. Sasha didn't know where to look and started thinking about towels.

— When I own Stone Maples," she said, "I'll have the same towels there, blue and white, monogrammed. And I'll have blue terrycloth bathrobes.

— No, Nathan said, you won't make a hostess. I have an instinct for that. You would make a very good witch or a bad librarian.

She laughed and turned away, trying not to breathe; she thought her breath smelled like the garlic that was thickly seasoned in the restaurant's fish soup. Garlic *instantly impregnates women from head to toe*, Deirdre said, picking slices from her plate.

Nathan noticed this and made her brush her teeth with his brush. What he did to her afterwards did not embarrass Sasha as much as the brush in her mouth - it had an unusual shape and too stiff red bristles.

What he did to her afterward, Sasha remembered vaguely, as if she were peeking through a gauze curtain.

When, a few years later, she tried to repeat it with her sister, it didn't work. Edna snorted and got angry, which was strange - Sasha remembered how Nathan had praised her taste, he had even compared it to *cherry citro*, maybe because there was a streak of rotten cherry color on the sheets in the morning, or maybe he really liked it.

## HEDDA. LETTER SEVEN

*Mattancherry, April, 2003*

Daughter, you can come to me now!

I have left Rajiv Appas and am living on my own! Little Benji was not given to me, but Gauri is with me, your black-haired four-year-old, she knows many English words, including *my sister Drina*.

I was so unexpectedly lucky, I still can't believe it.

At the very end of March, the wife of a Southampton sales representative came to the workshop to prepare the furniture she had bought from an antique dealer for removal. Mrs. Jane Debney - oh, how I missed the plain English - took me for tea on the veranda of a nearby café. It was the middle of the day, and Rajiv grimaced, but nodded and let me go.

Mrs. Debney is good-looking, with hair like raffia - the kind they weave mats out of here - a whole bunch of hair and horn-rimmed glasses, a very serious lady. We talked for about forty minutes, but it seemed to me that she understood everything about me. She was in a hurry to go to the movies - with her Indian husband! to the movies! - and had promised to come when the furniture was ready, but she came the next day.

— Hedda," she said, "this is no way to live. I've been thinking about you and your children all night. I couldn't sleep!

Oh, that's a proper English lady, I tell you, there's not many of those nowadays.

— Hedda," she said as I cried and wiped my face with her handkerchief, "my husband and I need an au pair. At our house in Mattancherry. We'll be gone more than half the year, and I don't trust the Kerala servants. Someone has to be in charge of the house and the household, and it is better if that someone is a white educated Christian woman.

You know all about my education, but I didn't say anything. In the evening I packed my clothes in the laundry basket, put the bangles Rajiv had given me in the bottom, took my daughter in my arms, and left through the back door.

Now I live in a colonial house with a carved wooden staircase and wainscoting on the walls, and Gauri has her own room here, so I can read in bed without fear of waking her. There's not much to do: I'm overseeing the morning cleaning and going through the linens in the chests Mrs. Debney has ordered dried and ironed. The owners will be back in mid-September, so if you pack up quickly and come to my place in Hochin, we'll have plenty of time to get reacquainted.

When I moved into the English house, I began to miss the Cleves, I thought it was all forgotten, like a child's counting, but it turned out that it wasn't - it looks much the same as ours, and there is a fireplace, although there is no need to heat it yet.

Also: tell my stern stepdaughter that I miss her too, though she's not likely to be happy about it.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

*If a woman writes about murders she didn't commit, the clothier wrote to me on the back of a postcard overlooking Port Rosslane, it doesn't mean she didn't do anything else stupid!*

*and don't forget, a witch is always responsible for her mother's death.*

this diary becomes too viscous, it gives birth to ghosts.

How is it that I've been going to bed in writing for a long time? I go to bed with a letter of resignation, but in the morning--

I plunged my hands into the diary again, pushing its reeds and sedges apart, and caught myself thinking as I wrote, and writing as abruptly as one chops salt in salt pans, with heavy breathing and muttered curses.

yesterday, on my way to Dr. Mayer's, I was listening to Irish musicians on the corner of Shaftesbury Road, playing the *Scarborough Fair*, the one with the flute was called Iwan, he was squinting and shaking his green hair cheerfully, the others looked tired and shivered in the wet wind.

Ivan sold me a CD with two trolls on the cover, he came back and played *Dark Island*, I stayed a little longer and went home, I gave the CD to my landlady, I keep forgetting her name, she has sky-colored hair and an actor's habit of kissing her cheek.

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an ancient Chinese said: it is intolerable to watch a game of chess when you are forbidden to prompt," I think I understand now what he meant.

I reread the herbalist, and I feel like I'm reading my own manuscript, but - far be it from me to Sasha's iconic thoroughness! I spend half the night writing a simple letter - long texts make me confused, not to mention capital letters and punctuation, the latter making me dizzy and sore throat.

she occupies me more and more, this Vermeerian innkeeper, living in a world where her runaway sister needs her like fresh bread and her unfaithful lover drowns in the night river, I wonder if these two ever lived, or maybe they didn't - the main thing is that this world fits in her diary, and it is harmless, though full of smoldering, coal-burning hatred.

The stolen notebook lives in my bed and on the table, the surprise settles in me with ashes, hangovers and tobacco crumbs, I must put it back, but that's not all - I must talk to her, *talk!* even if it means cooking dinner in eggshells.

oh wild, lonely and completely crazy sasha sleepy, do you know that the ancient Slavs had a special way of getting rid of changelings - a silent child planted by a witch was cooked dinner in an eggshell, and he was so surprised that he forgot about his mute, said out loud: *I am as old as the ancient forest, and I have never seen such a thing!* and disappeared out of sight.

such is the power of surprise

I'm going back to Wishgard tomorrow, so what's the surprise?

\*\*\*

women are a special tribe, they all live in an imaginary world, some don't know it and others are good at pretending, said the clothier, showing up at the Hobart Station without warning, he never used to do that before, I tell you something is changing.

it's time for you to get a cleaning girl or get married, or at least get married, louellyn stonebury! he looked around the hallway, poked his head into the kitchen, grimaced and walked through the rooms without taking off his muddy shoes.

I silently brought a rag and wiped the floor, there were stains on the carpet too, but they would have to be cleaned with powder, I

never thought that a clothier could leave marks, in the *heavenly garden* the floor is so spittle-stained you can't even see dragon's blood on it, we got your letter, he added after a long pause, sitting down at the table, and we were both surprised, there was nothing obvious in it, nothing of substance, just harmless musings.

We're bored, luellin!

I put a clean glass in front of him and poured the wine, I was out of rum, and I found a Bordeaux on the kitchen shelf I didn't know who had bought it.

It's sour, I suppose, he glanced at the label, but back to the point: whether she did or not, what's the outcome of the bet, you've been searching the witch's lair for nothing.

I don't know, I said gloomily and poured myself some wine into a coffee cup, I only have one glass, I've tried to buy a second one many times and it always disappears somewhere

Come on, you've read her diary, Llewelyn, all those *poppy buds*, *the felt back*, *the mosquito bites*, you know, you only write about love in such thick ink, and love is evil.

Sasha sleepy lies all the time, I said, barely able to open my lips, maybe she lied about the poppy bud, too.

every adherent fiercely defends his god when there is reason to doubt him, said the clothier, setting down his glass, I didn't make that up, but it's not badly said, that woman is not capable of doing evil, she just makes up stories, I said tiredly, I always get tired quickly in the presence of the clothier, like before a thunderstorm  
in a heat wave - in my eyes.

sand and ringing in my ears.

surely Miss Sleepy's electricity struck you like lightning in a church steeple! grinned the clothier, that's the worst thing that could have happened to you... well, that's what you should do.

Maybe another drink? I asked, trying to look past him, unable to look into a person's eyes when I'm in front of them - just like that Chinese dignitary who could turn the other side of his eyes toward visitors he didn't like.

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... *our wager was a mistake, and I intend to admit my defeat*,  
the out-of-nowhere carpenter sat down on the loose-

He pulled a leaf from the pocket of his robe, which today had no buttons on it - he probably wore it over his head like a Sarmatian cataphract.

*I regret that I have jeopardized my relationship with alexandra in this way, and I will hasten to confess everything to her and return her favor as soon as possible,* he crumpled the sheet in his fist and threw it under the table, I picked it up and put it in my pocket, I don't like to make a mess of things.

Look, I want to finish the second diary, I said, finishing my wine from the coffee cup, that is, the first, and I need to put back the other diary, that is, the herbalist - oh my God, I'm getting lost in them!

Of course you'll put everything back, nodded the carpenter, Sasha has already missed him and is very nervous, go right away on the evening bus.

But a letter, a letter, what an Edwardian style! The clothier intervened, with a standing collar and inkwell, and said simply: I was bought with two boyish berries, three weepy stories, and a plate of maple syrup pancakes!

Anyway, the wager is lost, said the carpenter thoughtfully, I hope you remember what you're supposed to do with your loss, lu

I'll send it to you the other day, I said, trying not to look him in the face, I'd return it now, but you're not really here, we won't forget your grace, grinned the clothier, but you're angry, Llewelyn Stonebury! You're wary, and you suspect everyone of perfidy and *absenteeism* - everyone, except for her!

That's right, I said she is and you're not.

Well, well, well, well," nodded the carpenter, "where are we compared to you? It is you who sit in the middle of the world with two macaques on your shoulders, and you judge everyone, and you yourself... he cut himself short, coughing and waving his hand.

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What on earth are you in?" finished the clothier for him, sitting there, playing your wooden Latin in the bilboque, not a thought of your own, your head full of Greco-Roman nonsense.

Why not, I note, you're allowed to quote Joyce at random.

Go, go to your moon-faced innkeeper and weep over her fate, and when you meet the late Mrs. Sleepy, you'll weep with the three of you.

Leave Mrs. Sonley alone," said the carpenter, "I don't know why you're getting on about them. Don't forget that we're talking about a round orphan, or rather two round orphans.

*Isn't a noble husband the one who brings up an orphan of six chi?"* said the clothier, rising from his chair, "and do you know that for every noble husband there is a blond boy weighing one danz, and no later than tomorrow at noon that boy will do what you would like him to do, he will do it at home, on the kitchen table, or on the sofa, among the cushions smelling of cat urine, and **h e** will be blamed for it.

It'll be you, lou, as it is with everything else! The carpenter snorted angrily, stood up, and silently walked toward the two-  
He had a pinch of bluish lime on his chair, probably spilled out of his pocket.

And don't forget to wrap up your loss properly, Lou, wrap it in plastic bubbles - I love the sound of them bursting when you pick them with your fingernail.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*... purple can be antique purple, dripped from a sea snail, or baroque purple, the juice of a lichen, just a little bit of oryzello grass squeezed dry.*



In India, where the bored Hedda has gone, they know how to revive a new life simply and easily. The one who is to be reborn is dragged into a golden cow and then taken out through the place where the calves come from.

I drag myself through the Face Herbalist to revive the past and then kill it. Sometimes I succeed.

Or rather, it did, because the herbalist had disappeared, turned into a piece of moss, like a magical coin from a dwarf-coronoid. Someone is reading it now, I can feel it, as if that someone were tickling my palm. And what to do now that I have a reader in my golden cow - will the Indian remedy work, will we both squeeze through the tight opening?

If the herbalist is reading the one I'm thinking of, then there are only two of us in the cow. If it's someone else, there's a whole bunch of us. If it's someone else, my diary pages will soon be lining the beach cabins at the Old Port.

If he is who I think he is, he will put the herbalist back when he comes to Wishgard-and he will. He hasn't finished my other notebook, this one, the *entertaining one* - curiosity will lead him here, no need for crushed vervain or aloe or red coral powder.

Strange thing is, no matter what I hide, it always comes out bad. I kept Hedda's letters in Daddy's shed, and I don't know how Junior got them. When she found them, she just took them and didn't say a word to me. I didn't think Edna could resist a real good scene in the spirit of Sister Boleyn.

I realized it later, when I went to the workshop to get my gardening shears and noticed the scattered sawdust and the overturned toolbox. For weeks I waited for her to speak, to cry, to throw the crumpled envelopes in my face, but she found another way to punish me, a way worthy of the wicked king of the Lapiths.

I think Ixion, chained to a spinning wheel in Tartarus, was tormented not so much by the torture as by the thought that he was

the thought of being treated like a child. Thoughts can be more torturous than torture chambers, and I know all about it.

I hid my herb book outside the house, too, as if the real secret was to be kept in the ground - and what was the use of it? It was discovered as easily as I had found a suede bag of priceless Murano beads hidden by my mother in the laundry basket as a child, out of harm's way.

It seems that the only thing I've managed to bury properly is my own talent - after all, I have some talentz

Somewhere in my garden, *in the reservoir that is to the east, in a hole in the north corner, is buried one cubit, or - setting back sixty cubits from the Solomon Ditch in the direction of the great watchtower, is buried three cubits.* Somewhere in my garden twenty-six pounds of Attic silver await the fortunate thief.

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*How different are the words Christ, beer, and teacher in his and my mouth.*

July 20th.

Memories are like someone else's promissory notes - in bitter days you can pay with them, you can get out of it, clutching your rapidly diminishing life in your fist. But as long as you have something to pay with, as long as the past tosses you around like an obedient bastard, you are in power, you have a full sleeve of trump cards.

How to live without a herbalist, when every day breathes in your face hot and stale, like a runaway dog hanging his purple tongue out to the side, and you feel stuffy, oh, how sick you feel, and you find crumbled galettes in your pocket and throw one at a time, right into the hot mouth, just to get a sip of air-

no, life without the herbalist is becoming increasingly unbearable.

I'll have to continue it here in the second notebook, it can't be helped.

I'm gonna try it right now.

The school-the green tinkling tile of the washrooms, the humming, shaking water pipes, the chrome lamp in which the classroom was reflected distorted, concave, as if in a Christmas tree ball - nothing has such perfect luster as blue Christmas tree balls! a strange urinal glimpsed behind a smelled door, a splattered long strip of washbasin along the wall, an apple stump in a desk, a ruled paper, a checkered bou- maga, unwound scrolls of gray toilet paper, sprawling under my fingers, cigarette butts in the black frozen grass behind the school, tightly packed absorbent cotton in my mother's bra, a long hallway without a single bench with a ship's window at the end, and the eternal battle for the window sill where the hills looked so good.

*The maples*, the bedclothes piled on the floor with dirty snow flakes, the four open doors with Roman numerals, the hinges creaking in the fourth room, the radiator leaking in the second, the winter light revealing dents and scuffs, fingerprints on the mirrors and door handles, and the coal sizzling wetly in the stove - we have to go to the shore for a swim, and the bird droppings on the garden path, and the wire baskets in the corridor, full of cellophane wrappers, orange peels, wine corks, and amber soaps, and the hair on the edge of the sink, and the chrome-plated trays with dirty glasses on the carpet, and sometimes a forgotten comb or tube of lipstick, sometimes a light drizzle, sometimes black smoke.

No, it doesn't work in this notebook. The words stick together like the armeritters Hedda used to fry for her daughter in the mornings. I once caught my sister hiding something in the hollow of a you-

of a dried beech tree in the far corner of the garden. There, on a mat of juniper scales and leaves, was a pile of breakfast, a clump of fried bread, sugar, and moldy ham.

- It's for the squirrels," said Junior, moving farther away just in case, "they'll come over the hill and be glad to find food here.

\*\*\*

*... The whole is made up of particles, but the whole is gone, The deceit among men has prevailed.*

When I saw Saunders six years ago, at the Garden of Heaven pub, I didn't recognize him immediately: his blond curls were shorn and his midday smile had faded.

— Nero's head has become Vespasian's head," I said when I ran into him at the bar, but he didn't answer, scooped the wet change off the counter, and headed toward his companions without even looking in my direction. The bar was decorated with pine needles, streamers, and sheared foil, and there was a shiny scarlet ribbon trailing behind Saunders's shoe.

— Which side did you come from?" Prue asked me as I returned to the table with three mugs of hot punch. - Branagh can't hear with his right ear now, so try the left. He's recently returned from the islands, because of his mother's death, I thought you knew.

— There's no reason to go near him, whoever he's got dead," said Somme, who had had a lot to drink and wanted more. - He's as dangerous as a scolopendra, or whatever it is that lives in those Asian seas of his.

— I think I'm going to go ask him to dance," I said, standing up and walking quickly over to the table of beer mugs. Saunders looked up at me, his eyes a little cloudy.

but as sly and blue as they were on the veranda.

"Heather Hill's, where he treated Junior to a lemon sherbet.

— It can't be," he said, "Alexandra herself, the Tsarina of Russia! In such a hot place and with curled tresses. And who was left in the house to guard the family plates?"

— Let's dance," I gave him my hand, and he got up with a slightly surprised look. We passed the table where Prue was comforting Tommy, pushed past the counter, got to the door, and went out onto the porch.

— You don't want to dance anymore," Saunders asked, leaning against the wall and putting his hand on my shoulder, his tongue a little slack, but his hand was firm and light.

I was instantly cold in my bare-back silk dress, but I didn't ask Saunders for a sweater; I wanted to sober up a little. I had forgotten to eat a piece of butter on the way to the pub, and my feet felt like I was walking on a wet porch where the evening snow had melted.

Two customers came out of the pub, tangled in the canniness, and they glanced at us, and one gave Saunders a two-fingered poke and a wink.

— Come on, Miss Sonley," Saunders pulled me to him, running his hand painfully through my hair, "where's your maiden braid gone?"

He pressed his mouth hard against mine, and I could smell the malt and the freshness of juniper. It seemed that his friends had a bottle of gin under the table that they had brought with them. Suddenly the two flavors were joined by another, hot and unfamiliar.

— Oh shit," Saunders said, pushing me away, "oh shit, did you bite me, Alix?"

I took half a step back and gasped: his mouth and chin were red and sticky, blood dripping slowly onto his fluffy blue sweater, I *should get salt!* It flashed through my head, but I couldn't move.

His blood was on my face, on my neck, even on the stone floor, two large drops on my breasts, and my mother's dress was hopelessly ruined. Tyrian purple could not be washed from white silk. If my old fiancé Monmouth had been here, he would have read from John Donne:

*Look and consider: a flea has bitten  
and drunk a little blood, First mine,  
then yours, And our blood is mixed  
in it.*

Saunders raised his head and put his palms to his nose.

— I'm sorry, Alix, it's nothing to do with you," I heard from beneath the palms of my hands, "it happens to me now. It just hasn't happened in a while, so I almost forgot. Get a napkin from the bar, if it's not too much trouble. I wiped my mouth with the palm of my hand, opened the tight, swollen door, and walked through the spruce needles damp with beer foam to the bar where the fussed over Patrick in his Christmas hat.

— Hey, you're okay," Prue called to me, walking toward me with two new mugs. - You know you stained your dress," Prue called to me, walking toward me with two new mugs.

— I stepped over the blood," I said, walking with her to the table where a bored-looking Sommy was drawing something on a napkin. - I stepped over the blood on the doorstep, it was an accident.

I've stepped over the blood of shameless deaf Saunders Branagh. Now I have to marry him.

## **TABITA. LETTER TENTH**

*2008. South Lambeth*

Aunt Jane, this is as bad as it gets.

He's gone to that worthless little town again, and this time

he didn't leave me the keys.

His finches must have gotten bored with him, and the azalea too.

Something strange is happening to me, Aunt Jane, for yesterday I sat for three hours on an uncomfortable deck chair in Hyde Park - they charge three pounds, by the way! - I watched the Canada geese, which swam up to the shore and seemed silent and silvery in the twilight, though I know they are a dirty blue color and cackle disgustingly.

There was a free bench in the alley next door, but people kept changing, and I wanted to be alone, and I had a pack of crackers, and you know how I don't like to eat in public. Eventually an African family with strollers, cardboard bags and thermoses got on the bench and I had to leave. Today I'm going to Kensington Gardens to see the squirrels.

And here's another thing: I read about the Hip Stone that Luellin once mentioned, and it turned out to be just a ski boulder that would return to its place wherever it was thrown. It was called the Hip Stone because when it was tied to a peasant's thigh, it made the thigh die and the stone return to its place.

Aunt Jane, what is this nonsense - the *hip is dead!* What's in his head?

What a man who has a pair of finches and bought them an antique cage with bronze drinkers and swings made of copper wirez may have on his mind.

That's nothing. The last time I saw him, he gave me an Elizabethan three-pence coin, and said that for it you could take a boat from Whitehall to London Bridge. But there was a ferry from our Lambeth to Westminster, and a *horse and rider* cost two pence. Imagine, he said, a whole horse and rider! And now, even with a twelve-pound bi-summer, you can't always get where you want to go.

I don't know what he was talking about.

*Kisses, T.*



## FACIAL HERBALIST

1981

*There is a herb of mensherafa, and where that herb lives, who is drunk out of his mind, but to give that herb to him to drown with wine and to give him to drink, he will soon be in his mind again in the old way.*

The maid Deirdre of Abertridur - they had a maid then, a terrible mess, but beautiful - told of the coal dumps that surrounded the mining villages like fortress walls, the sticky coal dust as familiar as the taste of burnt bread, the over-mine copier with its giant scaffolding like a Ferris wheel in a Cardiff amusement park, the smelting furnaces scattering festive sparks, the gorges like the end of the world where fog crawls into the mouth and horses dip their hooves in the void.

Deirdre's favorite story, the one that sent shivers down Sasha's spine, was the story of the Llanuitin community, a village that had gone underwater a hundred and twenty years ago.

All forty houses and the church of St. John of Jerusalem! The damned reservoir had swallowed them, Deirdre said, rounding her piercing blue eyes, and Sasha imagined a monster of the same blue color, all in flowing blue scales, jaw open with blue teeth of a deadly translucent hue.

Sasha herself had teeth like these when she returned from the Westwood forest with a basket full of thorn berries for *Gypsy syrup*, the berries stained her face and mouth thickly, and at the bottom of the basket a thick bluish juice left indelible stains.

When Sasha turned nine and started writing poetry, Deirdre read a few pages, thought for a while, and said with importance:

— Well, child, it seems the gods have anointed your lips with May honey and the blood of a wise man. That's what they do to those destined to form words. Even the bard Taliesin had his lips anointed, and you'll learn that in school.

— Bloodz How disgusting," Sasha said and smiled blissfully.

### 1993

*There is a herb of the Virgin Mary, which grows at great rivers, and this herb is very good for young children to drink in milk, it helps from all sorrows. The herb is very good to be given to young children to drink in milk, it helps from all sorrows.*

... Hedda, on the other hand, had time for a lot of things, just moving slowly, wiggling her broad flanks; she and Junior were linked by a lazy confidence in their beauty, in their need for the world, in the fact that they *would have time for everything*; they both sat at breakfast in their pajamas, ignoring the fact that a piece of cardboard had been placed under the table leg, glad that there were no guests today and that they could wander around all morning in their robes open.

It seemed to Sasha that the nerve of the house was painfully frayed, its springs shriveled and aching, and she twisted in her chair, chewing impatiently on her toast, watching in disgust as Hedda brought in a mountain of buttered pancakes and a jar of blueberry jam.

A faint, devious grin lurked at the corners of Heddy's lips-she stretched, she squirmed, as if waiting for someone strong, as big as she was, to come up behind her and take her silly round breasts in the palm of his hand and squeeze them tight. I wish, Sasha thought, that someone had found her, that we would be happy, that we would have a great life.

After stretching their breakfast until noon, mother and daughter would roll up their sleeves and do laundry or cleaning, and Sasha would take a book and go deep into the garden, where she had a corner behind the greenhouse, near the fence, overgrown with brambles, and a stone rocker on two split fish tails left by the previous owners.

The bench was the oldest thing in the Maples, cold, uncomfortable, but Sasha would take off her father's jacket, hanging in the hallway with an old fedora - her father wore it all when he worked in the garden on Sundays, - and sat on it with her legs tucked under her, waiting calmly for Hedda to come after her and stand by the warmth of the fire with her fists on her satin apron-clad sides, shaking her head.

Looking into her reproachful blue eyes, Sasha felt no remorse; she knew that the house was hers, no matter who did the dishes or made the beds. It used to be her mother's house, and now it was hers, no matter how much Hedda fussed and *fussed*.

She knew that she held the Maples in her little fist and that if she unclenched it, everything would collapse, move, crawl, turn into the shameless underside of a theatrical backdrop, the way a frightened passenger holds his fist tightly clenched when the plane falls into the clouds and begins to tumble awkwardly from side to side. The passenger knows that only his desire to land, to be alive, to see the tiled roofs of the city and the gray landing strip of the airport keeps this senseless iron box in the air, only his greedy desire, only his.

## LOUFERS CLUB GUESTBOOK. 2008

*Levy Junior writes:*

Sensation! Lamia is hiding someone in a room on the top floor. For two days! Our friend Finn Everton claims that it's someone

her dead sister's former room, but it's locked now. Finn saw Lamia going in there with tea and toast. When Finn asked Lamia if it needed cleaning, she looked at her in disgust and wrote in big letters, "DO NOT TOUCH WHEN NOT ASKED."

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*Writes Neo:*

Finn's a known liar, my sister went to Heverstock with her. But it's worth checking out, I agree. T and I will keep an eye on the town, and you and Spider take over the house, inside and out.

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*Levy Junior writes:*

Neo, are you deaf? I told you last time I couldn't watch the windows any more, my grandmother caught me in her bedroom with binoculars. I'll stay in the garden tonight, see who comes in and out. By the way, the inspector's here again, and that's suspicious. Either the police have come to their senses and are on the case, or that fool has fallen in love with Lamia!

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*Writes Alien:*

Cool! Yesterday I was at the post near the Maples from seven o'clock, the landlady came out with a twisted face and walked briskly into town, I followed her, of course. And in twenty minutes I was outside the Noon Teeth house! She entered the house and immediately began to write something in her notebook, almost on her horn. And he looked at her with admiration, as if she were writing a check!

*Spiderman writes:*

And who are you surprising, you half-wit? They've been engaged since last spring, he even sleeps over at her place sometimes. Soon

Saunders will become the innkeeper and bury his wife under the blackberry bush we know.

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*Writes Alien:*

That's not the point! She must have written that she wouldn't give him the keys anymore, because he'd taken something valuable from the Maples, because Branny laughed at first, and then she said, "I'll give it to him, but what's in it for me?" And then she slapped him in the face, and started to undress, and he threw her on the table, and the kitchen light was on, and you could see everything!

*Levy Junior writes:*

It's not very valuable information. If you took a picture of it o n y o u r cell phone, then yes. What does Lamia look like without her underwear?

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*Writes Alien:*

I could only see Saunders's back and her legs, but I w a s outside, right under the kitchen window. Her legs were long and white, like they'd been drained of blood.

And then she went home to her apartment with some thing, and the thing was in a bag. And I went home because I was asleep.

*Spiderman writes:*

Of course you do. We even know what you did in your house, the first thing you did as soon as you walked into the bathroom!

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*Levy Junior writes:*

Spider, shut up. Etiquette, for crying out loud. Tomorrow we're going after Irl. Cr. Bring everything you've got and sandwiches.

## LETTER FROM EDNA ALEXANDRINA SONLEY

*undated*

... I won't forgive you for that note of yours, and I won't forgive you for many other things.

The French word from there was translated to me on the Internet - *vostalgie de La Roche*, the craving for dirt, how elegantly you've done it! Well, I may be attracted to guys who aren't so clean, but I wouldn't get into bed with my own sister, and I certainly wouldn't be jealous of her beauty.

Do you think I didn't know that you were working magic on me, just as your mother worked magic on her husband? As soon as she died, he couldn't stand it for six months and married someone else.

I lived in the same house with you for sixteen years - and slept under the same blanket with you for two years, until I realized I was taking a handful of parking tokens for granted. You said you were crazy about me, you bathed me in the bathtub-I hate that jug over my head! - Well, I believe you were crazy, but I had nothing to do with it. You were quenching your thirst with me, the way one uses a wet sponge to wipe the lips of a sick person who can't be given water. You made up admirers and wrote yourself letters of confession-I knew it, and I felt *sorry for* you, yes, sorry, but nothing more.

You're stuck with the old maids for a reason, sister, men can smell an *imaginary abbot* a mile away, men don't like jealous virgins, and who likes them?

I knew you took my dirty laundry out of the hamper and touched it, I saw you pick up an orange peel I threw in the kitchen, put it in your mouth and ate it.

I could smell you casting a spell on me when you looked at me with your swollen tea eyes, I noticed you rummaging through the drawers of my dresser in my room and putting your gate powder in my milk, I always knew you were lying to me.

If I hadn't left, you'd have finished me off.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

overnight the wind had swept the clouds away from the crust, the morning was unexpectedly hot - just right for a royal procession, as my grandmother would have said, I got the key to the no-mer from the Everton girl at 8 a.m. She and I walked up to the maple gate at the same time, she swept my money into the cash register, hummed, came out from behind the counter and put a WE ARE BOOKED UP sign on the front door.

We have six rooms, but one - the best one - has a broken window, the Finn explained, noticing my puzzled look, and the landlady has kept the other one locked for two days, I don't know why.

I asked, though I knew that Sasha got up in the morning, and Finn waved her hand toward the garden, and there was something feverish in her smile-she probably hadn't put up the WE ARE BOOKED UP sign for a long time, or maybe never.

I left my bag in the room, went out into the garden with a fresh newspaper, and settled down to read on a wide bench, its uneven red stones reminding me of honeycomb, the moss between them dark as if it were bee brood.

Meanwhile the lady of the house was the most silent bee I had ever seen, appearing on the path with garden shears, or on the terrace with a pile of cushions, her hair, bound with a black ribbon, shining like strands of erminia.

once she passed me with a preoccupied look, holding a Spanish pot with a withered stem to her bosom, but I did not lift my eyes from the Daily Telegraph, though I would have given thirty silver solids in fines to tear that ribbon off her and let her hair loose.

funny laws the Franks had, after all; in the Middle Ages they would have charged me only fifteen solidi more if I had

I touched Sasha's breasts in public, only fifteen times twelve days!

All morning I tried to remember what that bar-hatted ribbon reminded me of, and at last I remembered: Gisela, the Swansea girl who had been with the carpenter in that overturned car-I had visited her in the hospital and even wanted to marry her because of the rough healed scar on her neck, but she didn't want to know me, that Gisela from Swansea.

She had something else that reminded me of Sasha: a faint smile and an invisible spring inside, the kind of spring that all former circus performers have, even old men and fat people, but Gisela was young and thin, and she wanted me to go to jail.

I have since decided not to marry anyone, although I might reconsider if, say, Gerhardt Mayer became a woman.

Meanwhile, Sasha's diary was signaling me from the room behind the apple-colored curtains, it flickered in the depths of her bed like a lighthouse on Cape Allapul, I knew that at the end of this notebook there was a denouement awaiting me, which I was pulling back with all my might, just as I had tried as a child not to look in the Christmas stocking hanging over the fireplace before time.

Come on, said the old Luellin in me, repeating Apuleius, *bring down the tragic curtain and fold this theatrical screen, speak plainly.*

I can't, old man, it's late, don't mind," answered the man who now lived in my place.

\*\*\*

Today I must put back what I took without asking, for the late Mrs. Sleepy has left me without reading and is probably scolding me with her last words.



there on the veranda, she was reading Sasha's herb book, there's no doubt about it: I found the very line in it, as if underlined with a sharp fingernail, it says of the broken banister, and also of the fall down the stairs

what she wanted to say was that alexandra's father had also fallen down the stairs, but had survived because sasha was there, and she was afraidz that if I had stopped being angry and answered my father's letters, he too would have gotten up from the floor and walked with a slight limp.

It appears that a text can replace a living person no less than a clay ushebti can replace a dead person in Egyptian fields of reedsz

I remember how I envied the owner of such an ushebti when I read the Book of the Dead for the first time: ... *when in the fields of Ialu the gods call the deceased to work, calling him by name, the ushebti should come forward and respond: here I am! Then he will go where they command him and will do what they command him to do without question*

what Dad was thinking, lying there in the basement darkness, when he realized he couldn't get upstairs, when he was tired of screaming.

\*\*\*

That afternoon I didn't wait for the vacuum cleaner to hum to save the day, I knew Finn was busy in the kitchen with a group of Yorkshire sprouts who had probably been turned away from Heather Hill earlier in the morning.

three arrogant boys and two girls with alarming rings in their lips - I am always upset to see such rings, I think they are inserted in the same holes for the jade jet that the Taoist of Hunan wrote about, how do they manage it?

one of the maidens reminded me of my London neighbor Tabitha, with the same pleading eyes and thick, milky voice, one of the companions rubbing her withers and croup, while she moored and waved her away

At the beginning of the summer, I told Tabitha the story of Glasgavlen, the magic cow, who was milked by anyone and everyone in Ireland, until a countrywoman put a sieve instead of a watering can under the generous streams, and Glasgavlen took offense and never gave milk again.

Tabitha didn't seem to understand and laughed - and so I laughed.

The Finn had to put the schoolboys in a spacious bridal suite, put up a sheet of cardboard over the window and two folding beds, then the boys demanded hot breakfast and shandy, so the maid had her hands full, and I volunteered to help a little.

I asked, pulling dusty mattresses and spare blankets out of the pantry, Finn brought her eyes to the bridge of her nose and made a vague sound with her mouth that I found indecent.

I was sure that Sasha wouldn't show up until lunchtime; I hadn't had time to say a word to her all morning, even though I had arrived on the earliest bus, at six-thirty - so I could probably find her in the garden, but I was afraid my impatience would give me away.

a wary, hurried thief was stirring inside me, churning in the drum of my stomach, drying my mouth and sore under my spine-so I just sat down on the garden bench and waited, and waited I did.

\*\*\*\*

sasha went to the coal depot in torni to get stove eggs - that's what anthracite dust briquettes are called here,

they look more like giant candy pots to me.

At precisely nine o'clock, the high-body truck ordered from the port appeared at the bridge; in the cab sat a shaggy-haired guy in a vest with many pockets, a copy of one of the local firemen - looking at him, I thought that Wishgard had run out of divine plasticine and was giving me soon-to-be-remade figures of characters already used more than once.

As she left, Sasha gave me a sly smile and jingled some imaginary change in her pocket - the blind old man Plutos bent his horn over the *maples*, for the first time in two summer months the guesthouse was full, and two rooms were even booked for August, for nine whole days

I got up as the gate closed behind her, and passed quickly into the house, unseen by anyone else

It was dark in the landlady's room, but I knew what I wanted, and I could move by feel, and sooner or later I would have to move like this in broad daylight-get used to it, lou, said the relentless clothier, soon you'll have to throw mistletoe spears at people at random.

quite a few childish hiding places, tin boxes and fake graves full of rock 'n' roll posters and worn clothes, I said out loud - deliberately so that the spirits of this room wouldn't contradict me, then stuck my hand under my pillow and got what I wanted out of it.

The diary obediently opened to the page I hadn't finished last time, which meant that the spirits of this room cared about me

Sasha's bed had not yet been made, and the wicker chair was covered with dresses and underwear, so I sat on the floor, leaned against the cold wall and began to read.

I read slowly, knowing that this diary would not tell me more than the stolen herbalist had told me, but I didn't want more, I wanted more.

If I were a Nasimi of the Shirvan, I would say that my mouth was filled with the saliva of delight and the bitterness of love.

The further I read, the colder the wall became, I finished the last page, sat on the floor for a while longer, closed the diary, took it with two fingers by the edge of the cover like a dead butterfly, put it under Sasha's pillow and went out.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*It wasn't, it just is.*

The twenty-first of July. Not three weeks after I had returned from Henley, which I had not been to, I had guests in my house, whom I had not invited, banging spoons in the kitchen-just like those times I do not want to remember.

My sister looks up, her pupil like a black bug on a faded petal, and says, "Fenier needs a nanny. You see, I'm going to take over the boarding house, you and Everton are not doing a good job.

My niece looks up: Aunt Alix, why aren't there any dogs? Grandma said you had dogs with long ears.

- Shut up," her sister tugged her arm, "the dogs are gone, they ran away. No one can get along with your Aunt Alix.

I nod my head and pour myself a strong coffee from the Neapolitan coffee pot - only Finn knows how to operate it, so she's useful for something. We used to call it *silent coffee*; my mother made it in the mornings to keep the noisy espresso machine from turning on-the old Swiss machine would rumble so hungrily that the residents would wake up and demand breakfast earlier than usual.

The midday sun brightens Junior's hair, and for a moment I think it's Hedda reaching for the salad bowl, picking out the sparse basil leaves for her daughter. I think she is pleased with my growing despair, as pleased as she would be with killing the caretaker-if there were a caretaker.

I seem to have summoned Miss Edna A. from oblivion myself, and now I sit here a disappointed sibyl staring at my sister's full creamy neck adorned with my chain.

No, the sibyl has nothing to do with it, rather I sit Odysseus digging a hole in the middle of a cherished grove in the Cimmerian soums - to see the shadows of the dead.

The blood of the slaughtered animals flowed thickly into the pit to the delight of the ghosts, but who was the first to lap it up from the pitz El Penor, the young companion who had drunkenly fallen from the roof four days before, was the one who appeared to the astonished chief.

- What are you doing here?" Odysseus asked him, for he had not even noticed his death. Elpenor was terribly offended by this.

And now what to do with this offended Elpenor? Whether to give him a drink of sacrificial blood, or better, a potion to make him forget, so that he might reach Ithaca sooner.

Of course you do.

Time will go on smoothly, and the black bug will grow to fill the blue iris, and I'll take care of the house and the girl-what's the use of a nanny? Since I called you here, Edna A., I can send you back, and then I'll think of something.

I'm guilty to you and I've written a hell of a lot of pages about it, but where, where in those pages does it say I want to see youz

\*\*\*

*In the land of the Hyperboreans there is the island  
of St. Petersburg And the muses beat their feet,  
though long dead*

— We've been corresponding since about January," said Junior, slowly peeling a hard-boiled egg, "you see, I heard about your engagement and decided it was no good. It's been unbearably hot and dusty where I've lived for the last four years, always having to wrap myself in leaves and squirt water from a bottle in my face every hour. Oh, no, don't get out your nasty notebook!

I put the notebook in my pocket and sat down across from her at the kitchen table.

- Saunders just wants to own the Maples," Junior went on, "he can't have fallen in love with Alix, that bunch of wilted anemones, I told myself. He wants to *marry the hostess of the Maples*, and that's understandable. But there are two mistresses! Why don't you go to Hochin instead of me, dear sister, and wave palm leaves around? So I wrote to him honestly, and asked him if he wanted to marry me, for old times' sake.

Well, you've always been a straightforward girl, I thought, looking at her face. There was a flabby weakness in her face, probably the effects of the hot climate, for she was only twenty-four.

— He told me he agreed, that he couldn't have me, and that we could probably get you a room here at the Maples," she looked around the kitchen. - But after the wedding, you'd have to give up your bedroom and move to one of the lower rooms. Let's say number four, where there's a jasmine bush under the window.

I shook my head and set the teapot and my mother's Wedgwood dish, bought from a Cardigan antique dealer in the

two thousand and first year. It took me a long time to find it in the dusty neighborhood shops, and I had to pay for it as if I had bought it at Sotheby's on a hot day.

- You'll get used to it. I know how you got him, my f i a n c é ," said Junior, picking at her cold oatmeal with a spoon, "it was easy, he always wanted his own business. All those girls gave him rackets and stylish hand-me-downs, but none of them would dare to mess with him *properly*, because they were rich worthless girls. Up there on the hill," she jabbed her finger at the newly glazed window, "he gets paid about as m u c h a week as they tip in the Maldives after a successful dive. That's insulting!

I nodded in agreement, took the plate from her and set it on the floor, and immediately an obscenely fat Ku-shi came over to the plate and noisily licked the butter out of the middle.

No good girls. Come on, sister.

I know one of them, young Miss Cynthia Bohan of Heberstock College-or rather, the former Miss Bohan-and you're a long way from her.

\*\*\*

*You may know how long a mosquito lives, to what depths the sea is illuminated by the sun, and what the soul of a whisker is, but you are far from the elderly slave described by Lucian who sees through everything.*

At the end of July, a year ago, Prue came running to me at midnight, after dancing at the Crest, and told me that Cynthia had run away from her husband and had been living in a hotel on the hill for two weeks with a retired diver n i c k n a m e d Noon Teeth.

— You remember that blond Cynthia," Prue said indignantly as she went down to the cellar for a porter, her sparrowish voice seeming to come from the ground, which made it sound more muffled and persuasive. - I m a g i n e, her husband had withdrawn all the money from the joint account and was threatening to sue the poor girl. Or rather, he withdrew what was left of their joint account after she'd paid for the apartment. - Prue laughed, her laughter bouncing in the cold, damp stone walls.

— I remember," I said, leaning over the railing and pointing my flashlight at the shelves of supplies, the bulb in the cellar having long since burned out, and I didn't dare unscrew the rusty lampholder. - Of course, Sparrow, I remember her.

When Prue left, I fed the dogs, put the empty porter bottle away, closed the door, and sat down at the kitchen table. My *heart sank, as my mother used to say*, even my fingers went numb.

Cynthia in her red knit coat on the college steps. Poor unapproachable Cynthia, letting me breathe on her chilled hands. Cynthia in the burdocks.

The letters *C* and *B* on her blotter, circled in a diligent ink monogram.

C. B. is a swarthy pamper, a salty breeze, a degree of insanity, the butt of every barrel, this Saunders. Isn't it strange that we've run into him at every corner: first my sister, then my mother's china, now Cynthia.

There he is, the man to whom the runes point - deaf as Heimdall, he approaches my house from one side or the other, like a stubborn Scotsman, Bruce, to the sea citadel of Loch Swin.

He probably doesn't remember me, except as Edna A.'s older sister, the tennis ball thief. He doesn't remember me, but that makes the spades shine just as sharp and the horses



bellowing no less menacingly. Well, I'll raise the bridge and open the castle gates myself.

Poor silver-haired Cynthia, the tall laughing mirror in which I first saw myself whole. Here's your burdock, Cynthia.

I looked at the calendar, picked up a postcard with a view of Jurie Island and wrote:

*Mr. Branagh, in his own hands. Wishgard, "Heather Hill."*

*Dear Saunders, would you have time to stop by the Stone Maple Inn by the old harbor? I hear you did your taxes at Leif's place.*

*Well, I need to consult with you. Forget the old stuff?*

*Thank you in advance, Alexandra Sonley.*

\*\*\*

*Lshmev ejshs o£ssssshgat.*

Why do I write diaries and start a second one before I finish the first?

Because I'm writing the first one for my mother and the second one for Llewelyn. Then I could not finish either of them, and t h e first one had disappeared, God knows where it had gone. It was not without reason that the Druids did not dare to write down their teachings, neither in letters nor in signs; they did not trust what was written and were afraid that knowledge would spread among the uninitiated.

Actually, the second diary was an accident: I had found another chestnut notebook in my desk to use for writing. That June night, when my dogs fell asleep, I was numb, either with anger or confusion, as if Aeneas had been in a quadruplet.

in that book of the Aeneid. What was I to do? I had to find some way of dealing with chaos.

I was going to carry the notebook with me, but that same day Prue gave me a notebook on a lanyard, and then I got used to it and wrote on anything I could get my hands on. The twin notebook was used for something else, and now it is read by Lou-ellin, who is caught in the unconscious, for you are still reading, my soulz Take off your gold glasses and look into the face of Norn Verdandi, she does not like glare.

*How much faith is there in someone whose hands are tinkling with chains, an astrologer who has not been to prison, who finds no recognition - for the sake of success, one must not die a little!*

That's according to Juvenal, as you like to say, dear Inspector.

Why does Luellin come here-to expose me-z to embrace me-z to jingle my chains-z to die-z or maybe he wants me to wash his heels.

He is so immersed in himself, in his colorless, guilty autumn, that it is time to smack him on the head with an inflated bull bubble, as the servants of thinkers on the invented island of Laputa did to thinkers. He believes in what I w r i t e , I write what he wants to read, we're both b u s y , w h i c h means I can't stop.

He'd believe anything, though, that cross-eyed Londoner, the kind of man who spills water under the table when there's talk of a fire and scratches behind his ear with a middle finger dipped in saliva to ward off anxious thoughts. If I wrote that I had lived three hundred years as a wild bull, two hundred as a wild pig, and another hundred years as a salmon, he wouldn't even flinch.

Remember the prostitute Camille, the one Gan-tenbein used to come to to do his stubborn weekly-

If he had thought for a minute or looked at her pink, brazen, shiny stockings, he would have understood, but why? To lose his precious prey, like the magpie of Reims who stole the cardinal's ring but couldn't hold it in his beak because he wanted to understand it so badly.

I'm trying to understand less, you know. You understand me, Inspector.

*Часть  
третья*

ВЕЛЪ

МЫ

НЕ

МЫ





## LUELLIN'S DIARY

there are two ways I know of to cut a person off cleanly: a thin blade is one, and a serrated blade is two.

Well, thin, of course, before you know it, the blood is curdling, the bandages are freshly white, and phantom pains are crouching and bowing from the painted door.

but the jagged one was the first time I tried it.

*you know?* - she grinned in my face on the last page of her diary, and I read it with the trepidation of a bear-snatcher opening a safe with a necklace of bric-a-brac!

*Do you understand me, Inspector?* I almost threw the notebook away, as one throws away a blanket with a scorpion lurking in it; I felt like a portion that had swallowed hot coals, and I am sure that the portion did it out of anger and not out of longing for a brute: *when there is a will and a will, a grieving wife always finds a way of*

I was wrong, and the diary was not a shameful secret, not a monologue in front of a closed window; no, it was a mocking whisper in my ear - in my one and only ear! it was a witch's brew that kept me oblivious, it was a game in which I didn't know the rules and ran around the meadow with a bar-hatted ribbon over my eyes, hugging a tree, a lamppost, a squealing neighbor, it was a comic book for a city madman, drawn by a rural fool living in the countryside.

Speaking of crazy people, in Argentina, when they give you a pointing finger, you just want to say, "Get out of the way, I think. so spin it for yourself, lou.

\*\*\*

slowly, humming and shivering as an old daylight lamp lights up, I saw the day I had dreamed of checking the mail in the carpenter's shed: there it was, the workbench with the tools, museum-quality, like Scythian gold under glass, the chisel, the pliers, the chisels, the black rubber mallet!

a small sledgehammer that leaves no marks, a bearded sutzell's attribute, here it is, a mallet, a fiberglass handle *dresser*.

That's right, that's where she made her caretaker out of her father's hammer and a stack of blue rowing club almanacs, made him and drowned him, but I'm good, I should have known right away!

It needed a story, and the story needed a reader, a puppet, a naive, blinded instructor, a louellin with a resin hammer for a head.

But that's not what hurt, it's that anyone could be a reader, I was just at her fingertips, that white clay hand, dry and untroubled - anyone could come into that room, rummage under the pillow, sit on the cold floor, and learn all about her, and listen to the darkness of her shenanigans, including those sucked out of her white clay finger.

No, I won't forgive her for this, war, war.

Long live the antler, the jagged edges and the narrow groove for blood drainage, where the fisherman from bonifacio would write: *die from this wound!* But I won't write anything, and I won't read anything, I'll live in a *heavenly garden* and finish my empty bottle of añejo, and burn it all with an elderflame.

You're a big liar, Llewelyn Elderberry.

When you imagine that chill face and the light from the round window in the roof of the carpenter's shed, the yellowish light, the hot water running down her neck and belly, she has a bulging fat-here! like a Mayolian Pomona! When you imagine it, you want to go back to the hotel and sit down in a wicker chair.



chair, even if it is still occupied by the late Mrs. Sleepy, open a book of elegies, and read aloud from a section of the propertium with expression:

*not by goodness, no, by witchcraft, the wicked one has overcome me, the wolf is spinning, driving me with its threads.*

\*\*\*

curiosity played on me like a drinking fountain on a tennis ball, until it got wet and piled up, heavy with

Now that I had read enough and knew everything about her, both what she wanted to tell me and what was hidden under the sandstone slab, now that I was wet and heavy and swamped, it was time to give up the whole Wishgard thing and go home as if nothing had happened.

what I really wantedz

to know how Sasha Sonley sees me, to see myself from afar - from her wild and precipitous shorez

or maybe I wanted to be where she kept her rosary, between her cheek and the palm of her hand tucked under the pillow- maybe I wanted to sleep with sasha sleepy-z

No, why would I want that? What I know about her is already told only in bed, cooling off from morning kisses, when time fades and flickers like a TV screen when the bill's forgotten to be paid.

I was looking through the keyhole of someone else's mind, bent over in an uncomfortable position, cursing my uncomfortable arms and neck, and there was a calm, scrutinizing olive eye that knows how to get proud when it's time to hunt.

and then behind the door hid a foxy smile and a lush tail.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*Vaiv was the heLp of mav.*

July twenty-second. I wish the inspector would read my diary more.

I suppose he's reading Aristotle now and will soon learn that evil deeds are done willingly. Good for him. I've got enough to worry about. The honeymoon suite has crumpled sheets covered in beer and black lipstick, the bathroom drain is clogged, and the mirror says: *Life is pain!*

I'll deal with that later, now I have to do the girl, I've got a decent supply of cereal and a carton of eggs, and I think there's some chocolate left in the pantry. There's not much to do with Junior as she sleeps like a serpentine Echidna in her cave, but the baby will have to be left to the maid-I'm going to the Thorney storehouse in half an hour to buy some coal before the money runs out.

- You'll tell me who the girl's father is," I wrote to Junior before giving her the first portion, but she shook her head: *"I'll tell you when you stop your nonsense and start talking.*

It's a good time to wish I was mute. If I hadn't been mute, I would have sung her the Blake song I sang to her when she was five and a half. She and Hedda arrived at the boarding house in Papa's patched Austin and stood at the gate, looking around at each other, both stout, disheveled, in green coats, looking like two heather bushes.

*I have vo vame: I am £sht two days oLd*

*What shaLL I caLL thee?*

*I happy am, Joy is my vame.*

I would sing it to her as she drank my potion, yawned, and lay in bed curled up like a herbal la-

She was on the same bed where I had first put my hand on her breast in ninety-nine. But I didn't have to tie her up then. But now I had to. I took a nylon stocking, the rope leaves marks - anything leaves marks on her skin.

Then I went out into the garden and looked at the moon.

The moon was full and white with a fresh cut, like a tree cut down. I thought it was a good sign and went back inside to have tea and think for a while.

\*\*\*

*... If she needs to go a mile away from Rome, she will choose the time of departure from a book; if she is a poor woman, she will go to a chiromancer and pay for the fortune-telling with kisses.*

There it was, Wales: the unreliable pier humming underfoot, the ribbed iron ladder, the shiny silt mixed with dirty sand, the salt-stained gangways, the fog settling in icy drops on the heather.

There is another Wales: it has a distinctive, eye-cutting whiteness, the harsh morning light soaks through objects, marking everything pure, flawless white - sugar in an earthenware sugar bowl, eggshells, a fishnet blouse forgotten on a chair.

On days like this, long sheets of light lie on the walls and floor, highlighting the dust in the corners and the nail marks that once held the Postmaster's engravings - "Portrait of a Servant," "Girl with Shrimp" - the Hogarth of the gift store, unbreakable loyalty, valiant helplessness.

But now the rains have fallen, the fog has receded from the shore, and hangs low over the wharf from which the early

a ferry to Ireland. One day I would stand there on the deck of the *Norfolk*, clinging tightly to the freshly painted white railing with its instantaneous rust, and look ahead at the approaching shore, covered in Martian potholes.

It wasn't that I wanted to go to Ireland, no, it was just that one day I'd have to try it - forget the laundry, the dairy and the tea shop, wrap myself in a cashmere shawl and get on a ship. Just for fun, say, to see if there are Blue Men in the Long and Cheyent Strait.

The Blue Men were the most poetic monsters in the area, living in underwater caves, my father used to tell me when he wanted to amuse me. Swiftly emerging from nowhere, they swooped down in blue whistling flocks and sank merchant ships. They spoke human language and had the power of storms, lightning and the north wind.

But could be spared if the nimble captain answered in rhyme to their last word.

\*\*\*

*... Who can sit under a wish-fulfilling tree without thinking of tigers?*

July 23rd. Why did I tie her up? Why did I put her to sleep?  
herz

Why did she start talking about a hard raw heart? Why?  
she was reading in her mother's bedroom, climbing on the bed with  
her swollen feetz Why did she slap weeping Fenja on the cheekz

I need to think, and for that I need Edna to lie still. I will give her  
as much poppy tea as she needs, even if I have to boil all the dried  
rocks in the pantry. I'll give her poppy tea as long as it takes

until the tungsten vein of rage inside of me stops quivering.

How am I worse than Hypnos, who gave Demeter poppy to stop looking for her daughter and work on her fat wheat. I will give it to the fat Junior to give me a break and stop looking for trouble.

My mother told me that chameleons change color to avoid being seen by enemies, pretending to be leaves, grass, tree bark. When I grew up, I learned that this was not true - they change color from cold or hunger, even from fear. The youngest one changed color from anger, or rather, she lost her color all together, and her smell makes me sick, as if I were standing in front of that monster from the saga who, on the day of his death, produced clouds of flies, ants and lice that scattered all over the world.

By the way, the monster was born from a love affair between close relatives for a reason, but we had nothing to do with it - Junior was never my sister!

And there was no connection, just the incoherent babble of flesh. I can't believe I wanted to bring her home, that sloppy-- She had caught some kind of disease in mosquito Hochin and looked even more like her rosy-cheeked mother.

When I was like Fenya, no, a little older, we used to believe that if you looked inside a poppy seed, you'd go blind; I guess I looked inside it then, and quite deeply.

Otherwise, how could I not have noticed this resemblance twenty years ago? At least on one of those summer days when they sat side by side on the swings, their two curly heads tilted back in the same way, squinting meaninglessly into the parched sky. Mother and stepmother. Ed-na-na-na-na-na and Hedda-da-da-da. Two Persephone garlanded with poppies, calm and full-blooded, swaying their bare feet to the beat of an unknown melody-what's the matter with me? Why do I keep thinking about poppies?

Because it's time to brew a new batch.

## LETTER FROM DAFFYDD MONMOUTH. 2006

You won't believe it, I've started reading Russian - that old book you gave me when you were going through the boxes in the attic. I'm still reading by rote, the characters' names are completely unpronounceable, but I've already figured out who's an oak and who's a holly, and which lady they're fighting for.

When I started the book, saw the phonetic table at the beginning and started rounding my mouth this way and that in front of the mirror, I thought I could hear you laughing. I remember how you laughed when you taught me an old cursive, and I can still say it quickly: ...we drank tea, we beat spoons, we spoke in Turkish, chabi, chalyabi, chalyabi, chabi, chabi, chabi!

Our engagement was doomed, Sashenka, and not because I was sixteen years older and afraid of being saddled on all fours by the young Campaspa, and not because you were frightened of something and would not let yourself be touched, though you exuded a spicy fragrance like a fictitious panther from Alexandria's "Physiologist"-you remember I brought it to you to read in the summer of ninety-five.

No, it failed because you were looking for something in a man that I didn't have. I was ready to be a father, a brother, a lover, any leaf from the Freudian herbarium, but I was not ready to be a bonded, uncomplaining reader, and you needed a reader, Sasha, a reader, that's all.

When you didn't come to Snowdonia, I breathed a sigh of relief, and when I received my ring in an envelope with an ornithological inscription, I even laughed. I hope you enjoyed my gift from home, and if you need any silver bullets to go with it, let me know.

Sometimes I think Monmouth House could give you what you're looking for - a quiet study overlooking the cliff-top wasteland, silence and time, lots of time. And you could give me what I'm looking for, a gentle Tusculan co--

a conversationalist with whom I could talk about the limits of good and evil, eudaemonia, and ways to keep myself from sorrow.

But, once I visualize it in pictures, I shudder with a premonition of trouble.

One day, in Cartref, you told me about the school camp, when you had poisoned yourself with wild mushrooms and ended up in the village hospital, which was hardly a hospital at all - just two rooms painted white with garden windows.

Your letter home was lost and no one came for you, neither from Visgard nor from the camp. For days you sat in the garden by the fence, looking out for your mother or father on the dusty village road. When you didn't wait, you decided that you had been abandoned - a classic conclusion at the age of nine - and swore that you would live alone for the rest of your life. You decided to live by the sea, not talking to anyone, walking along the cliff and feeding the seagulls. Hasn't your dream come true?

Isn't the antique guilt you cherish in yourself the surest way to settle down alone?

Of course, you have done a lot of stupid things, I won't list them, but it's enough to gnaw at you like Dante's Ugolino gnawing at the skull of an enemy. Or, still, the hands of your own children? In my future book, I will elaborate on this.

For now, just trust me, a fifty-year-old mentor: guilt is not what you think it is. Guilt is not a white stone that you throw into a well to spend the rest of your life leaning over the well log waiting for a splash. Guilt has no cause, no circumstances, and no catharsis that allows you to finally unbend and start living as a human being.

Guilt has no life of its own at all, which is just as true as the fact that it cannot take yours. Guilt is the well itself.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1999

*There is a herb called zemeseya, which is as thin and sharp as a needle. And whoever takes it without knowing, it will destroy his hand, it will destroy everything up to the very bone, and afterwards it will become sore and will not heal for a long time, and whoever steps on his foot without knowing will destroy his foot.*

When Sasha had to go to the capital for twelve days, she asked Monmouth's teacher to come to the Maples in the evenings and write her postcards about how things were going.

Deffydd sent two short comforting notes, and at the end of the week he came himself to take Sasha to the premiere at the Sherman Theater. It had been three years since they'd been engaged—the teacher thought it was an occasion for dinner, but he wanted Sasha to remember, so he sulked and kept silent all evening, staring at his cleverly filed nails.

— I've known him for three years," Sasha thought, "what a horror. I was in my early twenties, Dad was alive, and Junior was wearing my old T-shirt that said *The University of WaLes, A£erystwyth*. I've had his ring in my desk drawer since the ninety-fifth year and I've never worn it—I wonder if his old bride ever wore her diamond ring? How many coal and breakfast biscuits fit in a ring like that? It's been three years, and I've never seen Daf-fidd without his pants on. And what kind of a sight is a naked teacher? A naked Saunders Branagh, for instance, would be another thing, but where can you find him nowadays, and when you do, he won't take his clothes off.

— Why do you need these courses?" asked Teacher Monmouth when they were seated at a table by the window in the *Food Studio*, where the smell of spices and beans was so strong it made hungry Sasha nauseous. — Come with me. Your sister's house is all messed up, I went to see her last night: she was gone and the gate was wide open. A



On Thursday, she gave me dubious tea in an untidy kitchen, shuffling from foot to foot and clearly waiting for me to leave. The towels in the bathroom smell like laundry detergent and damp.... awful.

— It's her house, too," said Sasha, shrugging her shoulders. - She's free to ruin the Maples if she doesn't care about her own dowry.

— You're going to be the mistress of a big house, not an inkeeper with a diploma from a cheap hotel course hanging on the wall. You realize you're wasting your time. The maples won't survive.

— Then we will cut them down and use them for firewood," said Sasha. - For eternal stone firewood.

The next morning she found a mocking postcard in the mailbox, with a view of the bay and a Cardiff staff. Daffydd must have sent it from the train station at three in the morning.

*Please take special care of the house when the family is away. Let the fire in my brother's room and mine always be burning in the fireplace. The maids, who have nothing to do, can sit at the spinning wheel. Put a padlock on the wine cellar and make sure one of the servants doesn't get to the beer. I know that Mary Jones spinner's got a thing for men. Write me if the Alderney heifer is sold, and how much it fetched, and if the old goose is sitting on eggs, and if the cobbler has gelded Dickie's hog.*

1998

*There is a herb called siddies, which makes unclean spirits run away, and it grows in Indian countries.*

Cedars and umbrella pines with lumpy chocolate bark, gray-blue sandstone, black slate, chalky lime and lichen, a lilac trickle of young heather - Wales was the center of her favorite colors, the perfect palette. If Sasha could hold the huge brush, she would dip its squirrely tip into this dim glow and paint something irretrievable, like Mum under an apple tree, yes - Mum with her hair loose and her dog Trida in her arms.

When the dog Trida was dying, she lay on her side, stretched out her four stiff legs and became very small and **u g l y**, but Sasha was not surprised: she already knew that when a person dies, he becomes shorter and unlike himself, and Trida was almost human.

All those she had seen dead were smaller and more insignificant than themselves when they were alive, even her father had lost his posture and height as he lay on the garden table with his arms folded across his chest.

Death is an inefficient **w a s h e r w o m a n**, Sasha realized that August day, and in her hands everything the strongest, the freshest, even the unworn, shrinks and comes apart.

The first thing death takes away is the beautiful and familiar; it's deliberate, so that we miss those whom it takes away less, Sasha thought, looking at the purple shameful holes of her father's feet and the stunted reddish vegetation running down from the pits to her chest.

*It does not make me dweLL iv darkvess as those who have fēev Lovg dead,* Sasha read in her mother's book, and since then she knew that the dead do not immediately plunge into darkness, but for a while they see the world as if through a veil with flies or a transparent black handkerchief, Then they see the world as through a fly-covered glass, and then the darkness thickens, surrounds them on all sides, and nothing else happens, except that someone, in compassion, reads aloud to them.

1991

*There is a herb jumper, or skoček, and this herb is good for everything: where there is an old conspiracy treasury, this herb will destroy everything, or any sores, sprinkle it on and it will heal in three days. It is good for anyone who wants to fight, and no one will beat him. And it is not easy to tear it.*

When her father fell ill, Sasha didn't even notice at first: at the beginning of the summer, she was given a small Japanese camera, and she took up photography as fervently as she had read before - relentlessly and indiscriminately.

She had a corner of the carpenter's shed, separated from her father's half by a plush wire curtain, where she kept cuvettes, a thermometer, needle-shaped methol crystals and a glass stirring rod, and her father's coat hung on the shed door to keep the light out.

*A haven of rest and an altar of mercy, my father chuckled, looking at the long films drying on wooden clothespins and saying that Sasha had an eye but no patience.*

But then my father fell ill and stopped coming to the barn in the evenings, then acquaintances from my father's work began to appear in the house, leaving cigarette butts in the blackberry bushes, then doctors who left their prescriptions on the kitchen table, then a professor who left nothing, but pinched Sasha's side when she was handing him a raincoat - two more weeks passed and it became clear that the owner of the Maples was really ill.

Hedda wandered around the house with her head down as if looking at the scratches in the beech floorboards, she had to feed her husband in bed, give him oxygen, wash him over a bowl, and dilute the powders from the paper pound twice a day.

If she had known that in ninety-six he would have to be spoon-fed, and under the blanket put an enameled

duck, if she had known that she would have to learn how to inject and prick him with the pinkish murky stuff by the hour or he would scream in pain, she would probably have packed up her chitons and himati and run back to her grocery store.

But it was August ninety-one, a few years before the accident near Swansea, and Dad had recovered. One Sunday morning he put on his blue robe and brought to the barn a shattered cardboard box he had found in a pile of wood at the beginning of the summer, in a junk *shop* he called *The Old Scriosity Shop* for some reason.

On Christmas Eve, the teacher gave Sasha Pliny's *Natural History* with an imaginary portrait on the cover. You could fall in love with the portrait: high marble cheekbones and wavy girl's hair. The youngest spent a long time trying to figure out what the *imaginary portrait* meant, but was still puzzled.

— It's the face of the author you see when you read a book," said Sasha. - It can be very different from the real thing, but it's always closer to the real thing.

The teacher opened the book in the middle and read about a young man who had obtained the healing peony flower despite its keeper, an angry mottled woodpecker who wanted to peck out the hero's eyes.

— I'll go to the spotted woodpecker, too! - said Junior, "to get a peony to cure Sasha's daddy. Because if he dies, Mommy will remarry and I'll have a second sister, and that's too much.

— At least go to the greenhouse," said Sasha, "I can't even get you to weed a bed of lilies of the valley. Or run to Ersley's pharmacy for oxygen. Or the mottled woodpecker will peck out your eyes and you won't be able to spy on me.

— You girls are insufferable," said Teacher Monmouth.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

Here's what one writer said when asked about his favorite book - for years now, I've only been interested in the Navigators' Chronicles!

and I caught myself that I had stopped reading since the first time I opened Sasha's notebook in her closed bedroom, the unread *ap de gref* remained next to my bed, *ap de gref, a journey through the amazon*, 1894! I had learned from the first two chapters that the earth might not be round, but when many people imagined it to be a ball, it simply became so.

Now I don't read books, instead I read Sasha Sonley's second *tete-a-tete*, which is nothing like the first one, nothing at all, except for a monologue of messages written by Ovidius on behalf of nonexistent jealous women.

I read of the purple heather in the rain, of the leaden sheen of the Irish sea, of the aeolian harp in the attic, of her mother's blood in the pine needle-strewn snow, of the blue lime under her father's fingernails, of the fact that her nursery ceiling looked like apple pie crust and her sister's hair like faded seaweed, of the knitted socks she wore to bed with her fiancé, I read and think: how many men she has **h a d**, this *portly mute*, this opera phenella, who performs her mimicry in front of an indifferent audiencez.

Daffydd Monmouth, who got nothing.

a pianist from a hotel in Kensington, a pissed-off caretaker

dresser who doesn't look after anything, no matter how much!

I wouldn't trade this notebook for anything.

but he would burn it with great pleasure, like the dastardly Venetian who got hold of Cicero's manuscript and destroyed it, soon writing off the best of his thoughts.

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The only cafe in town with two computers, where I checked my e-mail last time, has closed for remodeling: it looks like they're going to turn it into a spice shop.

There is no frankincense or myrrh in the new display case, but there are plenty of jars of cinnamon sticks to bury a poor Nero's wife.

who will buy cinnamon in a city where they only eat fruit bread and sausagesz and where will I answer letters nowz I asked Gweniver, wrapped in an empty *shamrock*, cities where you can't check the mail are like a desert, I feel like a hungry nomad in them, letters thrown into the electric wind give me no rest!

Gweniver shrugged and led me into the room where her grandson was doing his homework, crouched in front of a small display-the boy's face was too white, the way fresh Caerphilly cheese is when it crumbles in your hands-he reluctantly got off the stool and followed Gweniver into the tea room, glancing back at me several times as if he was afraid I'd carry his tattered laptop out the back door.

I took his place, checked my email - nothing! then I noticed a forum icon at the bottom, right corner of the screen, clicked on it and let my curiosity run wild.

Damn, I wish I hadn't done that.

dexterity, laziness, and craftiness, than three reasons to fall in love without a thoughtz reflection, jealousy, and wastefulness, than three reasons to murderz

Give me a letter and I'll give you no less than three reasons for anything, but don't ask me what would make a man kill two gullible dogs named after ravens, gossiping crows that perched one on the other's shoulders.

After reading a few pages in the guest post of the Wishgardian *Lu-ferces*, I got completely frustrated, slammed the computer shut, and walked back into the hall, passing by the starchy decorated

the ruffles of Gweniver's back and the slouching back of young Mount Levi, the witch-hunter, both were busy laying out marzipan on a large platter of

Thanks, Junior! I stopped in front of them with my hands on the bar. You know what I think of your jokes, kid? A Chinese scholar who lived during the five dynasties woke up in his house looking like a crab with a crab painted on his forehead and wet pheasant feathers behind his ears, so his school friends made fun of him.

imagine him getting very upset and then killing himself.

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After moving from the *maples* to the familiar room above the bar, I barely slept on the hard pirate bunk - when patrick gave me the keys, he said he'd bring me a woolen blanket, but I refused and spent an hour shivering under a skinny blanket as frayed as a Caracalla denarius.

At first I dreamed of white nettle flowers around the porch, drooping in the rain, the porch window boarded up with plywood sheets, and I, conscious of being asleep, pulling the string of a brass ship's bell hanging on a pole, but there was no one in the house to unlock the door for me.

the rain intensifies, the pipes fill with tinny clinking, the water on the grate swirls like a dervish, I go around the house and climb up the iron ladder to the attic, I know the round attic window is open, it's always open.

on the floor, damp wooden crumbs, blossom-covered magazines, letters and sepia scattered about, I sit down on the floor to take a closer look, and then the house moves, and floats, swaying, in the rainwater, in the sleepy autumn driftwood, in the inky pulp of blackthorns-behind a round window that looks more and more like a

at the porthole, *at the silence of foreign belfries and the winter fire of the lighthouse*, I repeat an unknown line, and wake up with it, as if with a cloud under my tongue.

I got up, drank some rusty tap water, turned off the night-light I'd forgotten on the table, and it was half past four, my most disconcerting time - now the restless Mrs. Sleepy was probably rocking in her wicker chair.

I wrapped my sweater around my neck and fell into another dream

In another dream, my father came to the boarding house to talk to me, but Sasha wouldn't let him in, and I listened to their dialog, standing barefoot in the hallway in a long nightgown.

I can't let you in with that cat, Sasha said, I have two huge dogs in my garden, they'll tear it to shreds! my father was muttering something in a pesky, mosquito-like voice, I could see the gray sleeve of his coat, water was dripping off the sleeve onto the tile floor, it must still be raining, I thought, it's still raining in this dream, what a long tedious rain.

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Last night I couldn't sleep at all and thought of Sasha, sinking headfirst into the lush Tudor bed of room five - all that was missing was a c a n o p y on the carved pillars and a niche for the chaplet in the headboard.

I pictured them both, older and younger, lying, not touching each other, on the same high bed, listening to the rain, two solid soapstone figures, lying and looking up at the plaster angel's ankle on the ceiling after the partition was built.

I also thought about Sasha's father, how he was lying on the asphalt in the middle of the road, with his legs spread out in cotton socks, and I thought that in such cases shoes manage to come off with the laces tied, and I always thought it was only in the movies.



the girl, later revealed to be named Gisela, bent over him so low that blood from her neck dripped directly onto his white shirt, as if someone had slowly poured over his chest a large over-ripe cranberry, she held his head in her hands and kept looking around, as if searching with her eyes for sympathetic onlookers, policemen with yellow gummed ribbons, businesslike guys in white coats with IVs held high in their hands.

but I was the only one on the road

I sat leaning against the bent door of my car and tried to wipe my right eye with my dirty palm - I thought I had a cloud of asphalt dust in it, and I was looking at Gisela and the carpenter with my left eye, and they were a little blurred in the hot air, but then I stopped looking, because large cranberries sprinkled from my palm and it got dark.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*... the great thing a£ósht raivstorms is that we get to see womev sshffer.*

I'm sitting on my sofa in my dad's shed - the house is too crowded, the coast is too sunny. I have a bottle of Pomerol, my notebook, and a cup of almonds, nut shells crunching under my feet, and on the walls are bunches of onions and dried red peppers, forgotten since last year-I was trying to *be like Deirdre*, but I'm not. It smells sweetly of rotten wood and tanned leather, not Papa at all, a little Lou Elderbury, but it's a fog, an obsession, he's never been in this barn.

Today I realized that I don't want to be *La Locavdiera* anymore - I'm tired.

I want to walk along the beach with my lonely reader, sip rum from his flask, talk about what he prochi-

The only thing that's true is the names of people and the species of trees. And then we'll go back to the Maples, and I'll put CLOSED FOREVER on the gate.

What a strange feeling when you have no one to forgive, everyone is dead or sleeping the dead sleep. There is no one to forgive you, everyone is dead or asleep.

What a strange feeling to write about the past in *this* diary. It's like throwing a letter into the wrong mailbox, mixing up the inscriptions.

Last December we had a guy from Sydney staying with us, and he got it wrong and sent a check for 500 pounds to Santa Claus. He was supposed to send it to London, to his future landlady, but he couldn't find a post office, went to the municipality, saw a big red box in the middle of the hall and put the envelope in it. It was a *child's box*, put there at the beginning of December for letters asking for gifts. Hardly anyone reads them - in January, the mayor uses a little of them to stoke the fire in his office.

We laughed at the Aussie bumbler, and now I feel the same way - my messages are going to the wrong place too.

Yesterday I had to sort through Junior's bags because I was looking for the girl's underwear and the books Fenya demanded I read aloud to her. I had to undress my sister and change her shirt twice, and I also had to put on her pampers, which I had bicycled to a distant drug store, because I didn't want to see young Ersley's bewildered face.

I undressed and dressed her in the dark, by the light of a pocket lamp-not because I was afraid of waking her, but because I was afraid that someone from the garden would see the light in the locked room and ask questions.

No, I'm lying-- that's not why. I don't want to see her current body, that's why. Let it stay as it was painted in the herbalist, and let the herbalist go to hell.

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*The walls are white. The smell of  
lime. Everything happened, nothing  
came true.  
The winter air, salty and stiff, freezes  
through before your eyes.*

I've seen Luellin so many times in the kitchen, on the porch, in the garden, and never outside the gates of the Maples, maybe I'm imagining him? Maybe he's a brownie coming to sip milk on the verandaz

Prue says he goes to Leif's pub - I wish I could go there. I'd like to see him drinking beer and wiping his lips, I could wash his head with rainwater and then sit him in the middle of the room on a chair and give him a haircut. I'd like to fall asleep with him in the same church pew.

That's how Mom and Dad met - they fell asleep side by side, back to back, under the high church vault, during a blizzard in Bosslein.

The ferry service had been halted that day due to heavy seas, and a group of Chester students were stranded in the port after their field trip. They wandered around the port area, listening to the local radio talk about uprooted trees, flying tiles and houses without electricity.

Two hours later the wind picked up and the radio reported a fishing boat wrecked just off the coast, and when it was dark and heavy, sticky snow was falling, the passengers were called into the chapel for a hot coffee and left there because the wind picked up and started throwing snow at the church windows.

It seemed to be a common occurrence in these parts, Mom said, because the dull green window squares had been replaced with clear glass in some places. The back of the bench on which Mom sat was covered with finely carved hunting scenes, probably brought here from some castle. The wrought iron lattice gate had been hung by someone.

In a flash, the mosaic floor was covered with slush and papers - the chapel was already packed with six or ten people, no less.

— This chapel is just an ordinary chapel," said a long-haired boy, separated from Mom by a walnut back, Mom could only see his hair hanging to the floor and his feet in woolen socks, "we saw a real one this morning! It was built by the first Christians, one thousand three hundred years ago. There is nothing inside, only an earthen floor, a simple round window under the very roof, and a column of light in which the dust swirls.

— Maybe that's enough," said my mother, squirming on the hard bench, "to understand God and His will. Look, may I put your jacket under my head?"

I asked my mother how it was that she remembered every word, and she said: I wrote everything down then because I had no one to tell. The next day, when we went home on the morning ferry, I went to the café on the second deck and wrote down our night's conversation and then the guy's name several times: *WaldoSonlyWaldoWaldoSonlyWaldo*.

At midnight, he told his mother that Bosslein was a port of disaster: last year an Air Lingus plane had crashed here, killing everyone on board. They crashed into St. George's Strait, at noon sharp, for no apparent reason. But now Bosslein is exonerated, Waldo said, because it had a blizzard on January twenty-ninth, sixty-ninth, and locked us in here all night.

*How can you compare the deaths of many people with the casual acquaintance of two, my mother wrote in her diary, he's a wild one, this Glamorgan student - he might make a good engineer, but it's not worth keeping up an acquaintance with him.*

This mom's diary had survived in a pathetic state - four pages and a lilac welt cover. I found it in a box--

The books I had brought from Chester had never been unpacked, because my parents' bedroom only had one closet, and I didn't have a bedroom at all - those were tight times.

One page I tore out and taped to the back of a drawer of old bills and receipts - no one had looked in there for years. At the time, I had to sleep in the living room and do my homework in the closet, which was very inconvenient, so I made many hiding places around the house: a few important cards were under the beach mattresses in the pantry and Cynthia's button was in the living room under the oak floorboards.

*September, 1967.*

*Farnham*

*It was good for the wives of heroes and gods - the list of their hobbies appeared in the mythological dictionary and there was no need to pretend that you did not know something - no lying and understatement!*

*Why am I not living in the Cretan-Mycenaean era?*

*One ancient king, who had signed over a sacrificial horse to fight Troy, promised to send fifty warships when needed, but he sent one big one and forty-nine tiny terracotta ones, but fully equipped. And no one condemned him for betrayal. That was the power of the word.*

*And my word has no power. Yesterday, the hallway of the hospital was snowed in through the cracks in the walls, so I went to the superintendent. I told him that it was cold in the bedrooms and that we had to spread our mattresses by the electric stove and prepare for classes like....*

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*... If all this does not satisfy the deity, say the following: Father Mars, if this milk sacrifice is not enough for you--*

*you - here's another one to make up for it.*

Snowfall in Wales smells like violets, and rain smells like bog slime and seaweed.

That's why it rarely snows, but it rains all the time, and today it rained, and I went out in my new shoes. I should have gone back, but I was shaking so badly that I could only walk forward.

I hate to go to Uptown through the woods, but there are trucks stuck on the bridge today with some stone pipe - the new dock requires sacrifices every morning, either a female white hog or wine from an untrimmed vine.

When I reached Bran's cottage on Chaffinch Street, I knocked on the window because I saw him standing in the lighted kitchen with a bag of nuts in his hands. I didn't want to jingle the doorbell; Saunders had the boys' room downstairs and they went to bed early. He came to the window, raised his eyebrows in surprise, and quickly opened the door for me. Smiling, with a mouthful of nuts, the ever-hungry Saunders, the kidnapper of the herbalist.

— What a lot of people! - he said. - Wow, Alix Sonley showed up, and it's probably going to snow. I just got home from practice and it's a mess. I hope you brought a couple of sandwiches. I kicked off my wet shoes, went into the kitchen, sat down at the table, took out my pencil and notebook, and tried to calm down and breathe smoother.

— Give back what you took without asking," I wrote.

Brana said he didn't understand, but he stopped smiling. He took a wet rag from the sink and began to wipe the table slowly, circling the spot where my notebook had been.

— Give me back what you got at the Maples," I wrote, noticing that my handwriting was rounding off, as it always does when I'm taken properly. - Give it back, I know it's you.

— I thought you didn't need it anymore," Saunders said, "I thought you'd thrown it away.

— Give it back," I wrote.

— What's in it for me?" asked Saunders, speaking in a whisper, his feather-painted lips curving funny. My sister used to touch those lips, I'm sure she did, that was her way.

Yeah, of course. If he's read half of my herb book, he already knows a lot, and he's not going to let it go. And tomorrow or a year from now, the whole town will know a lot. Some bored Miss Maur at the post office will be reading the sixty-fourth copy, licking her mouth rapidly and squinting at the most interesting places. And a bored Cynthia Bohan will say to her husband, "I remember her from school, she used to look at me all the time, she was so strange.

People would say that Stone Maples was the same boarding house where the landlady first killed her sister and then seduced her, or vice versa. Whatever it was, it was not a good place, and it was a pity they didn't burn it down completely.

But it's all a small thing: *L'omĕre d'shv kLiishkva, etait assise shvee devooshkka*, as in that school poem. The other thing I dreaded was how I would talk to my mother, in case she stopped coming, having lost the trusted herbalist who served as our mailbox.

I should have trusted paper less, Sasha Sonley. But you liked to write in old-fashioned ink in a secret notebook, and then go to the end of the garden, along the purple vines of the pergola, to hide it in the ground.

You should have hidden it better - not in an empty grave, but in an alder hollow, for example, or in a greenhouse, under wilted dracaenas. But you wanted to hide it not just like that, but according to Freud: the grave *is a stay in the mother's body and all that*.

— Why do you look so gloomy? It's a find, not a theft! - said Saunders. - I didn't think you'd make such a fuss, Alix, baby.

Noiseꝛ Silent noise and paper rage. The white pangs of helplessness. He won't give until I pay, what am I to do-pay or cryꝛ

I will do as a Roman peasant woman did with Jupiter - I will give him a calf instead of a sheep and a lamb instead of a bull. I'll donate what no one else wants. I will exchange the forbidden fruit for the fruit of my imagination.

- So what's in it for me?" repeated Saunders, coming so close to me that I could smell roasted peanuts. - What will you give me for the return of what you found?

I wanted to write: *and what do you want?* but thought that there was no favorable answer to this question, put the notebook on the sideboard, took off my dress over my head and lay down on the kitchen table.

## HEDDA. LETTER EIGHTH

*Mattancherry, October, 2003*

Hello, dear Alix and Edna Alexandrina.

We are having a festival called Diwali, there are lights, candles, lamps, firecrackers, and Gauri and I have eaten carrot halwa.

I didn't write for a long time because I was sure I'd see you soon.

One day I dreamed that both girls came to me, for some reason colored like kathakali actors. **D r i n a h a d a** green face and a white, ruffled paper beard, like a *pakka*. And Alix had a black face, all white and red blotches, which is what a *kari* looks like.

In my dream we ate rice cakes and went to Hochin to rescue your brother from the hostile Appas family. We entered the house where Rajiv was sitting on the floor under a silk umbrella with gold fringe. His face was unfriendly and much more pale than it really was. Benjamin Phanindra was sitting on his lap; he did not recognize us and turned away.

Then Alix took off her yellow bedspread and threw it over Rajiv like a net, nay, like a Chinese fishing net,



such nets - huge! - hanging from wooden poles along the Khochi embankment. The blanket immediately shrank and fell to the floor - there was no one under it, just like David Copperfield's focus. No father, no son.

— You killed my boy, my Benjy! - I screamed, and she threw the blanket over me, smiling wickedly. When I woke up, my feet were cold and shivering. I thought something had happened to you, and I began to worry and fret.

But a week later the money came from Wishgard, as always, and I calmed down.

I'd rather think you're alive and don't want to know me than that you're dead and come to me in my sleep in blue skirts, decorated like local gods.

My landlady, Mrs. Dabney, has taken a fancy to Gauri and buys her all sorts of nice things. She and Mr. Dabney - his real name is Bharatendu - have no children of their own, and the girl's presence in the house amuses them a little.

Mr. Dabney is a reserved man, though not a gentleman; from a distance he looks like Waldo Sonley, long legs and arms, but his skin is the color of oak bark.

As for me, I go to Kerala cooking classes, walk with my daughter in the Harbor, work only eight hours a day, and little by little I am getting used to the fact that life is not over. Moreover, I started saving money. In six months' time I will be able to come to Wishgard, and then we will sit in our kitchen, light many candles and talk, reallyz.

I mean, we haven't really talked before.

## **LUELLIN'S DIARY**

She was pretty, don't listen to anyone, said Dreamers, they take girls like that to expensive restaurants to serve, they have lush breasts and a meaningful look, when I have my own hotel, I'll take them too, I'll put them on matron-

you know, the old-school Ken Russell schoolgirl kind.

her sister had been teaching her everything since she was fifteen, you know, fingers, lips, tongue, I think she's not bad now, she'll be here soon, you'll see for yourself, I could show you a picture of her in a spicy pose, but they took it away from me two hours ago, ripped it right out of my hands!

Have another drink, Alderbury, it's my treat, he suddenly switched to you, but I didn't even blink an eye - while the pale, drunken Saunders was explaining himself to the patrick, I was thinking about how different hell could be: Dante Alighieri's h e l l , t h e contoured map hell of Dante Alighieri, the dull, sticky, waxen sludge h e l l o f Father Arnall, the myrtle hell of Virgil, the tarry lakes of the early Christians, the stinking dens of the Persians, the voluntary hell of Swedenborg, and I was also thinking about which of them, if it were up to me, I would have sent Saunders Branagh to

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I thought the older sister would be a better cook, said Saunders with a weary smile, but I had hoped in vain, for Alix was as calm as a surgeon sewing on a diver's finger; she did not even cry out when I hurt her, you know.

I stood up and looked around for a free table, but sleepers grabbed me by the sleeve and pulled me down, Wait, don't move, Alderbury, believe me, I saw one of those on Paradise Island: One of them had his finger cut off by a propeller, everybody's running around the boat, screaming, the guy's got blood coming out of his hand, and she's crouched down on the sand, tucked her hair under her baseball cap and is fixing his veins with eyebrow tweezers, until the helicopter comes, she says, at least that way it looks like everything's all right.

Alix is like that, she's all about keeping the general contour, to make it visible: while I was pleasuring her on the kitchen table, with forks and spoons flying in all directions, just like in a Bob Rafelson movie, you wouldn't believe it, I kept thinking about that severed finger, I even got upset! and she didn't say a word, Alderbury, she didn't say a word, she was like a hill changer, she was paying with a bite on her lip, like if she opened her mouth she'd be expelled from the Great Druids, and it was her first time, Alderbury, I had a stain on the tabletop like port-wine splashed on it.

No, I think I'd send Bran to the Chinese hell described in the canons of Bodisattva Tizan, I thought, looking at his smooth, creamy bangs down to his eyebrows, only to decide whether to go to the sixth level, where mice gnaw out kidneys, or to the eighth level, where they pour hot iron into his mouth.

A real witch's mother always dies when she is a child, continued Saunders, again, her eyes are tea-colored and squinty, though only a little, remember in the old book there were signs to distinguish a witch *if the neighbors don't call for a visit and there are bones in the house*, why are you looking so hard at her? Inspector *you've got the hots for her yourself*, God forbid, he drained his glass and began to say to me again, *you and the inspector, I don't envy him who picks her up*, along with the old boarding-house full of ghosts, as for me, I'm not interested in marrying a mute - in short, it's two hours since she's not my fiancée! he said, banging his glass on the table, "Blaze away, those stone maples of yours!

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When I first came to Sasha's hotel, I was surprised by the hydrangeas on the breakfast tables, something you only find in Brittany, where the hydrangeas - lilac, pink, gem-

the fence of any barn, any pottery shop, from camper to concarno.

the second time I went to the *Maples*, the Wishgard was melting from the heat, and the cool hydrangea on the table seemed fake to me; here it comes, I thought, and reached out to touch it," I hate artificial flowers, and in all hotels I shove them behind the cupboard.

Smell it, said Finn Everton, emerging from the damp kitchen darkness, these petals don't like fingers, it's always better to smell than to touch.

Sasha, who had entered the kitchen with her, laughed for some reason, and I stared at her in amazement - it was more than a voice!

her laughter gave me a cramp in my stomach, I saw her all over - the stilettos in her low-cropped braid and the cold dent above her upper lip, her thawed breasts and her long back, pulled up by the ties of her apron, I saw her all over as if I had been looking at someone else before, I heard her breathing, the way disgruntled horses breathe in an ash-cat stable, shifting from foot to foot in unusually cramped stalls.

No, what has the horse got to do with it, it's a swallow, a philomela, whose tongue the voluptuous Terai cut out to conceal his crime, I just heard the chirping of this bird, forgetting its vow, giving an unintentional hoarse voice.

Meanwhile Sasha's hands were wiping plates and forks, the chalk and earthenware were lazily hitting each other under a strong hot stream of water, she took the fruit bowl with the gesture of a priest embracing a chalice, looked at it in the light, turned it around and put it on the shelf.

and then she smiled and put the back of her hand on my forehead, and I died, burned.

the lilac hydrangea sprawled with neopalimnaya kupina, jakaranda, rainforest of Nigeria, I walked through it,

pushing through the morning dewy thickets, wading between sharp buds like the mummies of royal children in Egyptian rock.

behind the hydrangea was a breast under a satin apron, two fresh coffee stains glistening on the apron, a mouth like a thorn berry above the breast, narrow eyes asleep above the mouth, a velvet ribbon above the eyes, a window open with rain above the ribbon, and God probably above the rain

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1981

*There is a herb honovnik, a blue leaf, a berry on top, a fragrant root. Give it to sorrowful people to drink, with cabbage drowning, with honey, - and it helps all kinds of diseases.*

The maid Deirdre told the horrors of Princess Ri-annon with a face so mournful, as if she had seen it all with her own eyes and still could not forget it.

When the prince had a son, Deirdre said, pointing with her hands: that's how big he was! and he was taken from six nannies - seven, Sasha corrected, her mother said, seven nannies have a child without an eye.

So when the six shameless women seized the baby, Deirdre continued, they decided to tell the prince that Rhiannon had eaten it. They killed the palace dogs, smeared their blood on the sleeping mother's hands and put dog bones next to them - Deirdre always lowered her voice at this point and shook her head reproachfully - then they woke everyone up and said that they had seen Rhiannon eating her baby, but they couldn't stop her.

— And everyone believed it," Sasha asked, each time hoping Deirdre would shake her head and say sternly, "Of course, no one believed the nonsense.

— Everyone," Deirdre answered calmly. - Everyone always believes everything, if you just tell them the details. So Rhiannon was put on a horse harness outside the palace door, and everyone could ride on her back.

— And everyone was skatingz - Sasha asked in disgust.

— It is said that many were squeamish.

When, twenty-five years later, Sasha asked herself who all these people were, why I was living as if in an ox-bubble, unable to recognize faces behind its murky walls, living without windows, without doors, or rather behind a mica window, behind the bronze fence of Manannan's fortress, where the magic cup was falling apart, why I never lie, why I don't recognize them by sight, why I've been walking these streets and drinking this lime water for so many years, why they don't like me and are ready to believe whatever they want, and why I don't even have to stain my lips with blood to do it - when Sasha asked herself this, she already knew the answer.

A uo penn bit pont, the cunning Gweniver would say.

You've broken some delicate bonds in your relationship with the city, Mom would say.

Exactly, Deirdre would say.

You're getting high off it, Junior would say.

I guess there's nothing you can do about it, Teacher Monmouth would say.

## 2000

*There is a herb of Paradise, which grows in clumps. And that herb lay it on a sleeping wife, and she will tell everything: with whom she was, what she said or thought evil.*

The war began when Saunders Branagh left Wishgard for good.

When she received his brief note, she stayed in her room all day - since they were sleeping apart again, Junior had gotten into the habit of locking herself in. In the evening, Sasha baked a cheese pie and placed a tray with two scraps under the bedroom door, where she was listening to *Tragi's Love Compavy* album for the third time. She found the dried cake in the same place the next day, and a crying Drina slipped out of the room to take a shower, but returned immediately and fell silent.

I see, Sasha thought, standing at the window in the corridor, first breakfast for the couple from the fourth, then the bills, and in the garden it would be good to comb out the over-ripe leaves from the ha-zone.

- Saunders wasn't really fit to be your husband," Sasha said, walking to the locked door. - You'd have to be crazy to take him seriously. Madness is in our family, of course, but what's it got to do with you?

There was silence outside the door. Sasha picked up the tray from the floor, sighed, put a piece of pie in her cheek and went downstairs, sucking on the salty cheese crust.

All through April, Junior made Sasha laugh by twirling around in front of the mirror, wrapped in a tulle curtain and putting a wreath of beaded lilies in her hair.

*Three cold saints*, she wrote in her notebook, which Sasha found in the most unexpected places, *three cold saints will announce my engagement, Alexandria to Brana, not on May eleventh, but on May thirteenth, you'll see, Drina plus Brana, AB.AB.AB.AB.*

There was a kind of *feverish*, sweet fire in her sister; it was a new sensation - shaky, hot, and dangerous. Sasha imagined her bodily current - constant, demanding, omnipresent, like charcoal powder spilled out of a mebrane, sour to the taste, like the terminals of a battery. He was a part of Junior, though he should have ruined her. So twisted iron branches and leaves were still part of the Maples sign,

even though they were the ones who killed my mom - the point of a five-toed maple leaf pierced her temple.

But now, with Saunders, it was different. The youngest looked through her sister, smiling a hazy, enchanted smile, the way people kidnapped by elves smile when they're told it's been a hundred and twenty years since they went into the hill. By mid-April Sasha was seriously tempted to touch her with a piece of iron, or to cut her curly hair at night, like Eilian of Dorwen, who had lured the magic folk with her curls.

But touch her - Junior wouldn't let him touch her in the daytime, dodging, puffing up her throat like a chameleon, holding her palms out in front of her like an Indian dancer. She was soaked in Branagh's Saunders from head to toe, she was boiled in Saunders like agate, according to Pliny, is boiled in honey for seven days and seven nights to remove *all earthiness and imperfections*.

All she had left for her sister was a steady humming irritation, gradually changing to a snowless dryness of hostility, and lo and behold - as soon as Saunders left, war broke out in the Maples.

## 2000

*There is a herb ratma, and its root is such, and whoever will take it from it will rejoice painfully and laugh, and whoever will take the color from it, and if he is unclean, he will be struck to the ground by black infirmity and will lie for three hours, but he will rise from the ground.*

Two weeks later, a bald-headed Kilkenny wine-dealer, intending to take the morning ferry to Ireland, stayed at the hotel; he took the fourth room with a garden window and demanded dinner at nine o'clock in the evening.

The youngest carried warmed chicken sandwiches into his room and disappeared until morning. In the morning, Sasha knocked on the door with a



Roman four on a carnation, as promised, at five o'clock. The room was silent for a long time, then there was a squawk, then a cup fell and tilted - it would have been better if it had not been a biscuit, Sasha thought - then barefoot footsteps were heard, and the door opened.

— Thank you, Miss Sonley," said the wine merchant, wrapping himself in a blanket, "I've been thinking, and I've decided to stay with you for a couple of days, to see some old friends.

Sasha tried to look over his shoulder into the room, but he deftly covered the door and added from behind the door:

— I'm keeping the room till Saturday, and then we'll see.

— We'll see," Sasha repeated quietly as she walked down **t h e** stairs, "we'll see how much of your sister is enough for me, is what you mean. I'll see how much I can handle your stupid whore working under your parents' roof, that's what you mean. We'll see.

— Why are you sulking, really," Junior raised her eyebrows, coming down to breakfast alone, "give me the tray, Joseph's feeling tired, he'll eat his tootsies in the room.

— I wasn't thinking of staying at his place," she repeated ten minutes later, "we listened to the radio, that's all.

— ... You have a dirty imagination! You're dirty! You'd like to have fun, but no one will take it! - She stood up from the table and retreated toward the kitchen door, hoping to slip out into the hallway, but Sasha didn't pursue her.

She stood in the middle of the room with the coffee tray in her hands, feeling her spine freezing and her legs growing weak, about to break like dragonfly wings, for a moment she thought herself terribly old and sick, but that moment was immediately swept away by a previously unknown frenzy, a dense, heavy, unbearable heat from head to toe.

Sasha put the tray on the table, took a clean cloth off the hook, carefully wrapped it around her hand and broke the window pane.

Shards and glass splinters splattered across the tiled floor, and the cool, sharp air from the garden entered the room, taking away the cheap bitterness of Robusta and the smell of burnt bacon. Sasha immediately breathed easier, sat down by the table, finished her coffee, and thought for ten minutes.

## LOUFERS CLUB GUESTBOOK. 2008

*Neo\_93 writes:*

Achtung! There are intruders in the witch's house! Today I saw with my own eyes a pretty girl, about four years old, playing in the garden. If it's Lamia's offspring, we've missed something important. And who the hell is the child's father?

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*The Daily News writes:*

If Lamia has a child, our actions are not legitimate. I'm resigning from the community. It's one thing to have dead raccoons, but it's another to do what we did at the last meeting.

I don't want to be a second Matthew Hopkins.

*Neo\_93 writes:*

We're not in Essex, and this isn't the 16th century. All we want to do is get Lamia out of town. No one's going to touch her *personally*. You, Daily News, may not care that there are bodies buried near your house, but I do.

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*The Daily News writes:*

You can put a naked baby on a shield and let it flow. If it doesn't drown, it's a witch's spawn. If he drowns, he's innocent. No, guys, I'm out.

*Marcus writes:*

Honestly, I liked it better when we did that memorial box thing, that was cool. And I liked breaking into the beach cabins in Heather, and that thing with the bunnies running away, and now we're dealing with this choc-noo woman, it's depressing.

*The Daily News writes:*

Marcus has a point, let's call it a day. I suggest we take the inflatable boats to the rental marina. **T h e** old Jemma now keeps watch there in the evenings, it's a **l o t** of fun. Especially if you take the two with the motor!

*Levy Junior writes:*

Daily News, what can you offer when you've just **l e f t** the team?

Gathering on Sunday. This will be the last action in "The Maples, I promise. After this, Lamia will never **b e** seen here again. Neo, it's your turn to buy sandwiches and coke.

Daily News, goodbye, you sad asshole.

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

## **SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008**

*The cat yelped, forgetting the verb.  
and rode off into the misty hollow.*

Twenty-fourth of July.

There's not much money in the desk drawer, but there's a handful of change in the tip box.

God, I've neglected the house. It's long past time to dig up the crocus bulbs in my mom's greenhouse, and I forgot about them; there's a nest of black ants under the porch - my mom already gave-

but she'd bury a fish bone or pour boiling water on it, and I'd walk by and look away.

Mom and Deirdre could spend all morning bent over some withering delphinium, and I'm thinking God knows what. No, God doesn't know what I'm thinking. I don't know what He's doing in His neglected garden in heaven. When I was four years old and we lived in another city, I told my mother that God was not too fond of organ music - otherwise how could it be that our neighbor Steinbaum was playing organ music?  
died in the middle of mass.

He was kind, he sent me chocolate bombs, and he wrote letters to my mother and left her a lot of money-I imagined it as German silver thalers piled up in a chest. He left it so we could get out of town, where Mom worked for a nasty bookseller and Dad didn't get home until nine o'clock.

When the neighbor died, his attorney brought my mother the letters he had written for six years, but he didn't send them to us, he put them in a striped hatbox. Strange - he didn't even have to go to the post office, just cross the road and drop the letter in our mailbox.

My mother was talking to Taube's attorney in the living room, but I could hear everything because we had only two rooms and a kitchen in that house. The landlady lived on the second floor, and she had a German surname, too; most of the people on Phyllis Road were Germans, and there was even a church with a small organ.

— Electrician Steinbaum? There's some mistake," Mom said and laughed, but her laugh was sad because it was Sunday and Dad had gone to work anyway.

— Mr. Oskar Steinbaum is not an electrician, he owns an electrician's shop," Tau-be corrected her glumly, "he left you all his money and these letters, and you are at liberty to refuse both. My client left the house and workshop to his sister. I believe she will be favored by his decision.

— Sit down, I'll put the coffee on the fire. And tomorrow I'll come to your office," said my mother, but a minute later I saw Taube, a long man in a gray tweed coat, walking down Phyllis Road; he didn't even seem to want coffee.

When my father returned, there was a striped hatbox full of sealed envelopes on the living room table, and my mother was sitting at the window looking out at the Steinbaum electrician's house, where the first-floor windows were lit up - probably the deceased's sister was already taking care of things.

At night my parents were fighting. I could hear my father walking around the kitchen, reading something loudly, deliberately making his voice sweet and whistling, then something heavy fell, then my mother objected very quietly, and then she cried.

There were many letters in the box, and I had to read them all winter long, until the middle of March. Every evening my mother would sit in her wicker chair by the window, open one envelope and read the letter, my father would go for a walk with his shaggy Trida, and I would sit beside her on the rug and watch my mother move her lips and smile.

When Mother read the last letter, she put the hatbox away in the closet and called Taube's attorney. Two days later, a narrow gray envelope with a window came in the mail, but Taube never showed up.

At the end of July we moved to the coast, and Mr. Steinbaum's thalers were enough for the first payment on the boarding house and for a white coat for my mother. In twenty-nine years, the white fur has faded and worn out in some places, but I keep it in the hallway in the winter, and it's nice to walk out into the cold garden in the morning to unlock the gate.

Writing letters that no one will read, or will read after your death, is a way of communicating with the sky that I will call the way of Oscar Steinbaum, the electrician.

Sasha Sonley's way is a little more complicated - I write one diary for my mom to entertain her, at least a little. And I know for a

fact that at least two people read it.

And I write another diary for *whomever God sends*. It's also read, don't doubt it.

\*\*\*

*... It is generally recognized that sleep is due to cooling, and such is the case with mandrake and poppy juice, they cause stiffness and torpor, while wine comforts with coolness.*

July twenty-fifth.

Fenya is not very fond of her mother; she has asked about her several times these days, and, hearing her *mother was asleep and tired, she* went to play in the greenhouse. The first person I let in there voluntarily and even supplied with a crowbar and an iron pail. If she digs up dracaenas and makes a doll's tent out of them, I won't say a word. Someone has to spoil a child who could exclaim, like Telemachus, "It is *probably impossible for us to know who our father is*."

What if one day I ask her who your daddy is? Whose name she says: the dark-haired Appas, or S.B., or the balding Virgin Kiajanka? I stare at the girl's face for a long time, trying to guess, but all I see is her mother's stropy mouth and her grandmother's sweetly arched eyebrows.

Who got to my sister's idle flower and poked a sting into the leaky corez

No answer. Well, don't.

Fenya's mother, meanwhile, is bathed in the lashes of a sleeping Buddha, and she even looks prettier - her cheeks have fallen, her lips have loosened, and her swollen legs are hidden under a striped blanket. I come to her with a Meissen cup from the honeymoon suite, and I could toss her a scone with sleeping pills.

like someone threw to my dogs after reading Virgil in high school.

Here she is, the future mistress of the inn, sleeping, transformed into a red fly, the *one* that hid in the folds of young Angus's cloak, the cloak was also striped, and *Angus* means the *only choice*.

Remember my wasps burned on the gas stove, fly Etainz How does it feel for you to be so helpless on the blue fire of my indifference?

I have one choice, too. No, I have two only choices.

Sometimes I go into the room, sit in the chair and stare at her, realizing that the easiest thing to do is to kill her exactly the way they all wanted to. Kill her and bury her in the garden. Two things I had simultaneously lost interest in, Junior and my memories of her, deserved to be buried together.

It is a pity that the herbalist has gone on a journey underground - how else to explain his disappearance? - they would have been cozy together in the hollow under the sandstone slab. My herbalist has descended into Sumerian hell and eats clay there and drinks uncleanness like all the subjects of Ereshkigal. Under my garden is Sumerian hell and no other, I've known that for a long time. Well, there he goes, like every fugitive who leaves a tin empty moon in his place.

It's a shame that Llewelyn doesn't read my diary anymore; he'd appreciate my new secret. A perfect secret, seductive and sarcastic, in place of the old one.

No one will find Edna A. in this pit, nor will they look for her. How long can we torture a cenotaph that has been plundered twice? This is where we'll put her - under a cloudy glass, under a chocolate-colored foil, with a broken dragonfly or a finch's wing on top.

No one would ever think of it.

Three more days and three more kettles of decoction and - that's it.



\*\*\*

*Her gods heard her plea: mingled, both their bodies were joined, and their faces became one.*

I think it was Marquez who wrote: I became a writer out of shyness, I wanted my friends to love me even more. Why am I writing this diary? So that those who are indifferent to me will hate me.

It was as if I were being shown a diafilm on the back of a linen glued map, where the contours of the continents shone through the heroine walking through the garden, and only the ocean was unobstructed. But there is no way to get to this ocean, no matter how many books you put under the projection lamp.

I'd like to put it all back together again, my whole Wishgard puzzle falling apart: the sleepy sheep pens, the gurgling of the peat bogs, the lighthouses, the abandoned mills, the reeds, the buns, the hungover fishermen, the creaking of the attic beams on a winter's night, the smell of turpentine from the gamekeeper's suede jacket, the omnipresent sedge, the rattle of riveting hammers from the shipyard, the wrecks on the bottom.

But late, late, my Wishgard is gone. You can gather it from the fine sand that flies into your eyes and over-  
of iodine, of seagulls that can fly up into the sky in a thousand flocks with an ear-splitting meow and shower you with silver fluff and droppings when you come for your blue and brown eggs. You can, but not for a minute or two.

I wish I could put it back together the way it should be, but you see, the present picture is imperfect, it is missing my mother and sister, my father and Mrs. Mol, the caretaker Dreser, and the dogs Hugin and Munin, all of whom are dead and some of whom I killed myself.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

Why haven't I gone where I'm going yet? Why does Sasha Sonley do it? She can kill and stab, drown and burn, she can do anything, even in words.

how it is with her - *hate is trying to get into my throat with a brass spoon, my throat is clenching and unclenching, everything I haven't had time to say is swelling up with a short-lived sore throat, I'm standing here naked, naked under my summer coat, looking at my breasts and I can't hate you, Dresser, because it's funny.*

jesus, i'm gonna memorize this whole journal by heart, a couple more days, and i can write for her, dictated to by her silent demons, who bear a striking resemblance to my own.

how slowly it came to me, inexorably, like freckles in the sun - she *handles* hers so cleverly that they don't even show *their* faces, and what do I do?

and what will I do when I get to where I'm going? I'll look at the boarded-up windows and go home.

I have the courage to pay my losses.

because then the clothier would stop talking to me and I'd be alone with the carpenter.

\*\*\*

When Saunders Branagh appeared in the *heavenly garden*, he was so drunk that his Maldivian tan had completely slipped off his face, leaving only his arms and neck wrapped three times with a red braided cord.

After ordering himself a porter, Saunders unceremoniously sat down at my table and began to tell me something inarticulate, endless about Sasha Sonley, something corporeal, crazy, fishy-smelling.

I hardly listened to him, glancing around indifferently, until he said, "*I still don't understand what she wanted back!* She's numb now, trying to make out the scribbles on the napkins, whether it's a stolen book or a recipe book.

I realized what he meant and went numb too, biting my lip yesterday I forgot to put the herb book back, good God, I was so angry I forgot to put it back under the sandstone slab, it stayed in my coat, in the side pocket, rolled up like Aramaic parchment, I had to do it, and so Sasha hardened herself and lay under the slab of alabaster sandstone and her impatience, and there's no fixing it now, no matter how much you bite your mouth, louëlyn alderbury.

what could I say to Saunders, dazed with kitchen love in a hurry- z I couldn't say anything, my tongue was in my mouth like a frozen roach, I couldn't say anything, my throat was clogged with some icy, bloody scales.

though no, I could read to him from the school's formerly boring Euripides:

*the manifestations of the divine powers are manifold against expectation, they decide much:*

*what you thought was right doesn't come true, and the gods find ways for the unexpected.*

\*\*\*

When white bulls became rare, Jupiter of the Capitol agreed to accept red bulls, but whitewashed with chalk, and blood-

The greedy goddess Mania at the end of the epic began to be organized with woolen dolls, and at the end - with poppy and garlic heads: any sacrifice is ridiculous because it is ready to depreciate before it has time to cool down on the altar.

Why is everything wrong with sasha sonley, too me, the virgin priestess of sein island, crucified among dirty plates, it hurts to think, too me, princess aisha under the torture plow

When I am afraid to think of anything, I always cling to my Greeks and Romans, as if they could shield me from human ugliness - even Gerhardt Mayer laughs at this, but they do shield me.

Strabo writes that by the convulsions of the sacrificed prisoner the Druids foretold the future, but what could the poor Brāna see when he climbed up on the defeated bridež could he see that he would not be master of the *maples*, even if he foughtž?

I can't think of it, I can't think of it, the tall white legs, spread like a Mesopotamian figurine, the clay hair wrapped around the sonders' hand, the mouth stained with sonders' juice - and why all this, Sashaz, so that this muscular Ruadh, son of Rigdonne, would *do it nine times in a row, without embarrassment, without tears of remorse, under a sea without waves, on nine bronze crocodiles?* and then, pulling on his underpants, he would run to his bedroom and bring a black-and-white photograph, quietly embossed in your house, from the family album, one of the two that survived the tumult and ragež.

\*\*\*

...no, it's moving, said Prue, out of nowhere, hanging a wet raincoat on the back of the bench, I went into the *maples* today to check on my dog, and t h e r e ' s n o t a soul in the hotel, a poor forgotten child playing in a pile of sand in the backyard.

childz I poured the rest of the rum into an empty glass, there's no child in the *cells*, *there's* a dog, but no child, I just moved out yesterday!

You just haven't seen them. They live in the attic, Prue said patiently. Alix put them upstairs, top secret.

Yes, of course, it's a big secret! Saunders raised his pointing finger and twirled it at his temple, Prue laughed hoarsely, and I stood up, took a drink from the new bottle Patrick had brought me, held out my hand and said a speech

enough of Russian secrets, I said, enough of secrets-all this blessed Cyrillic is as empty to me as an Ogamich letter is to a cemetery keeper-now she has a child-z I'll bet the child's name is *John alder shavings!* or *Peter chisel!* it's all very tiresome, and I don't want to hear any more about it, I don't want to-no, I'll go over there now and say it to her face!

and I went, and Saunders and Prue looked at me with bewilderment, not understanding a word of it, as if I had put on a canvas dress without a girdle and begun to beat my breast and recite nine incantations addressed to Hecate, the goddess of crossroads.

## TABITA. LETTER ELEVEN

*2008, South Lambeth*

My dear Aunt Jane, I'm at a loss for food.

I smoked the cigarettes you left in the Chinese box all day yesterday, and now my throat is sore and my mouth is dry. It's horrible, horrible. He's not what I thought he was, I don't even know what he is.

I will try to tell you in order, although I want to throw the paper and pen against the wall and shout at the whole Archive Hall.

Auntie, I've done something completely unseemly-you're bound to get angry," I entered his apartment without deciding, opening the door with the spare key I'd borrowed from the concierge. The first thing that occurred to me when I entered the living room was that he had moved to another apartment!

No, things were still in place, books and clothes were still strewn about, and there was a bottle of wine on the table, unopened and completely sour. But there was something u n l i v a b l e a b o u t it-you know, like a house that's rented out after the owner dies. I ran my finger over the table, the gray dust was thick, as if months had passed. I wrote on the tabletop: *Tabitha was here.*

Then I went into the bedroom, and there were dried margaritas in a glass, and two dead finches at the bottom of a brass antique cage.

Why didn't Lhuellin leave me the keys? No, he couldn't have left the birds unattended of his own free will, something terrible had happened to him, I thought, and anyone would have thought the same t h i n g .

I asked for an appointment at the archives, and at noon, after a quick coffee in the cafeteria, I went to that school on Clapham Street-I know that Lou- ellin only works in the mornings, so even if he was alive, he wouldn't be there. I didn't want to see him, I just wanted to understand.

I went up to the seventh floor and found their workroom, and in the elevator I put on a shaggy brown wig - don't laugh, Aunt Jane, it was the only one I had, I had to look older!

Then I tied an old pink handkerchief on my head-a head full of cheap curlers underneath-and went in without taking off my dark glasses. I spoke in a long Cockney accent, the way our formidable hostess, Miss Hobart, speaks, her voice is like the cry of an Australian heron, you can hear it from the hall, and she says *£rekkie* instead of *£reakfast*, I wrote to you about it, remember?

So there they were having tea-two girls who were writing and a young puffy-haired fellow with a thick blue vein on his forehead, his name was Mr. Whiteheart, and his accent was even cleaner than the one I was giving.

They looked at me with interest and put their cups on the table, thinking I had come to learn how to drive. But I made a stony face, sat down uninvited, put Ms. Hobart's business card from the concierge's locker on the table, and said I needed information about my tenant, and I needed it now, because I had *doubts*.

I'll admit to you that I had a nasty thrill at that moment. It was like peeking through a keyhole, touching his desk, looking at his work screen with its flickering map of London, talking to his friends- I didn't know then that Luellin had no friends at Clapham Drive Well.

I was in a hurry to find out something exciting about him, something that would give me the key to this unapproachable man like a Chinese box with a secret, or at least a secret button buried in the black lacquer.

And I sure as hell found out. I could drown myself.

Oh, Aunt, Mr. R. is here, and I shall have to go down with him to the basement, to the hated Card Room. Sealed, kissed and sent.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1979

*There is a herb scrofula, with leaves small in a heel, on one root of the hairs on a dozen, and the very thing that gold is twisted from the root.... If you are a man who is in a spoiled state, then God will forbid and help you.*

Chesterton wrote that the hills of England express the best of England, for they are mighty and soft. It also mentions a draught horse and a sturdy beech.

If Sasha had been asked what the hills of Wales express, she would have said that the hills are like her mother, unhappy, resigned and always in a haze - you can't tell if there are sheep huddled under a tree at the top or a white rhododendron bush in bloom.

So the hills of Wales are half Russian, mother's scarlet blood flowing in their chalk and flint veins. Emerging from the earth on the slopes of the Diallyt hills, wading through the Denbigh marshes, skirting carefully around the Chester mines, it flows into the Irish Sea, the color of dark beer, and loses its own color, dissolving into it as my mother dissolved into my weakened memory.

And what here reminds you of your father? Sasha would be asked. Light, she would say. Yellowish and transparent, as if it were a canifol.

The resinous light that fills the valleys when the rain clouds gather in the west and the hollow hills become inky and torn, as if drawn on fibrous wrapping paper. The colonial shop used to sell pounded sugar in such paper when Sasha was four years old; the sugar glittered blue and did not dissolve well in tea.

All that was left of my father was the light, not the pale, moving lights on the marshes that they call *dead men's sheep* here, but the direct light pouring in from the window in the roof of the carpenter's shed, hot, full of wood dust - to see it you had to go into my father's workshop, lie face down in a pile of fresh shavings, squeeze your eyes shut and freeze.

Let the dog and the hare and the letter carrier be hurt, and let Alex-sandra's pain go away, her father used to say, blowing on her bruised finger, and Sasha always thought of the letter carriers, who, according to a local poet, love walking and dogs and Christmas, - they hammer at the door with their blue knuckles, and sniff and sniff and sniff and sniff.



panting and blowing ghosts in the hallway, shuffling from foot to foot like little boys when they need to do something small.

1992

*There is a grass of varah, and it grows into an arrow like devetisil. Take three perch from the river and cut their lips, and let them live in the same water, and drown their lips with that grass - and that will be it.*

The nourishing, sickly smell of hot milk had been coming from Hedda all summer, and Sasha didn't understand how her father - for four years now! - She could lie down beside her every night on a narrow bed with large, loose pillows.

Hedda had brought the pillows with her; they had never been in the house before. Mama slept with a French roll under her head; there were no pillowcases for it in Wales, so Lisa Sonley sewed the covers herself out of unbleached cotton, and they were still a big hit.

In the fall, Sasha read a bizarre book by a French Egyptologist - it was not much easier to understand it than pictorial writing, but Sasha piled on the dictionaries and read to the halfway point. She liked most of all that the dead Egyptians did not just submit to the gods' decision, but tried to bargain with them and persuaded them in every possible way to determine the best fate for them.

There was a self-confidence and a charming meticulousness that was unusual for Christianity - Sasha decided that she would do the same, only while she was still alive.

*I have come to you, my lord," said one of the clever dead men in Osiris' court. - I have not done what is an abomination to the gods. I have not killed, I have not reduced the loaves in the temples, I have not reduced the food of the gods, I have not violated the measures of the fields, I have not increased the weights, I have not tampered with the arrows of the scales. I am clean, I am clean, I am clean, I am clean.*

When Sasha looked at Hedda through the eyes of Osiris, she knew exactly what should be done to her after the gods had weighed her raw, squelching heart of green merchandise on the judging scales. To be eaten by a lion with a crocodile's head, that's what should be done.

### 1983

*There is Job's herb, which is small in stature, that the needle is white, and the other is black, and its color is blue dust. And whoever finds that herb will go astray, but he will be mad, and if you throw it into the mill, it will destroy the whole of it.*

...Here, say, in this picture, everything is as it was: socks falling down her ankles, cheeks covered with a pink rash, a disease called *slap marks*, a horrible nasty thing, she thought of this summer, and the rash, and the round fountain with the lizard frozen on its hind legs, the kind that used to live in fire, Ma said, and now languish in the heather marshes, whether it was Tenby or Aberstwythz.

Brighton, West Pier, that's what it is. Behind the fountain, the poppies of the Royal Pavilion glow, and beyond, beyond the low parapet, the sea darkens - black, real, full of icy, arrogant fish.

Not like the Irish Sea: milky, creeping a mile and a half from the shore, leaving patched boat bottoms and muddy bottom grass in plain sight, revealing its secrets with a laughing shamelessness that Sasha had always envied - the sea and Cynthia Bohan had it, able to reveal any, the most burning secret, squinting with pleasure.

Then, in Brighton, she was taken for the first time to a matinee performance of Maeterlinck's play, the children in the theater sat with their mouths open, even forgetting that they had to squirm and rustle candy, and Sasha smiled indulgently and looked around triumphantly - there! I told you so! The soul of Bread! The soul of the Sahara!

It was true that in the theater the souls of the things were somehow pathetic, puffed up, it was obvious that the adults remembered something vaguely but could not express it; in desperation they sculpted things out of papier-mâché and voiced them in deliberately thin voices. The souls of these things were numb, as if they were covered in tar like submissive insects.

On the way home, Sasha tried to explain it to her mother and father, but her mother shook her head, smoked, and looked out the window; they still had another car then, with a quilted seat with small holes from her mother's cigarettes. In those days, Mom smoked so much and in such a hurry that Sasha made ashtrays for her everywhere - egg-white glued cups that no longer held water.

In the cups lived the resentful soul of my grandmother's set.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

I remember that the rain that evening pelted me like it was going to wash me into the gulf of Ireland, but I don't remember how I got to the *stone maples* or what I shouted as I stood in front of the locked gate with a WE ARE BOOKED UP sign as mean as the landlady herself.

Judging by the way my fists were swollen and my throat hoarse, I had been knocking for quite a while and shouting too loudly, trying to out-shout the monotonous Welsh downpour.

I think I shouted something like: Come out, alexandra - I'll show you your herb garden! You don't even have to lie down on the dirty kitchen table!

Come out, Lamia! I shouted, I guess the evil children have christened you correctly, except for them, no one in this city is busy with you, no one remembers your name, even if you write a thousand notebooks with spells!

or maybe I shouted: show me your sister whom you killed and buried-because it's easier for you to kill than to pri-

to know that they've run away from you, poisoned by your wormwood silence.

I can't remember being so drunk on the English language in my life.

\*\*\*

If I could speak to her, I would say, "Don't be afraid, sweetheart, stop being afraid.

I know, I know, everyone has his own shadow theater, my shadows pass through yours - like in the old Bradbury story, the Martians do not pass through the inhabitants of the earth, they will never meet, like the two music box players, like Behemoth and Leviathan, what's more - like Voltaire and the Russian Empress.

our shadows knock on the window on a moonless night, pressing their flattened faces against the glass, they frighten you by exploding with over-ripe cherry tincture, filling the pantry with small glass and bloody pulp, they take off with a great rustle from under the curtains, they are masculine like lemmings and feminine like stingrays, they have leathery wings, sheep's head, owl's claws, whatever you want them to be.

so what if I fed them myself from a handful?

I'm nothing but a puppenmeister to them, and you're nothing but a spoonmaid to your own.

fear and guilt are the two hoarse humming furs of your closet, I don't know what you've done in there, or rather I don't want to guess, but whatever it is, you, like me, have been listening to the shaky rattling for years and gazing at the ballerina's peeling earthenware face: *ah, my dear Augustine!* that's all she can say, twirling and bending over the faded velvet stage, but that's not what you want to hear, you want to hear - I forgive you, it's all right, forget it.

so Hesiod's Pelasgians listened to the noise of the oak tree, or the Etho-Ruskis listened to their Aeolian harp, but far from it, in your temples you have the mad Augustine beating, drowning out everything like the heavy beating of blood, deafened like a hammer-beater

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or maybe I shouted: come out, I'll give you your diary, and you'll make up more cardboard people, since no one alive wants to deal with you!

oh, I don't know what I was shouting, but the rain finally stopped, the night sky cleared, and almost immediately the gates of the stone maples opened - at first I thought they had opened by themselves, for I saw no one, but then the automatic lamp flashed, and in its pale flickering light I saw a girl standing in the middle of the garden path.

she stood there looking as if she had lived in the house since she was born, wrapped in a hooded guest jacket, the jacket covering her from head to toe, and I saw only her blond hair and lips, and then a small hand, which she pulled out of the wide canvas sleeve.

I squatted down and took her palm, hello, I said, do you live here? no, replied the girl, I'm a guest here, I was stolen this day and then I found myself, I'm Fenya, who are you? she handed me a notebook folded in four: aunt Alexandra told me to tell you, she knows letters, but she can't speak.

The girl turned and walked slowly down the garden path toward the house, and I unfolded the note and held it up to the blue streetlight.

*please don't come back again. What  
you stole, you can keep.*

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Why do they come in twos? I am guilty all around and therefore I cannot forgive. I am filled with guilt and annoyance, like the driver with the round-faced lions on the Cappadocian seal, madness is so close, it is like a fish splashing under the bridge, where disorder and confusion have filled everything with dark water, madness is as cozy as a calendar of omens and beliefs - in it jackdaws and swallows fall down the chimney, deadly parsley blooms in front of the house, anger fades, attachment barely smolders, and the arrow and snares become a flower and a trident in the hands of the smiling Ganesha.

why they come in twos.

first you are afraid, then you get drunk from the morning in the untidy heavenly garden, then you quietly go crazy, trying not to creak a single floorboard, then others become afraid of you, and it becomes easier, and then you cross the bridge - already guessing that there, on the other side.

God, wouldn't it be easier to take the ferry?

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*... He who drank wine, with a wholesome  
If I had lost my mother and father by a sudden death. If I had lost  
my mother and father by sudden death, If I had lost a brother  
or a little son by accident.*

July twenty-sixth. When I returned from Thorney, I found the maid in tears and the kitchen untidy after breakfast.

No, it wasn't. First I saw the mountain of bitten toast and eggshells left by the guests and the four cups of coffee grounds. On the back of the oak bench hung Everton's crudely tied pink sweater, but Everton was gone.

She had somehow opened the bedroom and found Junior sleeping dead, I thought, somehow not frightened at all. She found her and ran for help.

They're all coming here now.

I went up the stairs, turned the key and pushed open the door, and found my sister lying on her back with her legs spread wide, her plump white throat tense, her flannel shirt bunched up on her belly. I turned on the light, came closer, and saw the faint twist of her thighs and a wisp of colorless hair, like the tip of a cat's tail, stuck between the door and the jamb.

Footsteps and Everton's crying voice came from downstairs, and I turned off the light and walked quickly to the door, my heart a pang and my tongue a taste of iron, as if I'd frozen my mouth to the icy fence.

What twenty years ago had reminded me of a wax seal, a *porta segreta*, the fibrous core of a mushroom, a poppy bud covered with invisible fluff, had vanished without a trace.

What I had been touching with my mouth, panting with haste and inability, touching with my hands, desperately wanting to dig my nails into the pads of my fingers, was now just an ordinary keyhole, a hole in a plush curtain, an opening, just a front.

— Miss Sonley! - A frightened maid came rushing to me when I came down to the kitchen. - The girl's missing, she's been taken from the garden!

I stared at her in silence, the tang of icy iron noticeably stronger.

— She woke up pretty late," Finn continued, rubbing the black sweat under her eyes with her finger, "I let her out for a walk like you said, right after breakfast, then I killed myself upstairs, then I talked to the seven-ten pounders - only ten minutes! - and then I went out into the garden and

I saw her doll on the grass by the alpine slide. I've searched everywhere, Ms. Sonley - we have to call the police.

I shook my head and, after giving the maid a peck on the cheek, went out onto the porch and looked around the garden.

The gate was closed, but there was a gate behind the greenhouse that the guests used-it could be opened from the outside by unwinding the wire-maybe Fenya had left through it and was just standing on the bridge looking down, I thought, feeling the iron bitterness that had already destroyed my tongue and was now filling the sky. The only thing missing here was the police, Paul Dolphus, with his glassy pupils.

Besides, we already have a cop at the hotel. Arrived early this morning, as promised. Tame, tame, like a honey at the temple of Artemis. I imagined an anxious Llewellyn and our dumb Wishgard sergeant powdering doorknobs all over the house and searching the thorn bushes and raspberries.

The girl has been stolen, I tell them, I was out for coal, and her mother has not been able to look after her because she is lying in a locked room, poisoned with laudanum, waiting to quench her anxiety and decide her fate.

No, one Luellin will be enough. He still thinks God knows what he thinks of me after he's read the Henley notes. At the time I thought it was funny to give him all the evidence at once, turning into a book like a mermaid's tears into pebbles. Now I think I just wanted him to stay longer.

When Herbalist disappeared, I thought of him at once-though Saunders had more opportunity to steal my notebook. I *understand* Luellin's curiosity, as the boy Erichthonius, hidden in the chest, understood the curiosity of the king's daughters. No, not like that, I *feel* his curiosity as the shoulder of the sleeping son of Ares felt the hot oil spilling from his mistress's tilted lamp.



Why is it that when I think of Lou Elderbury, all I can think of is dramatic ancient episodes? Why do I even think of Lou Elderbury?

I'll go up to his room and try to explain everything, the main thing being to keep my pencil steady and my eyes clear. You see, I'm writing a novel, and you just happened to fall into my lap, I tell him. I had a little fun at your expense, I tell him. And now I need your help, I tell him.

Oh, I wish I could say it in my own voice! My mother always said I had a contralto, which is a deadly weapon, and if I lowered my voice to a *G minor octave*, she would forgive any mischief.

— And another thing," Finn said behind me, "that inspector from London left at half past ten. He looked like he'd been bitten by dogs! You probably hadn't even turned onto the highway yet, and he'd already come out with his stuff and slammed the door.

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*... Six essences were united in them: the sound of a cat's footsteps, a woman's beard, mountain roots, bear veins, fish breath and bird saliva.*

July twenty-seventh.

There's a hundred and seventy pounds in the desk drawer, not counting silver. We could stock up on ham for breakfast, pay the maid, and buy some spotted bread with icing for the girl.

We've had an unusual amount of activity and visits in the last few days.

Last night Gweniver Mount-Levy, whom I used to see from afar, came in, nodding faintly—as if I hadn't slept in her high bed when my mother died and I was sent away from home for three days, as if she hadn't come to the Maples twenty years ago to look at future properties.

It had been *fimbulwetter*, the great winter between us, for so long that I had forgotten how pretty the tea-house hostess was when you got closer, with that lilac crown of her hair, like Tadzio's mother in my favorite Mann story, with the long eyes and the cinnamon-colored mouth.

— You have a missing niece," Gweniver said, standing in the doorway. She didn't seem to want to come in, so I had to write a reply, walk over and show her the notebook.

— *She was found an hour later. Thank you for your concern!* - I wrote, and Gweniver read it, squinting, and nodded slowly.

— So it's true that you don't talk, poor kid," she said, went into the kitchen, looked around, went into the living room and sat down, stretching out her legs in her comfortable suede shoes. - The elders will do the talking, but don't bother to write, I know what you'll say.

She rubbed her temples with her hands, fixed her hair, looked at the scratches on the cherry tabletop for a while, and finally said:

— I found the girl, brought her here and put her in front of the gate. I didn't dare go in. I found her near Trefoil, locked in a woodshed. I gave her tea and calmed her down. Don't! - She waved her hand when she saw me reaching for my pencil. - I'm not going to explain anything. I just wanted to tell you not to imagine things. There's nothing wrong with her, I assure you, nothing irreparable.

Jesus, Gweniver, I didn't mean anything by it. I have a narrow palm, which means I have no imagination. That's why I took the teacher's gold-plated gift out of the stash and kept it in the living room with the trigger pulled.

When Everton and I, having walked twice around the garden, checked the harbor road, looked over Prue's property, and jogged to the beach and back, returned, walked around the rooms once more, and sat down on a stone bench to rest, the gate swung open, and there stood before us, shining like eight hundred warriors at the grate of the Wal-

a grinda, a beautifully coiffed Fenya with a half-eaten crust in her hand.

Everton rushed to her as if she were her own daughter, grabbed her arm, and dragged her into the house, and I followed, regretting for the first time in three weeks that I'd forgotten how to say the words out loud.

— I was called to play," said Fenya proudly, "by a big boy. He had this shiny yellow tire! It buzzed and the wheels spun.

— The boy with the car," I wrote in my notebook and put it on Gweniver's lap.

— Anything can happen," said Mistress Thrillist calmly. - You should keep a better eye on her. I don't ask whose child it is, but if you want to tell me, come to my tea-room. How long can you play the nymph Muta, punished by Jupiter?

Nymphu Mutuz Sometimes I think Gweniver is a little too well-read for a provincial witch from a seaside town.

## **LOUFERS CLUB GUESTBOOK. 2008**

*Neo\_93 writes:*

Daily News, if you're reading this, you were right. It's a pe-rebor. I'm leaving the community. You can change your password, but I swear I won't give away my meeting place.

*Writes Alien:*

Where had Junior gone? He was not in my gazebo, though we had agreed on seven o'clock. And anyway, two and a half people came, we're disbanding the clubz People who saw Juniorz

*Neo\_93 writes:*

I saw it. Junior stole a girl from Lamia and hid her in a garden near the Shamrock. You could get years for that.

seven. He called me, too, saying we were just having fun, watching Lamia thrash around. I bet she'd open her mouth and talk, maybe even scream, he said.

*Marcus writes:*

Oh, no.

*The Daily News writes:*

Neo, of course I'm reading, you haven't changed your password. I knew this was going to end up like this. You tried to talk him out of it.

*Writes eye\_by\_eye:*

For eight years, he did something with her!!!!

*Neo\_93 writes:*

He wasn't going to do ANYTHING to her. He wanted to hide her for an hour or two and see if Lamia would talk, that's all. I want to see her write the girl's identity on her notebook, he said. He didn't give a damn about those notes.

*Writes Alien:*

All right, he took her away, had fun for an hour, and then where did he go?

Lamia called the police and he was taken away. I can't believe it.

*Writes eye\_by\_eye:*

Junior wasn't in the police force. Paul would have told me! I think they locked him up at home, or worse, sent him to his father. I heard his grandmother say that one more trip like that and she'd take him to Swansea, close the tearoom and drive him - and he'd run half the way in the car.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

*Gweniver* is a mysterious name, if the *shamrock* mistress were a Boccaccio character, her name would be Ginevra, but she's a Mabinogion character, I realized that recently and for some reason I was glad.

When I first came to Wishgard, I had no idea that this city would become a mebius strip, a watery limit, a point of hopelessness - in short, a place where I am repeatedly convinced of my powerlessness, like a eunuch luring a maid to lie on the cushions in the secluded shade of a canopy.

that day, *Gweniver* seemed incredibly old, dry as a tea leaf, and I spoke to her in that special voice I use for talking to old but nice ladies-a little softer than usual, with just a touch of condescension.

A month later I was again in the *shamrock* and saw Mrs. Mount Levy, a forty-five-year-old widow with a sapphire star between her tightly clenched corsage breasts; at first I thought she was the young lady of the place and nodded hesitantly, but she quickly dispelled my doubts by coming very close to me and giving me the familiar smell of warmed tea-leaves.

how nice of you to come back to us, young man, she said, leaning quickly to my ear, now we'll have a London inspector on our visitor's list

you're wrong, I'm not!.. I said, admiring the silk skirt of the Lyotard chocolatier, full of blue wandering shadows, but *Gweniver* didn't bat an eye.

the third time the landlady was ill, and I received my assam in a clay kettle from the hands of her sullen maid; the fourth time she was an angry grandmother, reprimanding her grandson in a cramped back room behind a screen of false reeds; the fifth time she spoke of what a magical man the late Waldo Sonley had been, and her lips were so flaming that she wished to-

I wanted to splash water on them and hear the sizzle of red-hot iron.

The sixth time she tried to look at my palm, the seventh and eighth times I secretly wrote down her speeches on a napkin so I wouldn't forget, today was the ninth time and I must have come too early.

the red door was locked

I stood on the high porch, feeling the north wind pushing against my back, looked at the ship's bell swinging on the carved pole, reached out my hand with swollen knuckles bloody from the gates of the *stone maples*, stroked the shiny copper skirt, twitched his tongue and walked down the steps, then down the empty beach, crunching fins and pebbles, toward the new harbor, and then along the long cement, acrylic-painted wall toward the pier where the midday *Norfolk* moors

Wishgard wanted me to leave,  
so I left.

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don't carez

I didn't get the red door opened for the first time today, and I immediately lost my way

Now I look like that atomic monkey who was taught to press the button in the secret bunker, using up a ton of sweets, and now the war is over, there is no one left in the world, the monkey leaves the cage, walks through empty corridors for a long time, finds the remote control, habitually presses the button, but the button does not press - there is no electricity in the bunker.

well - and what nowz is the reading of oneself, pathetic as a blind man's owl in the nettlesz

Well, someone else is unlikely to play *my* towns, as one understanding fellow said, moving from town to town, and what am I saying, hovering between two fortresses- ir-Welsh and Welshz

so what if your herbalist is read only by a boring driving instructor, and it's a book that can be a *surprise, doesn't* it matter? *so what* if my diary is read only by Burlington book bugs in the brotigan library where the rejected manuscripts are kept? so what if my diary is read only by the Burlington book bugs in the brotigan library where the rejected manuscripts are kept? so what if it doesn't matter?

talent slowly kills you as you write, and quickly kills you if you stop.

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No, said Dr. Mayer, come on, there's as much difference between an innocent act and an unintentional act as there is between wine and tea, that's it, lou

here it is - I go to Gerhardt Mayer because of his caramel accent and his love of forgotten words, Mayer's diligent English tickles my diaphragm and I laugh.

I fell in love with him in the two thousand fourth year, when he said: *it is stuffy among these straightforward people!* he listened to himself, reached for a pen and wrote on s o m e scrap - I am sure he has a whole box of such scraps, Gerhardt Mayer never loses anything.

this morning I lay face down on his couch like an orestes on the floor of a Delphic temple, and listened to him mutter about nothing, or rather about dusty *sophrosyve* and dull *medev agav*

ever since I came back from Baxford and told him that my father's *guilt was only an* unpleasant confusion of circumstances, and now I am tormented by *my guilt in* front of *my* father, mayer has gone completely off the rails and is talking blessed pythian

nonsense.



what *sophrosyve*, the herbalist is another matter, I told him, for Sasha had been waiting for me to do it, to put it all back, just waiting, with that polite smile of hers, calm as a cat at the queen's reception, and when I didn't return it, she went to Saunders, because I *should* have returned it, and if I didn't, I didn't *take* it.

she loved him for his torment, and he loved her for her compassion for them, said Dr. Mayer, or rather, sang in a falsetto, like a poor *shen* in a Peking opera, I even shuddered with delight, this is Jungian: *your philosophy is akin to your temperament, it fascinates me.*

If I were a beautiful white Austrian woman, I'd make the doctor an obscene proposal.

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Come on, Dr. Mayer, Sasha is not a witch in the folk-lore sense of the word, but her power of attraction is such that she attracts evil, absorbs it, becomes it, and, without realizing it, spreads it like a burdock seed stuck to the hem of a garden apron.

why did Mr. and Mrs. Sonley die so young? Why did Heddaž Heddaž run away to India in such fear of what the charming caretaker Dresser was afraid of - white berries with black seeds and the moon on the *vagiva devtata*?

What else did she do to her half-sister but molest her and leave her to live as a confused slut? I will not judge her - even if they were real sisters, incest is not an evil but a scourge, for the lump of love energy needed to overcome brass taboos must be no less than a Zambezi nugget.

what had happened between the sisters was as senseless and unjustifiable as a drought in the upper ganges, such things rarely happen because of the languor of the flesh, the nugget was in Sasha's underbelly.

and I couldn't breathe, but there was something else, there was something else.

even if it were, says Gerhardt Mayer, but what's it to you, patient, what does it matter?

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*Thosh wretched, rash, ivtrshdivg fooL, fareweLL!  
I took thee for thy £etter: take thy fortune.*

July twenty-eighth. According to the Welsh laws of Howel the Good's time, a hundred cows and a strip of silver were to be given for dishonor, and it was a pity I was not of royal blood, for I could have demanded a whole herd and a decent mortgage for the herbalist.

- Wild Chinese lemon, that's what you are," Brana, who had never been to China, said to me. - You give me a splinter.

And indeed, there is one, *rovcirchs trifoliata*, I looked it up in the guidebook: wild lemon deliberately becomes bitter like bile - in order to become inedible and survive.

He said it to me at the door as I left his house, not having been in his bedroom, but having tasted his juices, tart as the powders of Avicenna. He told me this when I threw the photograph of my sister he had stolen from my house in his face-not to throw an angry Lutheran inkwell at him, so I threw what came to hand.

What else could I do, since I was no longer screaming or crying, just writing in my notebook with a pencil. What am I supposed to do?

I'd like to feel like a *car god* coming down from the theater ceiling under the triumphant gazes-

I feel like an aging Hestia, who left her virginity on an unwashed kitchen table and thus lost her immortality, because the Greeks' gods were only vulnerable as they were only vulnerable. And I feel like an aging Hestia, who left her virginity on an unwashed kitchen table and thus lost her immortality, because the Greek gods were vulnerable as soon as they started acting like humans. Meanwhile, *heroes were* resurrected even if they were roasted and eaten.

Wild Chinese lemon, that's what you are. Saunders said that when he brought a picture of Junior into the kitchen, with traces of can-cellar buttons on it, and put it on my chest. Take it, he said, I didn't think you'd make such a fuss over a naked-ass picture taken by a lousy photographer.

He dared to say such a thing to me, the wiry little Englishman, the thrifty *Bellerophonte* who struck the fiery chimera in his haste. He would soon fall to the ground if he could only see what his old horse had become, a foal born on weak legs.

He won't even have time to see it. I'll bury it before he does.

I'll put it where no one will look for it, it's practical and cozy, especially since I still have some brown paint left in the barn for the gate, so I can paint something better than the old one, something teary, smelling of sweet theater dust.

For example: *Moreover, my fate, like a lottery, forbids me to choose voluntarily.*

Shakespeare is an inexhaustible source of tombstone inscriptions.

If I were burying Saunders there, I'd write in chalk on the plywood: *You miserable, fussy buffoon, goodbye!*

For Llewellyn - whom I will never see again, so I'd rather he died - this would be a good one, blue on white border: *He wanted to erase the line between what he was and what he seemed to be.*

What would I write if I were digging a grave for myself?

*Against all odds, the subject affirms love as a value?* No, this quotation we shall perhaps concede to the teacher Monmouth; it is full of stale library air. What, then?

Petronius, with his flamboyant *Tots mshvdshs agit histri- ovem*.  
Dylan Thomas with his careless *avd death shaLL have vo domiviov*  
and beer-scented detachment - my God, in five years I'll be thirty-  
nine too.

That's all right for those who believe that the stone falls  
because the stone wants it to. I believe the stone falls because it  
has nowhere else to go. So this is what we're gonna write on my  
slab:

*Your pleas are too late, Frodi!*  
*We've started the mill, we can't stop it - The*  
*girders are shaking, the foundation's gone,*  
*A heavy millstone split in two.*

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*A£ shg£e covdita.*

I am sitting in an empty café, all upholstered in burgundy velvet,  
writing in my notebook and remembering the summer of eighteen-  
three in London. Not because it was the year Edna A. was born,  
sleeping in a locked room on the second floor of the Maples, but  
because the café's veranda had just been painted and all the  
benches had white alarm signs.

In Cardiff I have to sign papers at the notary's, or rather one  
with a long, regal title, which will take all day, so I can have an  
espresso at Edward's Galleries and buy cucumber herbs, because  
mine have all died out over the winter. Why do I feel in the big city  
as if I had sabots on my feet and a duck's head sticking out of a  
willow basketz Because I have no moneyz.

I never have any money, it's amazing. Once it comes in,  
something goes wrong. *No money, no money, no money.*

What is my nosy lodger doing now: looking through a dirty window in a bookmaker's shop or taking other people's dogs out *in* Kensington Gardens-what is he doing at all? When I think of Lou Elderbury, I think of Lou *Elderburylou Elderb- rilou*.

The velvet café is so quiet that I flinch at the footsteps of the daisy.

— What will you drink?" she says. - Take fresh yo gurt with basil. It's our special recipe.

— It has to be our special inn," Mom says as the four of us repaint the peeling veranda blue. - It should be *absolute*, like a patisserie in Pont-Aven: you walk in and you know it's a Breton *cofiserie* and you're about to get grenadine syrup and buckwheat galettes.

— I'm afraid you think too highly of this place," said Father, "don't forget we have only four rooms for guests. Well, six at the most. It's not a hotel, it's a house to live in. If it were up to me, I wouldn't let anyone in here at all. It's a h o u s e , and it's called the same as any house in Chester or Yorkshire. When I get a decent job, I'll take the stupid sign off the gate and give the rooms to our children - I'm ashamed Alexandra does her homework in the pantry.

— What other childrenz," Mom frowned. - Yes, we named our boarding house Stone Maples, not Tral and Dolphin or "Yellow Submarine," and that means the sea is not in the name, but in the essence. - She raises her ultramarine-stained finger, her mother's hair tucked under her handkerchief, but still catching some oil splashes.

— Nothing here should resemble the oil-smelling fishermen's diners that employ vagrants in the summer and shut the doors and shutters in the winter," he said.

she says. - Nothing here should say: you're too poor to stay with us!

— I always wanted to live by the sea," says my father, "but I never wanted to be an innkeeper in Wales. I wanted a little house and a workshop where I could tinker with old furniture, I wanted to get you away from the bookseller, but I didn't want to see you with the keys to the storerooms on your belt.

— No maids in bathing suits, no copper-colored anchors like the ones on Leif's porch. No ship thermometers on the walls! - Mom repeats, as if she didn't hear.

— I can't wait to get this over with and run to the beach," I thought, "where you can step into the fast tide and at the last moment dodge and run away to the mocking laughter of the seagulls.

— It's not so bad for Master Leif, it's just that he's been sailing on the Norfolk for twenty years," said Deirdre, "and he's probably been dreaming of opening a seafaring bar for twenty years. Don't worry, Miss Sonley, we'll manage, it's not a big burden.

— wind strength of three to six... light swell at sea. north of the island. south end... anticyclone from the Azores," says the radio.

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*This person is still needed to justify the cumulative action. The action is done. The actor is told to undress and wash off the antimony and rouge: he will no longer be needed....*

... Prue Sparrow came in, ruddy and ruffled as ever. She brought a dog, a stray dog found on the road. I took the dog, but I didn't let the neighbor in the house, so she could sulk all she wanted. Within a week the dog had mastered

She is already responding to her new name, wagging her ashy fluffy tail.

Koo-shi is a good name for a dog that doesn't bark at all, a silent friend for me. The dog is terribly fat, must have lived in a butcher's shop - maybe they're looking for him all over town. Everything fat and fluffy wants to run away and get lost.

Junior's room is the same as it was when she ran away and got lost.

The only things missing are the posters and club posters - the day she left, I tore them off the walls and buried them in the garden, along with the dresses she had left behind, I even threw the bedclothes in there, cutting them up with scissors, I wish I had used them for rags, they were such good sturdy linen.

In the evening I had to close the hotel, evicting the slightly stoned teenagers and two bewildered salesmen. I had to tell them that the heating boiler in the basement had burst. The locked room, the nosy maid, the s t r a n g e girl, the leaky roof, the guests, and **m y s e l f** become increasingly difficult to cope with.

Since Luellin had left the hotel without leaving a note, I had not been able to find a place to go, and all the time I had been assured that he had the herbalist, which meant that we talked every day and every night, I was as calm as a man talking to a trusted friend behind a tightly closed door.

But after he left, the mound behind my mother's greenhouse was empty, so my diary was at Branagh's house, which is a different matter. If Lou had taken something out of curiosity, he would have put it back.

But Saunders Branagh wouldn't put it down. A Scottish Kelpie horse that turned into a young man with white hair full of shells and seaweed. You get on one of these, and it goes into the river, and you're already crawling ashore, soaked to the s k i n ,

a humiliated rider who trusted a werewolf with his hooves inside out.

*The heart is pricked, nauseous, and the desire to eat is gone, The pulse is both hard and faint, frequent, feverish, Also bitter and dry in the mouth, fires blazing in dreams.*

That's how I felt when I went to help my aunt out on a dumpster-strewn Cefinch Street. An hour and a half later, on my way back to Neath Town, I felt much worse, and rightly so. Like Tyr, I had put my hand in the wolf's mouth as a pledge that he was not being deceived, and now he had the right to take offense and clench his *midday teeth* tighter.

What will I tell Luellin when he comes for me?

I killed my sister because she wants to be the boss and stick her nose in everything.

No - I killed my sister because she was no longer beautiful, and I'm ashamed to think that nine years ago I kissed her breasts and belly.

No - I killed my sister because I am guilty before her, and I would like to think that I am not guilty before her, but before my mother, before whom - well, what am I guilty of?

The word *guilty* makes me feel as if I had wet absorbent cotton in my naso-throat - I strike that word from my dictionary by decree of July twenty-eighth, two thousand eighth, and burn you all with fire, and *wine, and absorbent cotton, and new, and different.*

Okay, I'll wake Junior up, wake her up and give her a refreshing drink of cucumber grass. I'll wake her up and we'll try to live as a threesome. No, not the three of us, we'll be four or even five in no time, I know my sister.

No, I'll send her to Brighton first!

It was not for nothing that Brighton came into my mind when I told her to leave Henley for the regatta. Though if Henley and the regatta were only on paper, perhaps there was no Brighton.



It is decided: I will borrow a few hundred from Vorobyshka and send the girls to the sea, out of sight, I need time to think, I need to think.

And if I feel like killing her, I'll do it another way.

## TABITA. TWELFTH LETTER

*2008. South Lambeth*

Hi, Aunt Jane.

Thank God it was a day off and I could lie on the couch and chow on dried cheese with wine. It's amazing how, as soon as I write to you, or even start a letter, I feel happier and calmer. And this morning I threw Lou Hellen's sock in the hamper. If this keeps up, I'll stop blushing like a peasant every time I pass his door.

So, back to Thursday. Mr. White Heart was interested in me, despite my pink dress and glasses, so he took me into his office and gave me a cheap, unflavored tea that he keeps in a Lipton box.

We have a problem with Lou Elderbury, he said, and he is rather uncomfortable to deal with, although we all know his difficulties, and of course we are *compassionate*. He's missed seventeen classes this quarter, but I haven't dismissed him yet, that's *how he's* treated! Besides, said White Heart, wrinkling his nose sympathetically, he still has trouble with his head after that story. What story, I asked, imagining a touching elopement with another man's fiancée, but, Auntie, I wish I hadn't asked.

Turns out Luellin was going to jail for killing a man.

Not only is he an ex-latinist at an out-of-state college, he's not the drunken Etonian genius I thought he was,

he's a murderer who miraculously didn't end up in Holloway or Bel-Marsh. He was declared mentally ill, treated for three months, and dismissed from college, without the right to teach, *without the right to drive a car!*

It was an accident, of course: he made a mistake on a bend near Swansea and crashed into the car of a seaside resident. But it wasn't just a mistake: he was a bit *echa-shfe*, which is a nice word, isn't it?

Or rather, he was really drunk, or even more accurately, he had gotten behind the wheel drunk, late at night, after a party with friends, simply because he was *used to spending the night at home*. Luel-lin was taken to the hospital with a damaged eye, and Welsh with broken bones and head trauma. He died a year later, never recovered, leaving behind a wife and two children.

Since that story, Luellin has gone a little crazy," said Whiteheart with a bored look, "I mean, not really, but at times he gets into things that words can't describe. They only keep him in the office because he won't ask for a raise and agrees to work on Sundays. But it won't last long, Whiteheart said, because the last time he disappeared for two weeks, we had to find replacements for six apprentices, so we'll be sure to fire him.

Sweet Aunt Jane, I almost married a half-blind drunk with a felony record!

Oh, yeah, I know what you're gonna say. *It's vo shse pshmpivg a dry weLL.*

But, Aunt, how hard it is to imagine my life without Tabitha Elderbury, for I have made it up so marvelously! I shall come to Worsall in August and tell you all about it in detail.

Now my only concern is what to say if he asks me to look after the azalea again.

## FACIAL HERBALIST

1980

*There is a grass having, on a horse to ride bravely, and on water not to fight - you will not drown and in weather, but on top of water, but even though and all day stand in the water cold - you will not get sick, or even sit in a yzb in black smoke - will not suffocate.*

And what a house, what an Abergwynez - the millet of a July day shimmering in the ribbed glass of the living room, the smell of linseed oil, two tablespoons in the morning and one at night, the dried red-new heather on the cliff, the stove with green tiles, and two inflated plaster angels under the ceiling - one with half a leg left in Mama's bedroom, behind the partition.

The ant thread on the terrace heated by the day, the seeds of the cross-leaved plant flying in the face, the heavy scary hornets, the thick rice mist in the neck of the bottle found on the dresser, what it said - Joz Joellez hot fry in the sunlit water, the bitterness of the pine needles, you have to chew them for some reason, my mother's glass beads scattered on the floor, it's going to hit, it's going to hit!

That Abergwynez - the night stomping of the anthonovka in the garden, the warm bread wheel in crumpled parchment, slapping it on the table and telling me that the Crossmans had gone up in price, the clotheslines sagging in the rain, the sheets, the sheets, the ossified wasp specks in the buckwheat honey, the Russian words that stick in your head overnight - *malt, boat, cold, tin*.

On the table, cherry wet pulp in homespun bags - the stains on the canvas scare little Sasha, and big pink Deirdre laughs, strong pink hands squeezing, twisting, water pollen standing over the grass, when the front lawn is hosed down, the black hose bouncing in his hands like a fish with the slippery name of *eeL*, brought from Long Nef Lake and smoked on long clay ribs in the barn.

The darned nets on the shore, stretched on stakes, the silky cocoon of winter, the spidery sparse snow that makes the sand seem dirtier and the shells crunch louder, the chickens and diamond green, at night my mother sings: *Twenty-four grains are blowing away the blades of the sky, do we wake up and sleep in vain*, but Dad never sings, he tells *us* about Gretel's white stones and the nettle ring, the ring is not true, Sasha tries to weave one in the morning and suffers for a long time afterwards.

The sticky posters on the bollards in Uptown - someone's torn summer cheek, half a smile, the split cocoon at the back of the church - naked lizards with split tongues live in it, the jagged bolt of the garden wicket - you have to stand on a stone to open it, you have to stand on a stone, barberry and gnats, the peeling onion of the dome - an Orthodox church in Cardiff, mom lifts Sasha up high, awkwardly pressing her belly against the cast-iron circle filled with wax - put a candle! but the thin stick won't stick into the circle, it tries to slip out, the bland taste of the wafer on her tongue, what else is therez.

There's a lot of *impossible* things: impossible, says Deirdre, like turning an egg inside out! impossible, says Mom, nonsense, nonsense, get it out of your head! impossible, says Dad, just impossible, that's all.

## 1990

*There is a herb of Uzhmintsa, but it grows in Ramenskiye places, it is seen like a grain on the ground. And that herb, if you have a good mind, keep it in your stock.*

Hedda's words are sloppy, faded, Sasha thought, you don't want to twirl them in your hands and look at them, as you always wanted to do with your mother's, but Hedda's things, on the contrary, they still smell of figs and dried plums, from the time of her grandmother.

where she sat behind the cash register in a starched bonnet, smiling understandingly at everyone.

Her stepmother's gums were bloodless even then, but her fingertips were bright red; they reminded Sasha of wax balls for sweeping - before the Heverstock holidays they were scattered in the classrooms and corridor and swept away with the school mud after a while, and they were probably made red to make the mud look more cheerful.

Hedda's ignorance was like a weathered chitinous shell - anything new could spring up in it at any moment, or, say, a centipede could take up residence. Younger's ignorance was as tight and greedy as a dewdrop flower - anything that entered it ceased to be itself, but became the substance of the flower, its sticky, dewy insides.

But in both women, big and small, there was a smooth, intoxicating simplicity, bordering on emptiness on the one hand and perfection on the other. The paths they walked, the places where they sat down on the grass, the walls they leaned against during the day - all these points and lines would surely form a complex harmonic pattern if viewed from above. G, D, B flat, F sharp.

They were happy with each other, the house, the weather, the burnt oatmeal and everything that happened to them, and every now and then Sasha caught herself wishing she could live in Heddin Chitin for a while - to see how it worked. *ALLegretto, a piacere? Giocoso? Ostivato?*

And that milky giggle, the gurgle of sleepy juices, the gleam of snow-white teeth and irises, two Joycean barmaids, serving golden beer, repeatedly reflected in fogged mirrors, ruling over the beaten court and the passage of time, knowing how to collect wet change from a tin plate on the counter with one finger, and how to live in general.

Nothing, there is not much left, thought Sasha, just a few more years, and I shall be able to pack up my books, my dresses, my photographs, retire from the "Maples," move into an attic somewhere and get a dog. Or two.

No lodgers, no bacon breakfasts, no beans floating in brown sauce, no cheesy bed odors, no little feet stomping up and down the stairs, no murky rage, no watery annoyance.

Back in school, Sasha had read about toasted grains, the ones the Israelites had brought to David when they were forbidden to eat baked bread—no *new bread, no dried grains, no raw grains, until the day you bring offerings to your God*—and now, when she thought of her life in the Maples, it seemed like a handful of toasted grains.

Not bread, not lentils, not barley, not beans - just food, just to live.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

my father's Baxford neighbor, baker Alison Eidhan, didn't tell me much, but the abandoned house and the boarded-up shop told the rest.

Now you'll be our clothierz asked Alison as we opened the store door, and I began to twist the heavy levers of the metal blinds to let in the light.

I hadn't thought about it yet, I said, but I will now.

Well, what to say to the honorable womanz I haven't had a proper rest since I ran into the locked door of the tea shop, walked about half a mile to the new terminal, bought a ticket and took the ferry to Ireland.

near the ticket office I met a familiar fireman in a vest with pockets, he was sitting on the parapet looking at the sea, sucking on a dubious cigarette, how much water, he said as I approached, to think how much water there is and how slowly it sways, you see that stone over there, the one that looks like a seal, it's only left side has been exposed for half an hour, are you waiting for the head to show? I asked him, sitting down next to it on the sun-warmed sandstone, no, he said, it doesn't have a head, I'm just waiting because nothing is burning anywhere.... ah, it's you, buddy! you're still here?

He looked at me with a disappointed look: "Well, you still haven't got anything to light up.

Standing at the rust-covered *Norfolk* railings, I looked out at the receding Welsh coast, at the nodding cranes in the new harbor like six dog heads on the neck of a frightened scylla, at the overturned fishing boats in the glistening tide, at the stained-glass windows of the hotel on the hill, full of shattered morning sunshine

I thought that all that had happened to me there was a *wabeel*, a pair of wings torn from a dead bird, flapped in the air to beckon the falconer, and then to take his prey, you hear, Sasha sleepily, you are but deceptive fluff and feathers on my way to Ireland.

I covered my tear-stained eye with my hand; it always tears when I forget that it sees worse than the right one, or indeed it sees nothing at all.

Tiresias was punished with blindness for peeping a little too much, and my eye was taken away from me for drinking too much - and I would have given the other for waking up next to alexandra sleepyhead.

No, I'm lying, I wouldn't give the eye, take the ear, take both! I'll remain a deaf Lanthanotus, and so what? yonder, in Plato's federation, a horse was also deaf, but he didn't obey the scourge and the arrows, for he *had a strong revelation and plenty of blood*.

\*\*\*

you just missed a funny visitor, whiteheart said as soon as I opened the glass door. you should get to work more often, lou, or we'd all have to pick up the slack for you.

these people-two women, a whiteheart, and eight men-with whom I have to talk in the office, are like eleven shields forged by Mammurius after the pattern of the heavenly shield, and all eleven are not real!

Besides, they like to make nice, unkind pranks, so I didn't even listen at first, just went behind the screen, where we have something like a kitchen, and started pulling on my blue overalls - I have to wear my uniform to class, even though it makes me look like a funeral scarab with *cLapham drive weLL* written on it instead of the name of the deceased.

When I came to work here, I tried to talk less, I thought everyone would recognize me and look at me with understanding, because my pictures were in all the newspapers - but only for one day, the sensation was short-lived: *a drunken Latinist was responsible for an accident in the south of the county! a professor of Roman history was involved in a story! three people were sent to the hospital!*

after a month I realized that *they* don't read newspapers, *they* watch TV, and *they* didn't show me on TV because they took me to the clinic the same day and locked me in a room away from the journalists

the municipal system, like a pelican, is quick to kill its naughty children, but after waiting for the right amount of time, resurrects them by feeding them its blood - the city threw me out of work after two days, but paid Dr. Mayer handsomely for six months to listen to my dreams.

What other visitorz the new studentz I asked, looking over the weekly class list, there were no girls there, there was hardly anyone there - while I was doing the cloth work



I only have two young men and an elderly pharmacist left on my list.

No, your landlady, snorted Whiteheart, a young, disheveled lady in a jacket, thin and very anxious, Lou, what have you done to her? her fingers were bouncing on the table.

my landlady is a thousand years old, I said, feeling my back getting wet under my uniform, my landlady weighs a thousand pounds and never worries, plus she has blue hair on her head.

Not blue, that's for sure! Whiteheart's secretary said she had hair the color of rotten apples!

the color of raw umber, I corrected myself.

So it wasn't the landlady? Whiteheart puzzled, she deceived me? but she looked like a decent woman, just a bit out of it, she said your name so affectionately, I even thought... but don't think, read Herodotus, I said, going behind the screen. and pulling down the damn jumpsuit, *deceitful people, deceitful clothes.*

\*\*\*

why she wrote her diary at night, hurriedly, confusing names, twisting dates, composing her inane bookish sins-is it so that I would go up to her bedroom, put my hand under her pillow, and read? so that I would fall in bondage to the text, the finely planted letters like birds on wires, to be confused, addicted to green and red ink, like an opium addict, like the last fool.

I thought about it as I drove the car out of Whiteheart's garage, started it with Whiteheart's key, drove under the windows of the office where I'd left Whiteheart, stunned by my insolence, and turned onto the noon Old Clapham Street, littered with trucks.

Why did she lead me by the nose, accustomed me to the cold taste of unspoken speech, was it so that I should stay with her and let myself be tormented, so that I should live with her, give her wormwood like a curl of hair for a headache, thyme like an ear for a pain in the ears, so that I should stay at all-z

That's what I was thinking as I turned right at the junction with Lambeth Road, passing Chelsea Embankment and turning back at the Hogarth Lane traffic circle.

why did she come to London and come to Whitehart's, pretending to be God knows who, and ask about me-and from whom! from that office-balore who opens his lazy eye only to let out a cloud of noxious smoke.

What an indiscretion! thought I all the one hundred and eighty-nine miles to Carmarthen, I only noticed I had passed the port-tel-bot when I ran out of gas.

why she was looking for me - me who had robbed her twice, gone through her laundry, sniffed her letters, laughed at her notes, pushed her into bed with the voluptuous sea snail Saunders - what a bed! a table, an unwashed kitchen table - and left her alone on the edge of despair, me who had resembled a pelican in the desert of her own moderation, me who had *made a wager on her*.

I thought of this as I turned left at Wishgard Circle, but I realized it in time, and returning to Sands Terrace, I passed the stumpy antique elm torsos of the long Harbor Street, and rolled swiftly down the hill to the sea.

eighteen degrees outside, five and a half hours on the road, the flickering numbers above the car mirror told me.

the last time you got behind the wheel, it was a good deal more than that, lou, I said to myself, and your windows were fogged up - a policeman is about to come out of the harbor gate, and you'll go to jail for four years for violating a court order.

it's simple - she realized I had the pot and was coming to get it!

I must return what I took without asking, as the mean one took the sacred honey from the heart of the rock guarded by the hun- ice, as Jack Daugherty took the red cap of the scaly mer- rowe to release the captive souls from the bottom of the sea, but those two at least had a reason for which they were not ashamed, - but I have whatz

when I stopped on High Newport Road, the car smelled as gray as Zeus's lightning, I walked about two hundred yards to catch my breath, the *maple* gate was locked, but I was getting used to that by now

I pressed the bell button and leaned my forehead against the wall: Roman masonry, solid as a Damascus gate, open it, or I'll fall.

Look in your diary, Sasha, it's the Ides of August! I am a slave of Gerhardt Mayer, carpenter and clothier, and today I have a slave holiday, *servorshm dies*, so I've come to the Aventine hill.

Open up, diana.

## SASHA SONLEY'S DIARY. 2008

*Your Egyptian creeps  
are breeding in your Egyptian mud  
from the rays of your Egyptian sun.*

The indigo and sienna pollen is dissolved in the autumn air, inhaled just after the rain, as if you were entering a pottery workshop, such as still exist on the road to Caldbran Castle, where the potter is always wearing a knee-length cloth apron or a satin robe, and the prehistoric kiln stinks of bitter smoke.

The landlord frowns and watches you twirl a cup of that green color called prasgreen in your hands, and the

right - he looks like the great-grandmother of green, stern and te-men in the face.

When I was learning to paint, I ran out of green paint faster than the others, and perhaps white paint too, although I was a little frightened by the combination of the words *lead* and *whitewash* - I immediately imagined a painter with a bluish-gray face or a bullet from a dueling pistol flying through the white skies.

I stopped drawing in ninety-three-it was a winter Sunday-I came home, opened the door to my room, and saw a pile of brightly colored worms wriggling on the wooden floor and a pleased Edna sitting on the windowsill with her feet up.

The paints were neatly squeezed out of all the tubes, the empty tubes lying in the wastebasket, puddles of color in all the corners. When I counted to twelve in my mind and asked Junior what she was doing, she silently pointed to the freshly painted vase in the middle of my desk.

White bone china, underglaze painting, imperial factory.

It was the only thing left of Mom's mom, and now my mom, too, except for a box of out-of-print books. Edna painted the vase a dark, shining herringbone gold and stuck a holly leaf in it.

- She's as good as new now," my sister said proudly, "Merry Christmas, Alix!

\*\*\*

*... the gods have cotton legs because of our unbelief.*

I think they called it "Maples" out of a spirit of contradiction, because there were none. There were ash trees, alders, a sycamore with a spotted bare trunk at the gate, a four-

re lime trees on the sides of the garden path, hazel and honeysuckle, and no maples.

Mom said it was the runes, but I didn't really believe it, she didn't care about the runes-just a toy, not like Deirdre, that leather pouch with the ties was a lover and a friend.

I'd rather believe in some wild omen, like putting a baby through the branches of a maple tree so that the child wouldn't get sick and would live a long life. Or that the maple tree is an enchanted man who covers his face with five-fingered leaves. Or that the hieroglyph *maple* consists of the meanings of *de-revo* and *wind*, which is a good reason my mother liked to listen to the noise of the leaves in the crowns, and she used to make me listen, sitting me on the wide window sill in her bedroom.

Mama could think of anything, her head was filled with beliefs, the crunch of bluish pebbles, lines of an unknown poem, seagulls' cries, calligraphy, jerks of myths, the rumble of the night sea, the mabinogoy, the voices she spoke to.

My head now looks like my mother's, and I have another reason to call "Maples" maples: this tree is instantly empty of cold winds, can crumble in a single fall day, even in a single fall hour.

Another thing is Junior, she has a strong head, and if we were to name our dwelling after her, we would choose a calanium bush: *Vi£shrvshm Lavtava*, blond, lush, grows anywhere and is studded with poisonous black berries all winter long.

I'd like to know what kind of tree Fenya will look like. the three of them to a hotel, pack up their books, their dresses, the rest of their mother's china, and leave on some ferry, as I'm sure the London smarty-pants Luellin Elderbury did.

Without him there were no trees, no wind, and you could sit on the window sill all night long. Without him and without the herbalist, who now lives with him, but no one knows where he lives.

Maybe he found his Baxford, or maybe he went through the tall doors, looked around a bit, and came back. When I think of those doors, I think of the painted temple fusumas from my mother's album. They must have maple on them, too, or gilded cherry, but cherry is a must. My mother had been collecting albums about Japan for a long time, but she never got around to going there.

And I collect voices, crackles, rustles, hums and *whispers, whistles and pops*, but I never get around to writing it all down properly.

When I wake my sister up, the first thing I do is to show her the calamus bush, then the poppies and violets on the north wall, and then her motel behind the alpine slide.

See, I say, how many of your deaths in my garden, and you're still alive.

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*...Immortal gods cannot be strangers to each other, Even when great space separates them.*

July twenty-ninth.

— The past wasn't dead, it hadn't even passed. I wanted you to die in your sleep because I couldn't forgive you," I wrote to Junior when she finally woke up and demanded an explanation. It's a good thing I don't talk anymore; it keeps things short and doesn't go into detail. You can always pretend to run out of ink or boo-maga.

The youngest read and looked at me curiously. It was a little dark in the bedroom, but I could see that her cheekbones were pink.

— Just think about it," I wrote, filling her mug with themed tea, "you come here as if nothing had happened,

after you've been missing for four years. Half the village is sure you're buried in my garden!

— In our garden," Junior corrected me, resting her chin on my shoulder and looking at her notebook, but I continued writing as if I hadn't heard:

— While you were lying up here like a moth pupa, I changed my mind. I don't want you or your daughter. I think you should leave.

— Actually, Fenya and I can stay here as long as we want," she said, pushing the cup away. - I've had my fill of your potion, thank you.

— No, you can't," I wrote, "I'm getting married the other day, and we'll be cramped here, the four of us.

— No, we can," Junior threw back the blanket, got up easily, and walked to the window. - And you're not getting married. I'm getting married. Listen, Alix, I'm getting annoyed with this new way of yours, the way you walk around with a notebook around your neck. You don't have to play the mute Grail Keeper with me.

I stared at her back, enjoying the grumpy voice I'd forgotten. My girl. There was a reason I'd read to her as a child, holding her back with lollipops and promises or just locking the door.

Good thing I hadn't made Junior the sixth and seventh teas; who would I be fighting with now, I thought. Besides, her back and shoulders had thinned so much in the last few days that in some places you could see the old girl, like Osiris in a heather trunk, no, like Excalibur's sword inside a rock!

I wanted to tell her about Saunders and the kitchen table, and the ex-fiancé's name stung my tongue so much that I could hardly keep from breaking my old voto de silencio.

And to write about such things - the paper will not erase and no ink will be enough.

I also wanted to say that ever since she woke up, I've been having a hard time keeping from kicking her out, I've been

I just felt sorry for the brooding Fenja, hardly washed up after her long journey. I also wanted to say that I knew a man who wouldn't even look at *her*, *who* had eyes the color of unroasted coffee and made Saunders Branagh look like an Ethiopian plantation handyman, like that.

I also wanted to say that while Pharaoh's daughters could only tolerate men who were their brothers around them, I seem to be different: I can't tolerate only one female character - my sister.

- Come on, I know it's going to be okay," she said suddenly, glancing at me over her shoulder, just like in the picture Saunders had stolen. - Don't worry, sister, the war will be over, and we'll all win. I dreamed it.

So I did not keep her in a poppy slumber in vain: who knows, perhaps she not only shrank in size, but, like Septimius Severus, dreamed of a prophetic horsez

## LOUFERS CLUB GUESTBOOK. 2008

*Marcus writes:*

Hey, is anybody here? I got a letter from Junior! His grandmother took him to his father's and he'll have to go to a school for mining kids in the fall, that's what he said. He also said he was without Internet, so he had to go to a café and pay a pound and a half to write a couple of letters.

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*Spiderman writes:*

He's out of town for good. It's a little dull without Junior. Although I agree with the Daily News, the baby was overdone, especially since it wasn't her baby at all.



*Marcus writes:*

What do you mean? He's hatched out of an egg.

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*Spiderman writes:*

It's not him, it's her - it's the girl. I heard the girl's mother talking to her in Lamia's garden, and I was just passing by and climbed a tree out of habit. The mother looked strange too, like she was stoned and hadn't washed her hair in six months. It was a funny picture - Lamia came out on the porch and made signs to the unwashed chick, like, "Come over here. And she didn't even p r e t e n d t o notice, waiting for someone to talk to her in a human way, so Lamia couldn't stand it, went up to her with a notebook, wrote something briefly on it and almost shoved it in her face. And she grabbed her arm and held her. They're h a v i n g fun, Beavis!

*Writes eye\_for\_eye:*

Holy crap, I thought no one was even in the chat room at the time. Hey, everybody! Lamia closed the hotel last week for technical reasons.

*Marcus writes:*

She's annoying everyone with her dumbness! No one wants to sleep in her bed or eat her breakfast, so there's a technical reason. Soon she'll go bankrupt and sell her hotel with the corpses in the garden. I'd buy it myself, but I splurged on Resident Evil the other day.

*Let shs fivd edva's rottev skshLL.*

*Spiderman writes:*

Evil was boring, the second Prince of Persia was better. I wouldn't talk about the corpses in the garden if I were you, Marcus, it was your idea to dig everything up, it still hurts.

I don't know what she wrote there - I don't have Zeiss binoculars, but they were arguing in a funny way - one of them was writing something poisonous quickly, and the other one was reading quickly and yelling at her. And the girl stands next to them and looks up at them.

## LUELLIN'S DIARY

The ancient gods were no better at quarreling than humans, I thought, stubbornly holding my finger on the white, piano-like bell button.

The Sumerian Inanna, raped in a dream by a gardener, became angry and turned all the springs into blood, so that even the trees began to ooze blood, and then she descended to the earthly realm and appeared naked before her sister, but the latter took her and killed her - hung her on a hook.

why it won't open

if sasha's sister came back, they would definitely quarrel, because the past is the most painful reason for quarrels, and it is impossible to get rid of it, just as it is impossible to get rid of the evil that has been done, it is clear that water turned into blood will not become water, but it is possible - it is possible! - to turn away and not drink, I must explain this to Sasha, I must teach her

why it won't open

I picked up a handful of stones and threw them over the wall, for which she had come to London. Sasha sonley - in a pink headscarf drinking tea with whiteheart what the hell was going on here while I was wiping dusty mirrors in my father's house in a back Ford what was going on here that she had to come looking for *me*

There was a crunch of gravel behind the wall, a clang of iron bolts, and the right gate swung open.

a pale, frightened Sasha stood on the garden path in a man's shirt thickly stained with blood on his chest like a Parzival cloak.

She held her hands in front of her like a surgeon waiting to be poured out of a jug, her hands were up to her elbows in some bloody mucus, hello, I said, she stepped aside to let me pass, then turned and walked uncertainly towards the house.

I followed her, repeating to myself everything I wanted to say, like lines from the Iliad before an exam, heavy red water rumbling in my temples: she did it after all, she did it, poor girl, *tell me, Euthyphron, what do you call holy and what unholy? - I call holy what I'm doing now, which is to pursue the murderer.*

\*\*\*

I'm only a driving instructor, not an *inspector*, *I'm not* allowed to drive, but I do, that's the spirit of contradiction! I moved my lips, looking at the back of Alexandra's head with her hair combed high, I wanted to teach at least something, I wanted to remain a teacher! I wanted to stop being afraid, you know.

but I've become a bad teacher, and I've become even more afraid, but you, Sasha, don't be afraid-" I said it out loud, and she stumbled, a gray pebble flew out from under her suede shoe-"you don't be afraid, whatever you do, I'm here, and I'm on your side.

now you've *really* killed her, I thought it would end up like this.

I'll help you no matter what happens, because I'm sorry for you, and - I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you, I'm tired of lying to you.

it turns out the spirit of contradiction is a bronze nail! said I, taking off my coat and rolling up the sleeves of my shirt, the nail,

plugged-

which was in the vein of the Cretan monster Thalos, they pulled it out, and colorless blood flowed out, divine ichor, now I am afraid it will all come out of me little by little.

Sasha walked silently down the corridor, and I talked and could not stop, her silence helped me and frightened me, we reached the dining-room, and I saw a familiar pistol, darkly shining in the middle of a long table, *wipe it with a rag!* then I saw a blue Persian rug with a falconry and a border of leaves - the rug was splattered with what looked like lead dust, and the splatter stretched in a dirty path to the corner of the room, where something dark, dead, bent, was lying

Macbeth's *blood I had come so far* smeared red rust over my eyes, I grimaced and fell silent

\*\*\*

Sasha knelt down in front of the body and raised her gaunt face to me, I couldn't look down, I just couldn't take my eyes off her mouth, it was so swollen and bright, there it was, the antique purple of the sea snail!

get me some tissues, they're on the kitchen table, produce a purple mouth, cu-she has a fever, she's still dripping!

I looked where I was afraid to look, and saw a hot mouth open and a **s w o l l e n** tongue trembling in it.

She looked at me angrily, and I went into the kitchen, not feeling the walls and doors - just on a hunch, I saw gauze, absorbent cotton, scissors and a bottle of iodine on the table, I put it all in my pockets and carried it back.

When I entered the dining-room, I saw Sasha's back bent, she was doing something with the dog and whispering in his ear, I came close-

Here are some napkins, please, Sasha shuddered, reached out without looking, took the gauze and with difficulty slipped it under the immobile, heavy cushi.

can you forgive me? I asked, feeling my lips turn frosty, now I know how to do it: to fight madness is to have a vent in your head so that it flies in and out when it wants to, not to hide from it in the corners of your mind, pretending it's not happening to you.

bring the scissors, she said, pulling **s o m e t h i n g** slippery and seemingly inanimate out of the dog, her muffled voice seemed unfamiliar, though I had heard it in my dream, I quickly put the scissors in her outstretched hand, she took the inanimate thing, cut it open, pulled out a small, wet, shiny dog and dropped it right on the carpet.

There was a dark stain under the puppy, and I bent down and put a tissue under it, its eyes squeezed shut like it was scared to death, or maybe it just didn't want to look at me

my guides have always been here with me, I said, gasping for air, one is called *neglect*, and that's your father, and the other is *unforgiveness*, and that's my father, I've lived with them so l o n g that I've forgotten what it's like to be alone, you know?.

I think there will be another one, said Sasha, bending down to Koushi's belly and stroking it with her hand, yes, there it is, it's already shown, she laughed and looked up at me: I thought she was just fat, but she was walking and walking and suddenly lay down in the corner and scrubbed her paws under her, and then

\*\*\*

Come on, hold these, she licked them, they're the cleanest," I heard and realized that I had lost consciousness for a few minutes with my back against the living room wall.

I'm sorry, I've had a hard day, I said, I had to drive two hundred miles, I wanted to tell you, Sasha, that your coming to London... She handed me some hot, wet puppies and I fell silent, standing with them like an antique figure with two bunches of grapes.

What Londonz look, it's the third, said Sasha, my God, he's not breathing! she shook the puppy hard, holding its head down, the bone comb slipped out, the hair came loose and fell on her face.

Look, I said, forgiving is like putting back the stolen idunn apples, without which even the gods grew old and died, you knowz

Sasha shook the puppy silently and firmly, her lips pale, as if she was short of air, God knows what your soul is clogged with while you don't *forgive*, I could see that she couldn't hear, but I couldn't stop, life like a kobold gives you pinkish cobalt instead of silver, and you dig and dig your mine, finding more and more ingots of old anger.

alive! Sasha said and breathed into the puppy's nose.

you are digging, I know, digging and angry, you are like the Corsican fisherman who wrote *che La mia ferita sia mortaLe*, not realizing that it is his wound, his own!

\*\*\*

may my *what will* be fatalz Sasha asked absent-mindedly, the puppy in her arms stirred and made a faint bird whistle.

Well, yes, yes, I speak too viscous, too picturesque, but that's because I'm crazy about the sound of your voice! It's not like the one I heard in my dream, I said, putting the puppies back on the rug, one of them was already moving his paws and the other was like a smooth black bean.

they left me, both of them! and I thought of you, for if it had not been for your anger, I would not have gone to Baxford, and now that I have got-

coming from there, it's so strange and fresh to me, like in a thicket of wet wood, after a night's rain, you know?

you've been to Ireland? come on, lick it! she put the puppy up to the dog's face, looked at me with sudden interest, and turned away again.

Sasha, talk to me, she's already had her babies, not a dozen of them inside!

All right, all right, don't shout like that, I can hear you, you've gone to Baxford, so what next? Sasha leaned over to the exhausted sheep's wool pile and shrugged her shoulders: she seemed to be asleep.

Hey! I felt like I was choking again, listen, Sasha, it's important, I've been there! I've been to Baxford, to this island of apples, there's no apples there, but there's my father's grave, I've been there, and now they've both left me alone, the clothier and the carpenter, you hear, both of them!

I only have names for two puppies, and there are three here, said Sasha, stretching out, wiping her hands with gauze and looking reproachfully at the dog, let's stay here for now, Lou, in case there's another one?

you never know how many

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## NOTES AND COMMENTS

Page 7. *Seeing the dog's necks bristled with serpents menacingly*  
... verses from the sixth book of Publius Virgil Maron's Aeneid.

*Hugin and Munin* are Odin's ravens, his messengers and constant companions. "The two ravens sit on his shoulders and whisper in his ear about everything they see or hear <...>. > He sends them to fly over the world at daylight, and they return at breakfast" ("The Vision of Gulvi", 59).

Page 8. *Farmer Dinmont's Six Terriers* - Farmer Dandy Dinmont is one of the characters in the novel by Walter Scott "Guy Mannering." He kept six fearless terriers named Old Pepper, Old Mustard, Young Pepper, Young Mustard, Little Pepper and Little Mustard.

... *I've been at the pogost for thirty years, since I was a boy* - the gravedigger's words from Act 5 of Shakespeare's Hamlet.

...*Homeric line* - meaning a stanza from the seventh song of "The Odyssey" (translated by V.A. Zhukovsky):

Of skillful work of the skillful god Hephaestus, dogs  
Guardians of the house of King Alkinoi, kind to Zeus:  
They were immortal and did not grow old with the  
passing of the years.

Page 9. ...*Where is the second most joyful of this earth?* - words from the holy book of Zoroastrianism "Avesta" (Videvdāt. Earth. Transl. from Avest. V.Y. Kryukova).

Page 10 *Moty Doug and Church Grim* - Legends and legends of the British Isles tell of ghostly guard dogs. The Church Grim is a spirit **t h a t** guards graveyards against witches and other evil forces. Moty Doug from the Isle of Man foretold death to whoever saw him.

Page 10...*It was the bee that awakened the Hittite god Telepinu* - according to Hittite myth, the fertility god Telepinus.

Once he disappeared, causing a drought, the mother of the gods, Han-nahanna, sent a bee to find Telepinus. The bee found Telepinus asleep and stung him to wake him up.

Page 14 *Statue of St. Hippolytus* - discovered in 1551 near Tivoli. It is a figure sitting on a marble pedestal without head and upper body. Until 1959, the statue was kept in the Lateran Museum in Rome, but Pope John moved it to the lobby of the Vatican Library.

*There is no luck for brides and grooms until June ides* - lines from Ovid's *Fasti*.

Page 15 ... .. *of the day when the wolf will break the chain....* - Fenrir is the spawn of Loki, a monstrous wolf who, according to the Lore of Lore, will swallow the sun ("Völva's Prophecy").

*... and when I go to bed I never know to what lands I shall be carried before dawn*" refers to Alyson Pearson, a woman accused of witchcraft and burned on May 28, 1586, in Byrehill, Ireland. As Yates writes in *Rosa ALchemica*, she was condemned because "when she went to bed, she never knew to what lands she would be carried away before dawn".

*Kibela (Kiveva, Dindimena, Idean Mother, Great Mother of the Gods)* is a goddess of Phrygian origin, close in her functions to the Titanide Rhea. She was usually depicted on a golden chariot with a jagged crown on her head. She always appeared surrounded by wild lions and panthers, wild Cribantes, and mad Cribantine servants.

Page 17....*Acanthaster star (Acavthaster pLavci)* - predatory  
The starfish, also called the crown of thorns. It feeds on corals, turning them into lifeless skeletons.

*Besides, the Lottery of my destiny £ars me the right of choosivg* - "Besides, my destiny, like a lottery, forbids me the right of voluntary choice" (William Shakespeare. "The Merchant of Venice". Act 2, Scene 1. Translated by T. Shchepkina-

Kupernik).

Page 17 ... the *snow-white cow Io* is the beloved of Zeus, whom he turned into a cow to hide from his wife Hera. Hera discovers this and sends a gadfly to Io, which stings her and drives her across all countries and continents.

Page 20. *and spit in your leif!* - It is believed that beans were used as a household remedy against witches and ghosts: a person would put a bean in his mouth and then spit it at a guest. At the Roman feast of Lemuria, each householder would spit beans behind his back with the words, "I protect myself and my family," to keep the lemurs, or ghosts, away from him (Robert Graves, "The White Goddess").

*...all that nature around for doom and evil has brought forth.*  
(Lou-  
Can. "Pharsalia," vi. 670-684).

*...Which means I'm a useful witch tree myself* - the new Luellina familia (Elderberry) translates to *elderberry*.

Page 23 ... *...there are also among them those who speak slowly, with stammering, showing distracted thought ....* - as Emanuel Swedenborg writes about the clairvoyants in his work "Heavenly Secrets" (*Arcava ceLestia*).

Page 24. *like Zanni*, the Italian servant character. of the Commedia dell'Arte. Arlecchino, Brighella, Pierino and others belong to the category of *Zanni*. The characteristic traits of a Zanni are greediness and ignorance.

Page 34. the *silver hand of King Nuadu* is a character of the Celt. He lost his hand at the Battle of Moitour (Magus Tuired). Later, the healer god Dian Keht made him a silver hand, as it was unacceptable to rule the gods with a physical defect.

Page 35. *Whoever is not colored is just stupid* - this is how South American Indians explained the meaning of body coloring to Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Page 35. ...*from the eyes of a dragon buried by Ludd at the foot of a hill* - a story from the Mabinogion, King Ludd buried two dragons that were vexing Britain under the hill on which the fortress stood, causing the fortress to become unstable.

Page 36....*But if you dare to enter, beware of to eat their food or drink their wine*, according to Celtic lore, to warn travelers who dared to enter the heather hill, the home of the fae.

In ancient mythology, *Geryon is* a three-bodied and three-headed giant who reigned on the island of Erythea. In Dante's Divine Comedy, *Geryon is* the guardian of the eighth circle, where deceivers are punished. Dante here follows the tradition that "G e r y o n , who reigned in the Balearic Islands, with his gentle face, affectionate speeches, and all his w a y s , charmed the guests and then killed those who trusted his hospitality".

Page 37. *I'm afraid that everything is falling into disrepair....* - lines from Alexander Vvedensky's poem "I wish I were a beast." (1934).

*Dwergs* - also dwarfs, zwergs - are mountain dwarves in Celtic mythology.

Page 38. *No meat on the plates, no milk in the jugs* - according to a legend told in the so-called Harleian Manuscript, when the bard Tuatha De Danaan came to the court of King Bres, he hoped to receive a proper welcome. When the bard did not wait for a treat, he branded Bres with a poem of his own.

Page 47....*Sicilian twin demons - paliks*, in ancient Greek mythology, two spirits of the sulfur springs near Etna.

Page 50. *I know, Odin, where thy eye is hidden*.....words from "Völva's Divinations" (Elder Edda).

Page 52....*I'm the proprietress of a fine tavern called Ferry's - those*

the lines belong to the sixteenth-century Welsh poetess Gwervil Mechain.

Page 55. *The fools rush in where the angels fear to tread -*

"A fool always throws himself there, // Where an angel will not dare to take a step", lines from Alexander Pope's poem "Experience of Criticism" (translated by A. Subbotin).

Page 56....*like Lupe Velez in the Warhol movie - here has-*

The film is Andy Warhol's *Lupe*, shot in December 1965. The movie is about the actress Lupe Velez, who wanted to die beautifully, but died by falling headfirst into a toilet bowl.

Page 57. *La donna serpente* is Carlo Gozzi's play *The Serpent Woman*, written in 1762.

Page 62. ....*If with a bold hand I stroke him, and he does not po feels.* It refers to a famous passage from the

"Satyricon (ch. 88) by Petronius. If with a bold hand I stroke him and he does not feel it," I said, "I will give him two of the best fighting cocks. At this promise the sweet child himself drew near to me, fearing, I think, lest I myself should fall asleep. "

Page 63. *old Eumolpus* is the poet Eumolpus, one of the heroes of the

"Satyricon", with his friend Encolpius gets to Crotona, where he pretends to be a wealthy man who is looking for heirs. The Crotonians discover Eumolpus' cunning and throw him off a cliff.

Page 65 ...*he named me after a dead man lying in a patterned coffin in backwater Llanrwst -* Luellin's father named his son after King Llywelyn the Great (1173-1240), who ruled Wales from 1208. In 1230 Llywelyn had problems with his wife Joanna. William de Braos appeared at his castle at Easter, and Joanna cheated on her husband with an English nobleman. On May 2, de Braos was hanged on the moor and Joanna was placed under house arrest.

Page 67. *Dur-Sharrukin* was an Assyrian city built by King Sargon II in 713-707 BC; probably abandoned by the Assyrians in the early 7th century BC. It is now the site of Khorsabad in Iraq.

*We will sit down with you wind* - lines from the poem "I wish I was a beast..." by Alexander Vvedensky. (1934).

Page 68. *There once was a Lochyger named Stepeh.....* - James Joyce's limerick.

Page 79...*are sitting on a magic chain glapnir*, a chain that- The dwarves used mountain roots, cat footsteps, women's fights, bird saliva, fish voices, and bear tendons to shackle Fenrir.

Page 87. *Dr. Stefanus Chrysolitus, newly arrived*  
*I'm here.....*Sasha is reading Daniel's Diary of a Plague Year.  
Defoe.

Page 88. *Thomas More* (1478-1535) was a humanist and political figure of the 16th century, author of the novel-treatise "Utopia". Raphael *Gitlodey* - a traveler, on whose behalf the story in Utopia is told. The *Siphogrants* are elected officials on the island of Utopia.

*Llech Laver* - according to Welsh lore, this stone was built into the bridge leading to St. David's Cathedral. One day a funeral procession was crossing the bridge and the stone decided to insert its own words into the mourners' speeches. When it tried to speak, the stone broke apart.

Page 92. *Her mortal pallor was transformed into bloodless leaves.* lines from Book 4 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Page 98 ... *the acorn around Wendy's neck....* - Wendy, a character in D. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, was not killed by an arrow shot at her because the arrow hit an acorn, a gift from Peter Pan.



Page 99. ...*the old woman Callagh Bera*.... - in Irish mythology, the creator of mountains. She was carrying stones in her hem, but the strap broke off, the stones came out of her hem, and so mountains were formed.

Page 101. *Ixion* - in Greek mythology - the son of King Phlegias, known for his impudent and impious deeds. Pursued Hera with shameful proposals. Zeus deceived Ixion and instead of Hera he gave him a cloud like the latter. Ixion and Nephela are descended from the Centaurus family.

Page 104. *Aranyani* - dr.-ind. *Aravyavi*, lit. "forest", from *agapua*, "forest", "wilderness", in ancient Indian mythology, the goddess of the forest, mother of forest animals.

Page 117. *Shame on anyone who thinks ill of it!* - "Honni soit qui mal y pense," the motto of the English Order of the Garter established by King Edward III.

Page 120. *John's Oil* - According to J. Fraser, "John's oil" was ordinary mistletoe or a decoction made from it (The Golden Bough, ch. LXV).

Page 121 ...*the ring of Gyges, the Lydian king* - the magic ring of the shepherd Gyges, which made the wearer invisible. It was thanks to this ring that Gyges became king. Mentions of this ring can be found in the Neoplatonists - Porphyry, Iamblichus, Agrippa.

Page 130. ... *mesmerization of the heart* ... - a term used by the Italian anatomist and physiologist Luigi Galvani (1737-1798), which James Joyce uses in his novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

...*the white horse of the goddess Epona*.... - the Gaelic goddess Epona. Her name comes from the Gaelic word "epos", which means "horse", but can also be translated as "magic mare" or "Mare Goddess". White mares were particularly favored by Epona.

Page 130. ....*lent money to each other on the condition of repayment.*  
*The Roman writer of the 1st century A.D. Valerius Maximus wrote about the Celts: "It is said that they lend each other sums that will be repaid in the other world, so convinced are they that people's souls are immortal. I would call them insane if these pants-clad barbarians did not believe in the same thing that the Greek Pythagoras believed in."*

Page 131.....*a flag with a Red Dragon on it, called Ddraig Goch - the coat of arms of Wales features a red dragon. In the corner of the crest is a leek flower, one of the local national symbols. The motto "Y ddraig goch ddyry cychwyn" means "The Red Dragon leads the way".*

Page 136. *Anchises, King of the Dardans* - according to legend, Aphrodite was compelled by Zeus to fall in love with Anchises and she lay with him in the guise of a Phrygian princess. At dawn, Aphrodite revealed herself to Anchises and made him promise not to tell anyone what had happened. Anchises did not keep his word and Zeus threw a lightning bolt at him, which Aphrodite deflected with her belt. But this incident did not go unnoticed: he became weak and could no longer walk.

Page 138. *Midah and Airmead* - in Celtic mythology, Midah, son of the god of healing, and Airmead, his daughter, come to the castle of King Nuad. At the gate they meet a one-eyed gatekeeper with a cat in his arms. The gatekeeper, recognizing that the guests are skilled healers, asks them to make a new eye. Midah and Airmid transplant the cat's eye to the gatekeeper. However, the eye has retained the cat's behavior, which makes the patient very uncomfortable.

Page 146. *Who looks at the world as one looks at the eye.*  
Dhammapada, XIII (translated by V. Toporov).

Page 150. *I am Like a peLicav iv the wiLdervess. I am Like av owL iv the desert* - "I have become like a pelican in the desert; I have become like an owl in the ruins" (Psalms, ch. 102, 101:7).

Page 156...*fingers of the boy who ruined the pigeon's nest-*  
*According to a Welsh legend, the stone grabbed the hand of a boy who was trying to destroy the nest of a pigeon living in the church. According to a Welsh legend, the stone grabbed the hand of a boy who was trying to destroy the nest of a pigeon living in the church.*

Page 158. ...*no woman, no man, no life, no feeling-*  
*The motif is characteristic of the Buddhist sutras of the so-called "Ultimate Wisdom" (Prajñāparamita). - A motif characteristic of the Buddhist sutras of the so-called "Ultimate Wisdom" (Prajñāparamita).*

...*three hundred knights live with her. ....*A fragment of Pe-  
The Welsh epic "Mabinogion" is the story of the Redur, son of Evrauk, with the Knight of the Glade or Black Man from the Welsh epic "Mabinogion".

...*the mute maiden at King Arthur's table* - refers to the story from "Mabinogion", when a dwarf at King Arthur's court, who was considered mute, suddenly spoke at the sight of the knight Peredur who came to the castle.

Page 159. ...*having read Armies Prydeiv - Armies Prydeiv, "The History of Britain," a stark prophecy poem, is part of the Book of Ta-liesin along with "The Battle of the Trees."*

*Magh Tuireadh* (Cath Muighe Tuireadh) is a famous subject of Irish sagas. The battle between the tribe of the goddess Danu and the Fomorians took place at Magh Tuireadh.

...*until the stone beneath you shrieks and the lake runs out of Balor's eye* - in Irish mythology, the stone Lea Fal shrieks when the one destined to rule Ireland sits on it. Balor's power lay in his eye, which servants opened with a stick through his eyelid. After his death, Balor's body, according to legend, was hung on a sacred hazel tree, where it poured out its poison and split in two.

Page 160. ...*multiplied you like the plants of the field. ....* words from the Book of Ezekiel 6:17.

Page 161. *expectatio eLshdevdi* - literally: "expectation of being deceived" (*Latin*).

...worse than the helmsman-sleeper Palinurus is a companion and helmsman of Aeneas in Roman mythology. When the Trojan ships sailed from Sicily, Palinurus, standing at the helm, was seized by drowsiness, and he fell overboard. The waves swept him to the shore. Palinurus made it to land, but was captured and killed by the local Lucanians, leaving his body unburied.

Page 171. ....a French painter used up two royal hearts discarded from a tomb in the Abbey of Saint-Denis - burnt ochre, the paint that was the basis for the compositions used to embalm the Bourbon hearts. After the Revolution of 1789, the tombs were looted and the painter Saint-Martin bought two royal hearts to use for the paint.

Page 175. ....and under *Dunbar and under Sterling* - under Dunbar. In the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1296, the Scottish army under "Red" John Comyn was defeated by the English army under John de Warenne. The battle at Stirling Bridge, on the other hand, was won by the Scots under William Wallace.

Page 178 ... ..it is time to wipe with a goose after dinner - the caretaker is referring to the words of Gargantua from François Rabelais' novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Chapter XIII. How the Grand-Gouzier recognized Gargantua's extraordinary intelligence when he shaved the wipe).

*Redgrave*, Stephen Redgrave is a famous English athlete, a multiple Olympic champion in academic rowing.

*O taker, do not take* - Pyramid texts (pyramid of Unis, front room).

Page 181. *purely edgar, son of the duke of gloucester* - in the shek-  
The son of the Duke of Gloucester pretends to be a beggar  
(Bedlam Beggar) so that no one in England will recognize him.

Pages 181-182. The *giantess Tökk* is one of the guises of the god  
Loki.

...*Calech is already rinsing her cloak in Corryvreckan*, the  
weather goddess in Celtic mythology. In late summer, Calech  
rinses her cloak in Corryvreckan, a whirlpool off the western  
coast, and when she shakes it, the hills turn white with snow.

Pg. 182. *ivy crown* - meaning *mortal*.  
*the crown of David ap Griffydd*. The entire prophetic tradition of  
Wales is imbued with the dream of the restoration of a Briton  
kingdom that never really existed. In mockery of these aspirations,  
the last ruler of independent Wales, beheaded in London in 1283,  
was "crowned" with a wreath of ivy before his execution.

Page 187. *Sextus Papinius* - Sextus Papinius, a noble Roman,  
committed suicide. Unable to withstand his mother's sexual  
advances, he threw himself off a cliff.

Page 188. *Bees, your master is dead!* - There is a belief among  
beekeepers that if the owner of an apiary dies, the bees can be  
taken to another apiary by tapping the hive with a stick and  
saying a ritual phrase.

Page 190. *For even the scarlet maple ...* - tanka from the  
Manyoshu Anthology.

Page 194. *Cleobis and Bithenes* were brothers who were  
famous for their strength. One day they pulled their mother's  
chariot and took her to the temple of Juno in Argos, where their  
mother was a priestess. The distance was too great, and when they  
arrived at the temple, they lay breathless. Their mother  
prayed to the goddess to grant her sons "the highest good available  
to men",

and "the young men fell asleep in the sanctuary itself, and never rose again" (Herodotus, 1:31).

Page 195. *...I see my soul's first face ....* - lines from William Butler Yates's *The Death of Cuchulain*.

Page 197. *...I, a dead man, have not a single member that-who would not be a god* - words from chapter VI of the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

Page 199. *...in an old evelyn waugh novel - about mr. Pinfold* - referring to Evelyn Waugh's novel *The Trial of Gilbert Pinfold*.

Page 200. *Toeris* - in the ancient Egyptian pantheon goddess in the guise of a hippopotamus (standing upright on two legs). She was depicted with human hands and breasts.

*...the sky to lower, the earth to suspend.....* quote from "Meta-Apuleius' "Morphosis" (Book 1):

"- You bet! - I said. - What kind of woman is this lord and queen of the tavern?

- A witch," says she, "and a sorceress: she has power to bring down the sky, to suspend the earth, to make streams solid, to melt mountains, to bring out the dead, to bring down the gods, to extinguish the stars, to light up Tartarus itself!"

*...four hundred years ago in London lived a certain Samuel Pepys* - an official of the English Admiralty An English gentleman, Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) held high positions at the court of Charles II. He was nicknamed the Prince of Gossip for his famous diary, full of racy stories. Pepys took great care to write down the names of the dishes and drinks on his menu each day.

*...diary of a certain Robb* - Lord Robb was an amateur sleuth, and his diary is the only source for some of the more colorful and criminal stories of 1810-1820.

Page 205. *Sinclair's Under Milk Wood* ... - "Under the Gray of the Milky Wood," a movie starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, directed by Andrew Sinclair and based on the play by Dylan Thomas.

Page 208.....*illiterate as a singing shepherd* - has- This refers to Cadmon of Whitby (c. 680), who was a shepherd at Whitby Priory. One day someone appeared to him and commanded him to sing. Cadmon began to compose and sing gospel songs in English. He did not know literacy.

...*Plain of Failure* - Cuchulin, the hero of many Irish sagas, traveled to the island of Queen Skatah to learn the art of war from her. The way to the queen was full of obstacles, one of which was the Plain of Failure, covered with swamps.

Page 212. *my soul is raging*. Llewellyn refers to on the words of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "I did not create or accept his words. My voice keeps them out. My soul rages in the darkness of his language.

Page 214. *I laugh, but there is such a sound*. .....a line from Margaret Atwood's story "The Tomb of the Unknown Poet" (Per. L. Eltang).

Page 217. Ben-neeyeh - in Irish and Scottish mythology - a kind of banshee (Irish spirit of death, mourning the death of members of the old families).

Page 228. *From my house to the threshing floor*.....line from poems by Sergei Petrov (Selected Poems. St. Petersburg, 1997).

Page 234. ...*where the witches are, there are the bubbles of the earth!* - famous Shakespeare's lines from the tragedy of *Macbeth* translated by Kroneberg are: "The earth, like water, contains gases -// And these were bubbles-

ri of the earth." However, Shakespeare literally says: "The earth has bubbles like water. // And these (i.e. witches) are of them.

Page 236. ...*I remembered the Irish tale of the pixie* - in Angl- a type of faerie in Lysian folklore. Their favorite p a s t i m e is to drive travelers off the road. The surest way to drive away a pixie is to turn your jacket inside out or show an iron cross.

Page 246. *.The abuser of his neighbor and his possessions is a co-* According to Dante, in the seventh circle of hell languish rapists, including those who abuse their neighbors and their property, i.e. tyrants and robbers. As punishment, they are ordered to boil in a river of blood.

Page 254. ...*wrote virginia wolfe in my favorite book about women* - referring to Virginia Woolf's novel "Miss Sis Dolloway" (1925).

Page 269. ...*the magical coin of the koronaid dwarf*. .....For The coronaid paid their hosts with money, which, although it looked like real money, turned into lumps of ordinary moss as soon as the magical charms wore off.

Page 274. *Look and reason: here is a flea*. .....John Donne "Songs and Sonnets," 1635 (Per. G. M. Kruzhkov).

Page 283. ...*lower the tragic curtain and fold this theat-* In Apuleius' time, *the theatrical curtain was not pulled open at the beginning of a performance, but retracted under the stage*. In Apuleius' time, the theatrical curtain was not pulled apart before the beginning of a performance, but retracted under the stage. The screen is translated as an additional curtain used between acts.

Page 284. ...*the very openings for the flow of nephrite of the jet stream*. the terms of Taoist inner alchemy, defined- that have been reinterpreted in sexual practices.



Page 285. The *cow Glasgavlen* - in Irish mythology, a magic cow that fell from the sky and gave milk to all who needed it until a wicked woman put her in a sieve, after which the cow left Ireland forever.

Page 286. Plutos, the *blind old man*, is the god of wealth in Greek mythology. In Aristophanes' comedy *Plutos*, he is depicted as a blind old man who is unable to distribute wealth fairly. The horn of plenty is an attribute of Plutos.

...*throw mistletoe spear at people - it is about* the mistletoe spear, which Loki put in the hand of the blind god Hed, and the latter, throwing it, pierced through Baldr, the son of Odin.

Page 292. *Lshmev ejshs o£sscshgat* - "consciousness darkens", lit. "(Latin) - medieval medical terminology.

...*I was numb with confusion, as if Aeneas in the fourth book of the Aeneid* - in the fourth book of the *Aeneid*, Mercury appears to Aeneas at the command of Jupiter, which made Aeneas "numb, seized with confusion, his hair was disturbed with fright, and his voice was broken in his throat" (Virgil. "Aeneid", book 4, 280).

Page 293. *How much faith there is in him on whose hands the ze-pi rings* - Juvenal. "Satire," VI, 511-591.

"*The Voyage to Laputa*" is the third installment of Jonathan Swift's "The Travels of Lemuel Gulliver."

Page 297. *Portia was the daughter of Cato the Younger and wife of Brutus*. According to ancient accounts, after the death of Brutus she decided to commit suicide and used as a remedy burning coals, which were then in every house.

Page 298. *Dresser - dresser*, a wooden mallet used in the manual assembly of joinery.

Pg. 300. *Vaiv was the help of mav* - Give us help in the midst of affliction, for the defense of man is vanity. Psalms of David.

Psalms (59:13). Here it is distorted, in the original: "Vain is the help of man.

Page 300. *Echidna* is a demonic half-woman half-snake, daughter of Tartarus and Gaea. From Typhon and Geryon, Echidna gave birth to many monsters: Chimera, Cerberus, the Lernaean Hydra, and the Nemean Lion.

*I have no name: I am less than two days old* - stanzas from William Blake's poem "The Joyful Child": "- I am only two days old. // I have no name yet. // What shall I call you? I am glad to be alive. // "So call me joy!" (Translated by S. Marshak).

Page 302. *Blue Men in the Long and Cheyent Straits* - in Scottish folklore, the so-called "Blue Men of the Minch", creatures that lived in the strait between the Isle of Long and the Cheyent Islands. When they surfaced, they would sink ships, and to get rid of them, the captain had to quickly answer their last word in rhyme.

Page 304 *...fictional panther* - in the *Physiologus* and also in Pliny, the panther is represented as a multicolored animal that attracts others with its tart odor.

*...Tusculan Conversation...* - *The Tusculan Conversations* were written by Cicero in the fall of 45 B.C. and are dedicated to Marcus Junius Brutus, who went down in history as the leader of the conspiracy against Julius Caesar. The main problem discussed in the Conversations is the problem of eudaemonia, i.e., a happy life and the means to achieve it.

Page 307. *Please take special care of the house while the family is away...* - quoted from Smollett's *The Voyage of Humphrey Klinker* (1771. Translated by A.V. Krivtsova).

Page 309. *...wharf of repose and altar of mercy* are words from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, or the *Golden Donkey* (Book 11).

Page 308. *Not to make me dwell in darkness as those who have been long dead* - David's Psalm 143:3. In the Russian translation (143:3-4): "The enemy pursues my soul, has trampled down my life into the ground, has forced me to live in darkness like those long dead, and my spirit is dull in me, my heart is numb in me."

Page 311. *Fenella* - refers to the French composer D.F. Aubert's opera "Fenella" ("The Mute of Portici"), written to a libretto by E. Scribe. The part of the mute girl Fenella is mimic.

*Lazarillo de Tormes* - "La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades," a Spanish tale published anonymously at Burgos.

...A Journal of the Plague Year - Daniel Defoe's book "A Journal of the Plague Year, containing observations and reminiscences of the most remarkable events, both public and purely personal, which occurred in London during the last great ordeal in 1665" (Daniel Defoe. A Journal of the Plague Year).

...like that dastardly Venetian who got hold of the manuscript of Cicero's treatise *De gloria*, using the best parts of it in his writings.

Page 312. ...*cinnamon sticks* - Emperor Nero, after killing his wife Sobina, ordered all the cinnamon in Rome to be collected and burned during the ritual funeral.

Page 317. *The walls are white. The smell of lime. Everything was, nothing came true....* - stanza from a poem by Bakhyt Kenzheev.

Page 324. *Father Arnall* is the preacher in J. S. Joyce's novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Page 328. *Manannan's Fortress* - in Celtic mythology - a fortress-prison built of human bones,

bound together with lime mortar. Manannan threw in there those who, in his opinion, deserved an inferior fate.

Page 328. *A sho pevv fit povt* - "He who is the head is the bridge" (a medieval Welsh proverb).

Page 333. The *cat ahhed having forgotten the verb....* - a stanza from a poem by Henri Volokhonsky.

Pages 336-337. *and she could have thrown her a scone with sleeping pills in it.*

*I am referring* to the scone mixed with potions and honey with which *the Sibyl of Cum* put Kerber's dog to sleep (Virgil. "Aeneid", VI, 419-423).

Page 337. *...sleeps, turned into a red fly, the one that hid in the folds of young Aengus's cloak* - characters from the Irish sagas in the cycle of "The Mating of Etain".

*Ereshkigal* - in Sumerian-Akkadian mythology, the goddess ruler of the underworld. *Princess Aisha* - Alain Rob-Grillet in his essay "Angelica, or Charms" describes an engraving he saw in the book "Capital Punishment in Turkey at the end of the XVII century": "The girl lies with her tense legs spread wide apart; the victim is in unbelievable agony, for the plowshare, pointed at the end, passing between her spread legs, begins to penetrate into the secluded reddish thickets that conceal her pubis".

Page 341. *Ruadh, son of Rigdonn* is the hero of the Irish saga *Ruadh*, "gathered men and went in three ships to meet the son of the king of Lochlann beyond the sea, and he saw nine of the most beautiful women in all the world, three holding each ship. The women brought Ruadh with them, and he spent one night with each of them on dry ground or beds of bronze".

Page 345. *if one local poet is to be believed* - has-  
I'm referring to Dylan Thomas, whose story describes the Christmas-

Viennese letter carriers: "... with drizzly eyes and a cherry instead of a nose.... they loved walking and dogs and Christmas and snow" (Per. E. Suritz).

Page 349. *Puppenmeister* is a puppeteer. A word used by Nabokov in his novels "Lolita" and "The Gift". In Nabokov's work, it denotes a certain power that controls the fate of people.

Page 353. *like the boy Erichthonius* - meaning the child born of the seed of Hephaestus to Gaea. Athena had Kekrop's daughters guard the chest, but the curious women lifted the lid. When Athena learned of this, she punished them with madness, which ended in death.

Page 356. *How many times can you depict the nymph Muta punished by Jupiter?* - Muta, a Tiberian nymph whom Jupiter punished with dumbness for her talkativeness. In Roman mythology, she was identified with Tacita, the deity of silence and silence.

Page 360. *Sophrosyve* - "moderation" (*Ancient Greek*), *medev agav* - "nothing too much" (*Ancient Greek*).

Page 361. *poor shen in the peking opera* - in the peking opera Opera traditionally has four roles: *shen* (male role), *dan* (female role), *chou* (clown) and *jing* (strong, rough or dangerous characters).

Page 362. *Thosh wretched, rash, ivtrshdivg fooL, fareweLL!* - Hamlet's words to Polonius in the third act of the tragedy "Hamlet": "Thou wretched, fussy jester, farewell. // I have deemed you supreme: take your lot!" (Per. A. Kroneberg).

*...do not throw Luther's angry inkwell at him* - Martin Luther was periodically tempted by the devil. There is a legend of an inkpot thrown by Luther at the unclean during one of these temptations.

Page 363. *Hestia* is the ancient Greek goddess of the home, the eldest daughter of Cronus and Rhea. Chaste, celibate and celibate.

Hestia is at rest on Olympus, symbolizing the immutable cosmos.

Page 363. *Bellerophontes* is one of the main heroes of the older generation in Greek mythology, the son of the Corinthian king Glaucus. Like Heracles, he willy-nilly performs various feats, in particular, in the mountains of Lycia he kills a fire-breathing chimera combining the features of a lion, a goat and a snake.

Page 364. *Tots mshvdshs agit histriovem* - The whole world is a stage act. Petronius' words used for the inscription on the pediment of Shakespeare's Globe Theater.

*...avd death shaLL have vo domiviov* - "...and death shall have no power". The first line of the poem of the same name by the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas (1914-1953).

*Your pleas are too late, Frodi!* - In the Younger Edda, the giants Fenja and Menja address their master Frodi, for whom they ground gold, peace and happiness at their magic mill Grotti. But Frodi would not let the giants rest, and then they ground warriors who ravaged Frodi's domain.

Page 366. *This man is still needed to justify the aggregate action.....* - Leo Tolstoy. "War and Peace (Epilogue, Part I, Ch. IV).

Page 368. *The heart is pricked, nauseous, and the desire to eat is gone.....* - stanzas from the "Salerno Code of Health" (fourteenth century).

*Like Tyr, I put my hand in the wolf's mouth...* - in Germanic-Scandinavian mythology, the "god of battle", son of Odin and Frigg. It was he who put the magic chain on the wolf Fenrir, but to do so, Tyr had to put his right hand in the wolf's mouth as a sign of trust.

Page 375. *...six dog's heads around the neck of the frightened scyl-*  
The sea monster in Greek mythology, a sea monster that under-  
which was a cave in the steep cliffs of the narrow Strait of Sicily.

Page 375. *Vabulo* - according to Somov's "Dictionary of Rare and Forgotten Words", *vabulo* is a pair of bird's wings fastened with a thread, which are waved, whistling, to call a bird.

Page 376. ...*eleven shields forged by Mammouri- e....* - According to Roman legend, Jupiter gave King Numa a shield to protect his city. To prevent enemies from stealing this shield, Numa orders the blacksmith Mammurius to make eleven exact replicas. Mammurius (none other than the god of war himself, Mars) forges eleven similar shields and inscribes his name on the back of the real shield.

Page 379. ...*how jack dougherty took the red hat of scal-  
that merrow.* There's an Irish legend that--  
Jack Daugherty was visited by a merrow, i.e. a waterman. The merrow gave him a red cap so that he could get to the bottom of the sea. Jack saw cages at the bottom where the souls of dead sailors were languishing, so he invited Merrow to visit him, gave him moonshine, and then stole the red cap and went underwater to free the souls of the sailors.

*The Aventine Hill* is one of the seven hills on which Rome stands. On this hill was built the temple of Diana, who came to be considered the patroness of the lower classes (plebeians and slaves). The anniversary of the founding of the temple was considered to be the slaves' feast day - *servorsh m dies*.

Page 380. ...*the gods have cotton legs because of our unbelief* - slo-  
The freedman Ganymede, a character in Petronius' novel *Satyricon*.

Page 382....*like Septimius Severus, dreamed of a pro-  
a roan horse?* - Septimius Severus was a Roman emperor (193-211), the founder of the Severus dynasty. There's a legend that says he once dreamt that he saw a horse

Emperor Pertinax, who was riding a horse, fell and crashed. The horse approached Severus so that he could sit on it. The dream came true very soon and Septimius Severus succeeded to the imperial throne.

Page 386. ...*Sumerian inanna raped by the gardener*  
In Sumerian mythology, the goddess of love, fertility, and strife. In the myth of Inanna, the goddess takes revenge on the world because the gardener raped her while she was asleep, when she was tired from her journey and lay down to rest in the garden. Inanna turns all the water in the springs into blood, so that the trees begin to ooze blood, and sends devastating whirlwinds and storms into the country.

Page 390. ...*may my wound be mortal-"che La mia ferita sia mortaLe"* (Italian), ritual inscription on a ven- detta knife. Bonifacio, strait between the islands of Corsica and Sardinia.

Compilation of comments:

*Vladimir Korobov*



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