



## VILNIUS

BY KLEMEN PISK

TRANSLATION BY SHAY WOOD

KLEMEN PISK (born July 31, 1973 in Kranj, Slovenia) is a contemporary Slovene poet, writer, translator and musician. Between '06 & '09 he lived in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. In '98 he published his first book, *Labas Vakaras*, a collection of poems, which was nominated for book of the year in Slovenia. His second poetry book *Visoko in nagubano praočelo* (*High and Wrinkled Primordial Substance*) was published in '00, and *Mojster v spovednici* (*Master in the Confessional Box*) in '02.

Pisk's poetry and prose have been translated into many foreign languages and published in Austrian, Bosnian, Czech, Polish and Finnish literary magazines. His most recent book *Pihalec* (*The Blower*) is a selection of humoristic short stories published at the most respectful Slovene publishing house, *Nova revija*. From this book is also the story Vilnius.

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### 1. The Saw

I might have made it to the city gate and Mary of the Gate of Dawn if Algirdas Martinaitis had not prevented me with his work *Gija* (Thread). Algirdas had called me on the phone in the morning and said, "It's impossible to walk to the end of Aušros Vartų Street without running into the Philharmonic. If you come early enough, take a quick stroll down the street to the Madonna and kneel down and cross yourself to your heart's content. But if you lose track of time and are late to the concert because of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn, then you'd better not dare come before me."

Because my punctuality failed me and I was already short on time, I turned right instead of starting toward the city gate.

I entered the Philharmonic, which I had, in fact, run into. I eventually made my way through the vaulted hallway to the goddess of fire Gabija (I read her name on her nametag). She checked me off on the VIP list and let me into the large concert hall. I took my seat in the front beside an old lady whose wide build forced me to lean to the left. I had to contort myself somewhat if I wanted to prevent shoulder

contact. I waited, hunched over, for the string musicians to pick up their stringed instruments, the wind musicians their wind instruments, the percussionists their percussions, and so on. I waited to hear the latest creation of Algirdas, the composer who bore the same name as the Grand Duke of Lithuania, who, historians say, was buried in the fourteenth century according to pagan traditions, together with all his jewelry, weapons, animals, and servants.

Just as Algirdas the duke swore by paganism, so too did Algirdas the composer cultivate an affection for pre-Christian traditions. He was a Lithuanian Stravinsky; at least that is what Moscow critics nicknamed him in the time when the *Sovietų Sąjunga* still ruled with a firm hand in these parts. Algirdas' ballet *The Sun* from the late eighties did not speak about the sun as a celestial body but about the sun deity, the goddess Saulė, who is wooed and proposed to by Moon, but who, after marrying her, prefers to escape to Dawn, until Perkūnas, the god of thunder, punishes him and cuts him in half. Algirdas found the basic motif in a folk song that the leading folklorists brought to his attention. While the local public was enthusiastic, the firm hand of Moscow ridiculed: "Well, what's with you, polytheist, trying to revive old folk culture? Would you like to undermine the foundations of *perestroika*?" But because the Lithuanian national consciousness was fearless at that time and events were turning in a familiar direction, the ballet became quite interesting in the early nineties and experienced more than a hundred encore performances, even a few abroad. Perhaps the former world champion of chess, Mikhail Tal, watched it in Riga, and later the same day suffered a heart attack and passed away. He was found on the sofa next to a chessboard, stiffly clutching to his chest a pawn in one hand and Latvian citizenship in the other.

I therefore waited curious and hunched over to see what would happen, what Algirdas would offer this time, for he had uttered not a word about his new work to anyone. Not even in the program was there anything written in greater detail, but we did know that it was an orchestral work and that a soloist on a saw was in store for us, which was causing considerable speculation and reservation among the audience, from what I could decipher from their conversations: "Pjūklas, taip taip, labai įdomu, pjūklas (!) – keistai!" (Pjūklas = saw, taip = that, labai = very, įdomu = interesting, keistai = strange). A soloist on a saw then. Some folkloristics again, I thought to myself; again an emphasis on the primitive and the rural, on customs and habits. I thought of Beštrov Tonček from the village of Žiganja Vas, who always grabbed a saw at village festivals and coaxed howling sounds out of it. I imagined the saw in a folkloric light. I had seen its widespread distribution throughout Europe: from Gibraltar to Nordkapp, from Malta to Svalbard, from the Urals to Iceland, from Cyprus to Novaya Zemlya, from Lampedusa to Franz Josef Land. I had seen the smartest monkeys play on it, and I had even

seen Laplanders bend it according to the rules of their pentatonic scale. The saw: the tool of carpenters, lumberjacks, and woodworkers, who animate the tedious hours with folk art, transforming the saw from a tool into a musical instrument. Bravo, bravo, Algirdas, I thought to myself. As always you have managed to look beyond the average compositional horizon; as always you have bitten into the artistic surplus. I know well that you will charm us, you who has never yet disappointed. I can hardly wait for my ear to hear you and my soul to experience you.

The work began with a powerful atonal eruption, with an explosion. All that remained after the devastation was a thick cloud of wind instruments, supplemented by a mild but fairly discordant violin base. Gradually the rhythm slowed and the tense atmosphere relaxed. The composer afforded the audience a moment of rest, he let them breathe, but it did not last long. The kettledrums boomed and the cymbals struck unexpectedly. As I glanced around the concert hall I saw frightened people. But perhaps that was also the composer's intention – to sow horror.

Before the start of the second movement a surprising musical instrument was brought on stage. It turned out that Algirdas did not have an ordinary saw in mind but an electrical circular saw, which the soloist randomly switched on and off. He even laid thick logs on it, causing the small particles to fly about the concert hall, and we listeners sitting in the front were given an unpleasant shower. Quite disgruntled, we immediately started removing the sawdust from our pants, jackets, necklines, and hair. (The soloist on the saw – whom I could get a better look at once I had cleaned my eyes – very much resembled Markič.)

I glanced back toward the balcony and caught sight of Algirdas grinning wickedly and contently. It now became clear to me why he did not want to sit in front next to me, even though it would be appropriate for him as the author of the composition to sit with the distinguished guests. He made fools of us and mocked our refinement. Oh, how could I have been so naïve! I had imagined a romantic folk musician with a bending saw. I had mistakenly created in my mind that pleasant howling, but here he offered me a modernly equipped carpenter who could teach a dog to mew if he were to lay it instead of a log on the saw. The circular saw wailed and Algirdas laughed. Not only did he laugh, he howled like a cat on a circular saw.

## 2. Black Heifers

After the concert Algirdas invited me to dinner, but, because I was already scheduled to be somewhere else, I turned down socializing with musicians, which I did not regret anyway. I know how exhausting it

can be at such gatherings when a person must play the role of a balanced individual, even though it is clear that he has wandered among the greatest of madmen. Not that I consider myself an eccentric, since whoever looks on himself in that way is certainly not an eccentric but merely an ordinary buffoon, a comedian. So many times, though, I have tried my best to conceal my comedic nature, which, frankly, I am ashamed of. But some tactless person has always shown up and ruined everything, leaving me no other solution than to try to explain, justify, and resolve the incident with comedy. I prefer to speak in general terms because concrete descriptions are needless, and it would also be tactless to speak here of all the nonsense I have been forced into, not so much of my own will as in defense of my honor. In short, some people truly lack tact and do not know what is appropriate and what is not. Someone might be genteel, dressed according to the latest fashion, and full of nice manners, but emptiness and darkness rain from his mouth. (The inverse is also possible, as well as two remaining combinations that combinatorics permits.) He is weak linguistically, but not so much in the sense of correct pronunciation as much as in the sense of content. There are many cavaliers in the world who are bothered by individual words, merely a letter, spelling, or phoneme, instead of dealing with the semantics of sentences, paragraphs, and entire texts. But I should be honest that many times I myself have been that cavalier, that morphologist. It is obvious that there is a certain special attraction, a certain pleasure, hidden in forms. People admire nature more for its form than for its informational value or functionality. They exploit functionality but take pleasure in form and then marvel why form collapses. This sounds rather ecological, and if I were a true ecologist I would have refused dinner at Algirdas' out of protest that, because of his vile artistic impulses, trees are being chopped down.

I had arranged to meet up with Agnieška Olšauska (allow me to write her name by the rules of Lithuanian orthography) in a friendly pub in the middle of Castle Street. It is located right there when you, fellow traveler, set off from the Philharmonic straight past the Church of St. Casimir, where the Soviets guested with their Museum of Atheism twenty-three long years. Then suddenly you spot City Hall on the right and you are already on Great Street. After that you continue past the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas. You stand there for a bit and marvel why the Soviets did not prefer to guest in a more familiar environment. If you are interested in pictures, you can stop by Chodkevičius Palace. When you exit the gallery, you just cross the road and you are already on Castle Street. Waiting for you on the right is the pub, where you go in, order a Lithuanian beer, and watch the waitresses, who would certainly become successful models, actresses, singers, and television hostesses in Slovenia. When the waitress politely addresses you, you see that well-

bred people still exist in the world — and you say to yourself that beauty is not valued very much in Lithuania, thank God.

The waitress had just served me a beer when Agnieška appeared in the pub. She was late, as is appropriate for a lady, and allowed me to hang her fur coat on the coat rack<sup>1</sup>. As a representative of the living Polish minority in Lithuania, Agnieška spoke Polish, though not like Poles speak it in their homeland. She mauled a dialectal Polish, mercilessly articulated strange phonemes, conjugated verbs and declined nouns in unexpected ways, and even had intonation in certain words, presumably under the influence of Lithuanian, where the acute and the circumflex are the rule. And that is why Agnieška said, for example, *muost* instead of *most* (when she told her story of rushing across the bridge to a recording), *kmiel* instead of *chmiel* (when she explained what Lithuanians make beer from), *zviŋzac* instead of *związac* (when she complained that some malefactors in the entertainment industry wanted to tie her hands), and *jodajka* instead of *czarnulka* (when she told the joke about the black heifer). I listened with interest to the interesting forms of the Vilnius dialect and concentrated more on her pronunciation than on the content.

“Oh, Agnieška,” I said delightedly all of a sudden during our chat. “You’re a living example how palatal shibilants turn into sibilants, and how neuter-gender nouns get feminized. You’re also an excellent example how double consonants conflate into single ones. When you said *vina* instead of *winna* when you were talking about a feeling of guilt, that’s when I noticed it. And when you kept talking and said *a* for the word-final unstressed *e* — you can imagine — it truly hit home for me and I really concluded that there’s something to the thing Franciszek Stawski explained to me during his lifetime, but I hadn’t entirely believed him. I wanted to hear it with my own ears and go, that’s right, go to your marshy land. And that’s why I’m here now in front of you, I — your student... I implore you, one more time, please tell me one more time what Lithuanians make beer from!”

“From *kmiel*!” Agnieška replied.

“What did you go across when you were rushing to the recording?”

“Across the *muost*.”

“What kind were the two heifers that were knitting on the tree?”

“What kind? *Jodajki*, of course.”

I should explain why I even met up with Ms. Olšauska in the pub. We had probably met each other earlier, but it is also possible that we had not. And if we had not, I had likely been informed beforehand about her appearance and must have recognized her merely by some descriptions, by her hair, eyes, breasts, backbone, calves, thighbones, shinbones, and thyroid. It is entirely possible that we were on a date because

<sup>1</sup> According to etiquette, I should have waited for Agnieška in front of the pub, but Agnieška herself ordered me to wait for her inside. I say this just so someone does not suspect that I have an unrefined character.

I had won a prize — dinner with Ms. Olšauska — on some show, but it is also possible that she had won a prize, and that I was, in fact, the prize, while she was the prizewinner.

In short, we met up because I wanted to listen to her, and she wanted friendship; because I desired morphological analyses, and she desired Aunt Liz’s jam; because I craved cabbage lentils, and she craved minority and nationally conscious happiness; because I liked to eat bread made from whole-grain flour, and she wanted to have bilingual children...

“Agnieška, have you received any awards for your work? Do you have any international honors? Are you meeting the top criteria?” I asked her, full of the kind of arrogance only a Slovene artist can bring from his homeland. I was a poet and I liked pure rhyme, feminine paroxytonic, but sometimes I flirted with impure assonance too. When I was able to shake off some arrogance, I also listened to others — then I became truly excited that there are so many creators and designers, so many performers and copyists, so many poets and thespians, so many improvisers and scenic designers, so much performance and body art, so many lighting technicians and make-up artists, so much passive voice and so many participles, so many Hittites and Tocharians, so many Markičes. I respected the fact that a person actively produces something and that he indeed works on something he gives permanence to. If a person does something, that in itself is positive. If on top of that a person is still young, then that is very near perfection.... Every idea of a young man gives me joy. If only I was able to shake off some arrogance. I respected activity in every form, but most of all I respected the creativity of old Aunt Polpetka, who cooked the best lentils that my tongue had ever tasted. I loved them with turnips or without, regardless whether or not I had thrown off arrogance beforehand.

“My success story,” Agnieška answered, “began the year before last, when I made an appearance on a reality show on commercial television. From then on I had no peace from people. Men on the street gawked and shouted at me, strangers called me on the phone in the middle of the night, and the paparazzi were constantly on duty in front of my house. I knew, though, that it pays to strike while the iron is hot, and I decided to set sail into musical waters and build a singing career. I hired a songwriter and spent a lot of money for him to write me a song that stayed at the top of the charts for at least seven weeks. Unfortunately he recently stopped writing for me and chose some other female singer. And so my fame has almost completely disappeared. Once again I have to prove myself to people. I would love to sign up for Eurosong! I would need to find another songwriter, but there aren’t a lot of good ones, and I want the best because, for me, only winning counts!”

I shook off some arrogance.

“Hmm, well perhaps I know the right man for you,” I said, think-

ing of Algirdas. “I know of an excellent composer!”

“What kind of music does he write?”

“Atonal dodecaphonic avant-garde.”

“Oh, really? What’s his name?”

“Algirdas Martinaitis. Haven’t you heard of him before? He’s a famous Lithuanian composer.”

“I really wouldn’t know. Has he ever participated in Eurovision Song Contest?”

“Probably not. But he is a fearless, daring man. He dares to do a lot of things that his colleagues never would. I can guarantee you that he would try. For him, too, winning is the only thing that counts.”

“That’s the kind of man I need. What kind of music did you say he writes...?”

“Atonal dodecaphonic avant-garde.”

“Is that more dance, trance, or techno?”

“Well, it’s hard for me to say. You have to hear it. I’ll get you tickets for his concert, on the floor!”

“And how much does he charge?”

“If he sees a muse in you, he’ll work for you for free,” I winked.

“Oh, there still are romantic men in the world! And when will you introduce me to him? I’m very late, you know. The competition for Eurovision Song Contest will be over soon.”

“We’ll go there right now. Algirdas organized an after-concert party, and everyone is already there.”

“Won’t that be impolite?”

“Agnieška,” I exclaimed, “you’re a musician, for crying out loud, and all kinds of kindred spirits are there: atonalists, dodecaphonists, neoclassicists, and neo-baroqueists.”

“Where does Algirdas live?”

“Not far from here, in Užupis.”

“Are you going to call a taxi?”

“No, we’re walking.”

“Oh, we’ll have to go across the *muost!*”

“That’s right, across the *muost!*”

### 3. Across the Muost

The Vilnia is the river from which Vilnius got its name. It is very tiny and powerless if you compare it to the mighty Neris. The Vilnia, however, does not care for mightiness but puts its trust in technique. (The Vilnia reminds me of Markič.) Which is to say it meanders skillfully among the tiny houses; it knows exactly which path to take so as not to

flood the streets. At this point it is worth asking which came first, the chicken or the egg. The egg, it seems to me, since chickens developed from proto-chickens. For the chicken to have arisen, the proto-chicken must have laid a mutated egg. I am not a paleontologist who could prove the existence of proto-chickens, nor am I a hydrologist who could explain why the Vilnia is so meandering. But I can confirm with great certainty that the Vilnia is a twisted, winding, undulating vine whose core neither an unwinder nor a roller can get to. As the Vilnia leisurely but completely rolls through the landscape, so the clucking hen incubates her eggs: at first very calmly but in the end successfully and cackling with pride. As the Vilnia weaves, so the poet weaves his wreath of sonnets. As Valjevo is the Serbian Vilnius, so Vilnius is the Lithuanian Valjevo. People may roll with laughter as much as they want. This interpretation is probably true.

The city arose due to a strange combination of circumstances. It occurred in the Year of Our Lord 1320 when the Grand Duke Gediminas returned home toward nightfall, fatigued from a tiring hunt through the forests above the Vilnia’s river basin. Those regions were not yet inhabited then. Gediminas was so tired that he could not keep his eyelids open. His wife could not even convince him to have a little fun in their short, antique bed before going to sleep. He lay down to rest and saw in his dreams a howling iron wolf. When he awoke the first thing he did was ask his wife, “Laima, what does a howling iron wolf mean?” His wife did not know. Then he asked his squire, who likewise shrugged his shoulders as he cleaned Gediminas’ bows and arrows, halberds and spears, swords and sheathes. When his handmaid Lok could not explain the complex wolf symbolism, he finally summoned the wizard Lizdeika, who first wisely stroked his gray wizard beard and then even more wisely said: “The iron wolf means that here will stand a solid castle around which a great city will grow. The wolf’s howling means that a good reputation about the city will spread through the entire world.” The wizard Lizdeika probably did not know that Vilnius would one day be included on the UNESCO World Heritage list, but his prediction was absolutely correct, and therefore we can count him among the world’s most successful interpreters of dreams. But the interpretation of the dream was in fact a hint to Gediminas that it was high time to start construction. Perhaps the iron wolf actually meant and said something else, but the cunning wizard tailored it to his own interests. If the wizard were born today, he would probably be a skilled lobbyist. Perhaps the iron wolf portended that Algirdas the composer would be born one day and would write the symphony *Iron Filing*. Instead of a log he would put the iron wolf on the circular saw; instead of sawdust, filings would whizz around the concert hall; and the wolf would howl like a cat in heat.

Agnieška and I came to the Church of the Immaculate Conception of Blessed Virgin Mary, which stood on the bank of the Vilnia next

to the famous bridge (*muost*). We stepped onto it and started to walk across. I observed Agnieška and saw her with my own eyes crossing not the bridge but the *muost*. I do not know if I am capable of explaining the difference between my crossing and hers. It simply defies being explained by some logic of the object. It is a matter of energy, feeling, and unique experience. It is that dialect-ness which nearly all collectors of national artifacts and folk songs crave. It is, in fact, folkloric eroticism or dialectological orgasm; the insanity of the dialectal that shocks the dialectologist; the dialect-ness that has to be experienced in person and not on a recording (for instance, on cassette tapes). With her dialect Agnieška was immersed in a whole. She not only spoke it but she also lived it. Her dialect was her way of being and moving.

We transitioned suddenly from dialect-ness to the-other-side-of-the-river-ness, because we were by now on the other side of the river in Užupis, which means just that (*už-upis* = the other side of the river). The Republic of Užupis welcomed us. The musically inspired angel on Užupis Street, blowing into some kind of angelic trumpet, welcomed us. He stood on a tall pillar and looked toward Riverfront. Once the inhabitants of either side of the river were in conflict with each other because they could not agree whom the river's water belonged to. The Lord of the Waters came and urinated into the river. The water was no longer drinkable, and they stopped quarreling. The Lord of the Waters came up with a Solomonic solution to the problem.

“Did you know that I went to Užupis Gymnasium?” Agnieška said and pointed out the building on the left side of the road.

“Do you mean you were educated in Užupis?”

“Yes, and when the school recently commemorated its fiftieth anniversary, they invited me to sing at the celebration. Everyone remembered me well, and the principal told me that he had always been convinced that I have a marvelous voice, but he had never thought that I would become such a successful singer and build a great career. I sang them the song ‘I Am Finally Free.’”

“You definitely have to tell that to Algirdas. You have to make it clear to him that you’re not just another singer.”

“If he follows the media at least a little bit, then he has certainly already heard of me. They took my picture for the cover of *Moteris*<sup>2</sup>.”

“What an original name for a women’s magazine! I remember when they built a theater in my native city. They didn’t know what to name it, and then they decided that it would just be called The Theater. So I’ve decided that if I ever have a son, I’ll name him Son, and if it’s a daughter, I’ll name her Daughter. Perhaps I would prefer to name him Sunus and my daughter Dukte, so that it would sound fancier, more Lithuanian. Where I’m from, it’s not unusual for a person to give his child

a foreign name, even though that child doesn’t have any foreign roots at all. I know a Jeanette who doesn’t have even the slightest roots of foreignness in her, not even as much as a piece of ginseng candy contains ginseng. Despite that, she has a French-sounding name because perhaps it seemed fancy to her parents. Where I’m from, some children learn English as early as pre-school, although my acquaintance says that he would love to shove the parents of those children in jail with pedophiles, arguing that it’s an equally serious sin.”

“But children at that age are very receptive to foreign languages!”

“You’re right, but why do children have to learn English of all languages? My son, if he’s ever born, will prefer to learn Tocharian. And as an adolescent he can chase Tocharian girls if he wants. Or I’ll go to a second-hand bookstore and buy him a Hittite grammar, one that reeks of moldiness, has coffee spilled on the hundredth page, and has an antique smell to it!”

#### 4. The Workbench

Algirdas opened the door and looked at us with surprise at first but then with kindness. Presumably he was amazed that I had dared come to his after-concert party. After all, I had declined an invitation and apologized a few hours earlier. But because I am a man of tact, and an apologizing is nothing foreign to me, I presented an exceptionally sound, well-argued apology that needed no verbal explanation. I was leading a being of angelic proportions and diameters by my side: Agnieška with an accentuated side arc, a woman with an amazing front view and a heavenly top view. Algirdas happily dimensioned her with his eyes. He drew imaginary dimension lines on her body. (Algirdas looked like Markič, my technical education teacher in elementary school.)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Now that nostalgia for Markič has seized me once again, it is proper to say a few words about him. He was a tall, slender man, whom we students feared like the devil fears holy water. He always let us know that technical education is the most important subject in school. Whoever did not submit to his strict rules quickly fell into his disfavor. He invited the best students into his office, where they got to admire his masterpieces on the workbench. On the other hand, the rest of us had to make pencil sharpeners for hours and hours out of sandpaper that Markič ordered in huge quantities from some company in exchange for commission. Markič never raised his voice. He just looked at you with his glassy eyes, and you already knew that you needed to shape up. In extreme cases he calmly pulled on your ears with a gloomy look on his face. Markič knew how to squeeze every droplet of handicraft out of the most untechnical child, like I was. Dimensioning was his great passion. After explaining to us with millimetric precision the secrets of drawing an arrowhead, he piled work on us up to the top of our heads and even over several times – preferably on long Friday afternoons. While we were dimensioning feverishly, he fixedly read magazines like *Life and Technics*, *Radar*, *Defense*, and *Team*. In his cabinet Markič hoarded a lot of pencils of varying hardness (H, HB, and B), and he hung a large wooden compass for drawing on the blackboard on a special stand. He seemed then considerably advanced in years, but if I think hard about it, he had to have been around

<sup>2</sup> Lith. *moteris* = woman.

“Algirdas, allow me to introduce Ms. Olšauska,” I said, somewhat interrupting his dimensioning.

“You probably recognized me,” Agnieška said, then allowed Algirdas to kiss her hand. “I’m Agnieška, from the television show, the reality show. Everyone watched it. Have you read anything about me? There was a great deal said and written about me.”

“Of course I know who you are!” affirmed Algirdas enthusiastically. “I avidly cut out articles about you and I have almost all your appearances recorded on video cassettes. And the last time I saw you was at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Užupis Gymnasium, when you sang ‘I Am Finally Free.’ I stood in the middle of the crowd and applauded you loudly, but you probably didn’t notice me.”

“I’m so embarrassed that I don’t know who you are even though you are, as I hear, an acclaimed composer,” Agnieška said.

“You know,” Algirdas replied, “I don’t even consider myself a composer. That’s how others speak of me. I’m just a man who recently moved from Riverfront to Užupis, although I still haven’t been taken out of the Riverfront registry! I still have to collect a few papers and then the Užupis secretary will see me. Will she see me in the municipality’s main reception office? No, she can’t see me there because they’re renovating right now. Will she see me in the stuffy little room on the ground floor? No, she can’t see me there either. It would be too stuffy, you know.”

Algirdas made an excellent impression on Agnieška with his modesty.

He invited us inside. There were half-consumed glasses and ashtrays full of cigarette butts on the table, but there was not a living soul anywhere.

“Where is everybody? Isn’t there a party here?” I inquired while glancing at the empty parlor.

“Uhh, we had a fight as usual,” Algirdas said and waved his arm. “At the very beginning the atonalists got in the neoclassicists’ hair. Then the cacophonists added their two cents and started to prepare my piano. The neo-baroqueists even encouraged them! They wanted to tune my most precious Steinway to quarter tones just so some young budding talent could perform his work for a prepared piano on it! I barely stopped them. Just when it seemed that the situation had calmed, an acrimonious debate flared about who will get an award this year, and a terrible jealousy arose. The debate about awards became increasingly political. I couldn’t stand it anymore, so I shooed everyone home early. I may feel sorry now, but I can’t watch as professional colleagues sling mud at each other under my own roof. And this is supposed to be a party on the occasion of the premiere of my concert! I’m already accustomed to this, but I don’t know if I’ll keep socializing with my colleagues. I will rather

look for friends in other artistic genres; for example, thespians, poets, or lighting designers.”

“Lighting designers are a good choice, and I definitely recommend them,” I said. “They aren’t completely sure about their artistic mission. That’s why they don’t yearn for awards.”

“Lighting designers?” said Agnieška. “Aren’t they lighting technicians?”

“Oh, God forbid that a lighting designer hears you!” Algirdas exclaimed. “They really don’t yearn for awards, but they are very sensitive.”

“I admired a lighting designer once,” I said dreamily. “He was like my second father and knew a lot about everything. Whether he had to aim the beam of light into the sky or into the ground, he could create visible things out of invisible ones. He was the great lighting technician of lighting techniques, the true master of true mastership.”

“I knew a master of the Lithuanian dialect pop song,” Agnieška said. “He wrote songs for me for a long time, yet he wrote very few of them. He didn’t want money, but I often had to sit on his lap because that would supposedly insanely inspire him, as he himself claimed. Studying my body also would supposedly give him special power, as he himself claimed. At first I was naïve and humored his requests. But one day he started to try to persuade me to pose nude for him because he could compose more easily like that, as he himself claimed. I didn’t fall for that. I told him to his face what he deserved and broke off all contact with him. I’m always blunt, even if people don’t like it.”

“Well, I understand the man, and I also understand you somehow, or at least I’m trying to understand,” Algirdas joked. “What’s his name? Perhaps I know him.”

“Vitas Gerulaitis.”

“Hmm...Isn’t that a tennis player?”

“Yes, but this one doesn’t play tennis. They’re namesakes purely by coincidence. He’s not even related to him. I’m amazed that you don’t know him, since he is the doyen of the Lithuanian dialect pop song.”

“You know, I socialize mostly in atonal circles. I don’t have any friends or acquaintances on television. They don’t like me much because I’m crazy. Despite the fact that I’ve gotten a lot of awards, they’ve only recorded one of my concerts for television – *Concert for the Prepared Fly*.”

“Last year I participated in a dialect pop-song festival. Gerulaitis wrote an excellent song.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t watch. Please sing an excerpt for me.”

“What, sing right now?” Agnieška charmingly smiled.

“Yes, Agnieška, be courageous. There’s nothing to fear,” I encouraged her.

Agnieška cleared her throat and began to sing: “You drive down our street everyday, you watch where I walk to, what I do...just to see where I live, if I got a man, you’re so cool, just scared of girls...”

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27 years old, which is even younger than I am now.

“She sings beautifully,” Algirdas enthusiastically whispered to me.

“Indeed,” I quietly agreed. “But the lyrics charmed me even more. It’s so dialectal.”

“... you and me could be a tight couple, ooh, a tight couple, me and you, look at you, man, get movin’! Come over tonight, take me to a crazy club so I can show you what’s hip, what a freakin’ good party’s like<sup>4</sup>.”

“Bravo, excellent!” Algirdas applauded. “When I stood in front of Užupis Gymnasium and listened to you, my knees hurt like hell because I have problems with my bones, but despite that I persevered. You were worth it!”

“I’m glad that you like my singing. That’s precisely why I came here, isn’t it?” Agnieška said and looked toward me.

I explained to Algirdas why I had brought the young talented lady to his apartment in the first place: “As you already know, Agnieška was unexpectedly left without her personal songwriter. The selection for Eurovision is getting close now. So I thought of you.”

“You thought well. This isn’t beneath my honor. I like to take on crazy things! Because I’m crazy, you know.”

“That would be hard to dispute,” I concurred with delight.

“So, Mr. Algirdas, could you write a song for me?” Agnieška asked cautiously yet femininely.

“Of course I could!” consented Algirdas.

“Thank you, that makes me very happy,” Agnieška said. “But we’re late, you know.”

“When do you need the song?”

“Today. The deadline is tomorrow.”

“Can you wait five minutes?”

“You’ll write the song that fast?” Agnieška said with surprise.

“I studied music. Notes aren’t Greek to me.”

“But I would like to go over some things with you first. I want you to write a song for my soul.”

“I see into your soul better than you do,” Algirdas said and sat down at the piano. “And I’m not just going to write a melody but lyrics too. I already have an idea!”

“But what will my song talk about?”

“It will talk about Markič.”

“About whom?” Agnieška said with bewilderment.

“Excuse me for interfering,” I intervened in the conversation, “but which Markič are you referring to?”

“Which one? Your former technical education teacher, of course!” Algirdas exclaimed.

“How do you know that he taught me technical education? That was more than twenty years ago.”

“How do I know? Markič told me himself. He came to Lithuania just now. Do you remember the soloist on the circular saw?”

“Unbelievable, what a coincidence! I thought he looked like him.”

“Markič has really mastered the circular saw. He has distinguished himself as an excellent soloist. He even remembers you, you know. He told me that you were making trouble one time, and he pulled on your ears and said to you: ‘Grow, grow, grow.’ And you did grow – and look, perhaps you have him to thank for the fact that you’re a tall, upright man.”

“I don’t like to remember that incident.”

“Excuse me, but why should I sing about Markič now? I don’t understand that.” Agnieška wondered aloud.

“Because Markič is worth it,” Algirdas answered. “He’s simply worth expressing in poetry and setting to music. He’s worth being touched by lyric poetry. He’s worth being praised in song by the vocal chords. Markič is a big, big challenge because he’s personified poetry and music at the same time.”

“But how will I be able to really get into the lyrics when I don’t know Markič at all?”

Before Algirdas had time to answer her, the doorbell rang.

“Wait here. I’m going to open the door,” Algirdas said and hurried toward the door. “Well, look who’s here!”

I would not have believed my own eyes if I had not rubbed them and come to my senses. My former technical education teacher had stepped into the room. I had not seen him in twenty years, and now we had run into each other a whole 1,480 kilometers from home (road distance). But I had sensed Markič for a long time. I just knew that he would show up sooner or later. I had had a vision that Markič would appear soon. I knew that he must come, for he had been adumbrated and portended. In fact, he had been foreshadowed and metaphorically hidden behind the bush like some kind of silent allusion that only here and there peeks out from an artistic work. He had appeared to me not only in my dreams but every time I was tackling something technically challenging. When I was changing a flat tire, his imaginary dream voice encouraged me like a teacher, and he advised me how to handle the jack and

<sup>4</sup> Agnieška was actually singing in dialectal Lithuanian, but I thought it proper to translate her lyrics into colloquial American English. The lyrics that Agnieška sang went like this in Lithuanian: *Važiavai kiekvieną dieną mūsų keliu, / žiūrėjai į mane, kur vaikštinėju, ką darau. / Tam, kad pamatytumei, kur gyvenu, / ar jau turiu vaikną, / tu gi esi super vaikiną, bet bijai merginų. // Tu ir aš galėtume tikrai neblogai padykti, / ua neblogai padykti. Tik tu ir aš, prašau, vaikinuk, pasiskubink truputė! / Ateik šį vakar, / nuvarysiva į kokį gerą klubą pasitūsinti, / ten aš Tau parodysiu, kas tai yra cool ir kas tai yra šaunus tūsas.* Besides slang expressions, such as *nuvarysım*, *cool*, *vaikinuk*, the lyrics contain a lot of dialectological surpluses. If we analyze the original, we see some ancient vestiges; for instance, the use of the dual (*galėtume*), which has disappeared in standard Lithuanian. And precisely because of the dual, the commission placed this pop song in the Lithuanian Dialect Pop-Song Festival. Agnieška did not win an award, but she did charm the leading Lithuanian linguists, at least those who could take a break from writing in-depth linguistic treatises long enough to sit down in front of the television.

where to put it. When I was assembling a chair, he helped me decipher the complicated instructions, called my attention to some irregularities, and suggested a different, better solution with respect to a screw that was hard to install. When I was putting up a tent, he held up the support poles so that I could calmly drive in the pegs. When I was replacing a chain on a bicycle, he checked whether it sat well on the sprocket... But those had been only visual and auditory hallucinations. Now he had come and had revealed himself in all his physical presence. Markič was really in the room. He was, he stood, he moved, and he maintained a calm expression on his face, just as he had twenty years ago. As if an invisible force had lifted him from behind his home workbench and had carried him to the north, to the wild Lithuanian marsh.

“Now you can’t make excuses anymore that you don’t know him, Ms. Olšauska,” Algirdas burst out laughing. “This is him! This is Markič!”

After Markič kissed Agnieška’s hand, which seemed to be in considerable disagreement with his simple technical nature, he turned toward me and stared. Both of us were silent for a moment. Nothing else came to our minds in that unique moment but to keep silent and stare.

“They’re coming to their senses,” Algirdas explained to Agnieška. “To run into someone after all these years, it’s, how should I say, romantic.”

“Mr. Teacher, Mr. Teacher Markič,” I finally found the courage to say after a few moments of lyric silence. “I’m very happy that you showed up. Ever since you disappeared from my life, my handicraft has deteriorated a lot. When I was up against the wall, I always remembered you and imagined how you, the one who always knew the solution, would act in that situation.”

“Didn’t you once call me ‘Comrade’?” Markič smiled serenely. “And now – Mr. Teacher. Please.

“True, but times are different now. You too addressed me informally at one time.”

“We can also address each other in third person, if the mister so desires.”

“Rather not. Addressing someone in third person has died out,” I said. “Say, Mr. Markič, how are you and your technical pencils, and what’s going on with the sharpeners? Is your home workbench still standing?”

“Oh, please,” Markič smiled serenely. “You really haven’t followed my work till now. Technics is history for me. I was through with dimension lines once and for all twenty years ago. I sold my home workbench too. I do linguistics now.”

“Markič is one of the foremost Indo-Europeanists of today!” Algirdas said proudly as he patted Markič on the shoulder.

“I came to Lithuania to research vestiges of the dual in some Samogitian dialects,” Markič said seriously. “I’d had enough of elemen-

tary school brats. I have academic ambitions now.”

“Markič is writing his second doctoral dissertation in Baltology,” Algirdas added.

“Wow, I can’t believe it!” I exclaimed. I could not comprehend that my former technical education teacher had become a Baltologist.

“You can’t believe it? Wait, wait!” Algirdas said. “Markič, decline a personal pronoun in the dual!”

Markič shot off like a cannon: “*Mudu, mudvieju, mudviem, mudu, mudviem, mudviese!*”

“Did you hear that? Markič, conjugate the verb ‘to carry’ in the conditional dual!”

“*Neštuva, neštuta, nešty.*”

“Markič, the present active participle!”

“It’s formed with the suffix *-nt-!*”

“Markič, the future passive participle!”

“*Būsimas, būsimo, būsiam, būsima, būsimu, būsimate!*”

“Markič, what about orthography?”

“The comma sometimes jumps in front of *which, when, because, that, and if!*”

There are people that will always be out of my reach. If I had once seen a technically well-versed expert in Markič, he now outdid me in that field that I was convinced I had truly mastered – linguistics. No matter how hard I had studied and analyzed declension and conjugation patterns for hours on end, in comparison to Markič I was just an ordinary memorizer who is not capable of an in-depth scientific synthesis and who cannot put together a measly doctoral dissertation from the pile of information that he has. I was ashamed. Once again I was ashamed, just like twenty years ago, only this time not of my manual but rather of my intellectual abilities. Markič is a genius and I will never be his equal.

“I admire you,” I said. “Now even much more than before! But did you really give up all your former hobbies? At one time you said that you can’t imagine life without Life and Technics!”

“Ha,” he laughed serenely. “I stopped subscribing to Life and Technics twenty years ago. Now I subscribe to totally different journals: *Indouralica, Baltoslavica, Baskogalica, Keltoferica, Srbolužica.*”

“Which journal do you like the most, if I may ask?”

“*Srbolužica.*”

“I thought so. I do too.”

“Well, it’s nicely illustrated.”

“I admire you more and more as well, Mr. Markič,” Agnieška spoke up after a long time. “Fifteen minutes ago I still couldn’t imagine singing a song about you, but now I very much want to. You truly are worth expressing in word and setting to music. If anyone is worth that, then it’s you.”



“I told you so,” Algirdas happily affirmed. “I know exactly whom I want to dedicate a song to and who deserves it at all.”

“You’re going to dedicate a song to me?” Markič asked astonished.

“Whom should I dedicate it to if not to you? Should I dedicate it to Anne-Sophie Mutter? I’m not Penderecki.”

“Okay. Dedicate it to me.”

Algirdas sat down at the piano and ardently started to compose, and we could only stand speechless and admire the artist in action. He played through the scales, tried out various combinations of chords, muttered the melody line to himself, and made the song increasingly complicated. It would be hard to say that there was anything explicitly pop in the song. After all, Algirdas belonged to the dodecaphonic avantgardists. Sending that kind of song to Eurosong might seem weird to some; however, Eurosong had to be revived, it needed freshness, something shocking that would shut the mouths of writers of simple tunes and that would finally elevate the Artist on the pedestal, someone who comes from the world of true music and true scores. Countless plagiarized songs have been heard before. Stealing has been going on lengthwise and across, along and crosswise, vertically and horizontally, obliquely and zigzag, in circles and squares. Eurosong not only had nothing in common with music, it was a crime against humanity, something like the Holocaust or abortion. Only Algirdas could cleanse it of sinfulness. With an in-depth approach to music, he could restore its reputation; he would raise it from blasphemy to the level of symphony.

The song about Markič sounded heavenly. He finished it in five minutes, honing the lyrics just a little by saying the individual verses aloud. Algirdas’ vision of Markič was captured in impure rhyme with a paroxytonic clause, in caesurae and diaereses, oxymora and synecdoche. For example: *I am Markič, I live among the roots* (an example of an oxymoron. It is in fact clear that it would be difficult for such a giant to live among roots, but the cleverness of this verse is hidden in Indo-European roots, in seeking ancient roots and origins, in etymological reconstruction<sup>5</sup>).

<sup>5</sup> As I later learned, Markič was the one who first called attention to the mistaken etymology of the Slovene word *bogomolka* [praying mantis]. Linguists rather superficially supposed that it was a German calque of the expression *Gottesanbeterin*. They thought that it simply referred to an animal that, because of the posture of its front legs, prays to God. Markič demonstrated, however, that such an explanation does not hold. He came to his ingenious discovery by accident when he was once leafing through a dictionary of the Northern-Samogitian Lithuanian dialect and found that the expression *busbulvinė* for a special subspecies of the praying mantis that is also simultaneously the northernmost living among the representatives of the praying mantis genus. *Busbulvinė* literally meant “that which will be tuberous,” which is possible to explain by the fact that dead praying mantises clump together, resembling some kind of tuber. And the feminine form of tuber was *gomoljka*. The Lithuanian *bus* is the third-person future tense of “to be,” and *bulvinė* means “tuber,” therefore it was a Slovene calque of the Lithuanian expression “it will be a tuber.” Markič supposed that we Slovenes took the word from the Lithuanian in approximately 1500 B.C., therefore in the time of the most intensive Balto-Slavic contacts. The original form of the Slovene word therefore had to be *bogomoljka*, which Markič also proved, and even the Freising Fragments mention the word: “If our ancestor had not

When he had filed off the details, Algirdas played and sang the song for us from beginning to end. If the angel on Užupis Street could have strained his ears, he probably would have joined in and blown into his trumpet. He too was likely a committed dodecaphonist, at least he seemed that way at first sight.

Markič liked the song. Not in the way that he had once liked technical pencils, sharpeners, and the most modern workbenches; not in the way that he had once liked being an expert in handicraft. He liked the song almost to the same extent as the dual in some Lithuanian dialects. Markič yearned for conjugations and declensions, for declining and conjugating, for nouns and verbs, for participles and perfectives. He also yearned for nostalgia, and this song certainly aroused nostalgia. The melody awakened in him a 5000-year-old Indo-European memory. A melody that raises consciousness and invigorates. A melody that can be the only savior of Eurosong. Markič, Agnieška, Algirdas, they can save Eurosong from Eurosong elements.

“But how can I sing the lyrics ‘I am Markič’ if I’m not really Markič?” Agnieška asked. “That will seem pretty strange to the audience.”

“It’s a role-playing song,” I expertly clarified. “That means that the author and the performer aren’t identical with the lyric subject.”

“But people won’t know that,” Agnieška frowned.

“Sure they will! Every remotely experienced critic today has heard of the role-playing song!” I said, growing upset. “I knew a poet with a huge butt who wrote a verse about ‘his little butt.’ Did any critic therefore accuse him of delusion? No, no, indeed no one, because they understood it as a role-playing song. And that’s how it will be with this song that you’re going to sing. Everyone will know that you’re not Markič, and qualifying for Eurosong is a sure thing because there has not yet been a role-playing song on Eurosong.”

“I know that people in favor of the role-playing song will certainly be sitting on the judges’ panel,” Algirdas affirmed.

“There won’t be a judges’ panel at all; there’s going to be televoting instead!” Agnieška exclaimed.

“Do you really believe in telephone voting?” I asked and burst out laughing.

“Look how naïve you are,” Algirdas said, shaking his head.

“Televoting,” I said, “was thought up for money. It seems like people are deciding, but they actually aren’t. It’s interesting that today more people believe in televoting than in God.”

“Please, stop with the televoting! How can you occupy yourselves with such a mundane thing?” Markič said, becoming agitated.

“What about doing business in sandpaper and collecting a commission? Isn’t that mundane?” I poked at him.

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sinned, praying mantises would have eaten him.”

“Sandpaper is history. Now I sell score paper,” Markič answered.

“Look,” Algirdas exclaimed and waved his score in front of my face. “Markič brought me first-rate score paper. He brought so much of it that I can live to be 120 years old and I won’t use it all up.”

When I inspected the score paper more closely and turned it toward the light, I noticed a manufacturer’s name printed on it that had been well known to me in my youth: *Slavc & Žmavc*. The same company that made the sandpaper made the score paper as well! My head became incredibly overwhelmed. And then it became clear to me, as if I were some kind of assistant detective from a German series, that the tragedy of Markič’s existence is hidden behind this.

No matter how much Markič felt like a Baltologist, how much money he received from various institutes just so he could pursue Baltology, so he could seek self-realization, confirmation, and fulfillment, and regardless of his linguistic activities, he still did business in paper. I do not think that it could be otherwise because I cannot imagine that he could live only off Baltology, and what fool would do that? Oh, God forbid that I insult Baltology and Baltologists, who will never admit that things are going badly for them. God forbid that I look condescendingly on this noble community, which I am trying to enter myself. Yes, I would really like to see them accept me into the elite, but it is necessary to acknowledge that nowadays you must, if you want to realize your life vision, perform a lot of dirty work, in quotation marks or without them. My neighbor, for example, went to the factory in the morning to load tires so that he could assemble a glider in the afternoon. Markič sold paper in the morning so that he could be a Baltologist in the afternoon. He did this for Baltology itself as well as out of pure and genuine love for the Baltic languages – for the two that are still around and the one that is no longer around (Prussian).

“Mr. Markič,” I said, “now I can finally ask you: Who are Slavc and Žmavc?”

“They are my cousins who established the family company. They have a lot of forests and can therefore manufacture a lot of paper. Žmavc<sup>6</sup> was once a well-known Slovene skier who took sixteenth place at the Olympic Games. I have one more cousin, Skumavc<sup>7</sup>. He trained in ski jumping. We’re not on good terms with him and we haven’t spoken in several years because he moved into our grandfather’s house without paying us out.”

“And how do Slavc and Žmavc view your linguistic revival?” I asked curiously.

<sup>6</sup> Gregor Žmavc (1957), Slovene skier. From 1976 to 1983 competed in the World Cup in the slalom and the giant slalom, a participant of the Olympic Games in Lake Placid. Greatest success: 7th place in a competition in Schladming.

<sup>7</sup> Dare Skumavc (1962), Slovene ski jumper. He was a member of the Slovenian National Team for two years. Greatest success: 30th place in Obersdorf (1981). Personal record: 146 m (Planica, 1982).

“They see profit,” Markič answered. “They’re very adaptable, and no work is too much for them. Now they’re making a special etymological paper designed for the reconstruction of Lithuanian words. I’m going to offer it to my Baltologist colleagues and to other Indo-Europeanists as well.”

“Skumavc has a son who also skis, right?”<sup>8</sup> I asked when I remembered that we had gone to the airport a few weeks ago, right before my departure to Lithuania, to welcome our young skiers, one of which was a young Skumavc. I held in my hands a poster that read: “Our dear young skiers, we are happy that you delight us with your marvelous results.”

“Yes,” Markič said, “he has a son. He’ll achieve a lot more. Have you heard of his daughter, Špela Skumavc, yet?”<sup>9</sup>

“No.”

“How haven’t you?”

“Well, I just haven’t.”

“But how is that possible?”

“Just is.”

Forceful howling coming from the courtyard suddenly interrupted the lively conversation. At first it howled in intervals, then more frequently and loudly. It sounded quite terrifying, and we stood dumbstruck in horror and exchanged frightened glances.

“What’s that?” Agnieška shrieked.

“Oh no, the iron wolf!” Markič exclaimed.

“Let’s run!” Algirdas called out and began running through the room.

“Where? If it’s outside, then we can’t go out. Is there a side door? What if we lock the door and stack furniture against it?” Markič was asking in a panic.

Then wild knocking sounded at the door.

“The iron wolf, he’s knocking on the door...” Algirdas said in amazement.

Agnieška burst into tears.

“Ouch, ouch, help!” was heard behind the door.

“It’s a person!” I exclaimed. “I’m opening the door.”

“Don’t open it. It’s the iron wolf imitating a person!” Markič said.

“Yeah, sure,” I said and hurried toward the door.

“Don’t open it; don’t open it, for the sake of Baltology and for our sake!” Markič yelled. Algirdas hid behind the piano. Agnieška plunged onto the couch and trembled.

I courageously opened the door, and, look! I was not mistaken. A little old man with a gray beard stood in front of the door. He was bare-

<sup>8</sup> Miha Skumavc (1988), 18th at the World Youth Championships in the super giant slalom.

<sup>9</sup> Špela Skumavc (1985), Slovene biathlete, gold medal at the World Youth Championships in the biathlon.

foot and blood was dripping from his heel.

“I was going past your house and stepped on a nail and now it hurts, ouch!” were the first words the little old man uttered.

“Please, come in, we’ll pull it out for you immediately,” I said and invited him into the house. “Algirdas, do you have any pliers?”

“I do,” Algirdas said and peeked out from behind the piano.

“Why are there so many nails in front of your house?” the little old man asked with a moan.

“I know why,” Algirdas said, “because last week we were practicing with Markič for the concert and were sawing boards. There were a lot of nails in them, and we took them out. And we’ll do the same for you.”

He brought the pliers and instantly pulled out the nail with them. The old man bellowed like a wounded bull, and Agnieška dressed his heel.

“I don’t know why you walk around barefoot. If you would wear shoes, this certainly wouldn’t happen to you,” Algirdas said.

“Because,” the little old man replied, “I’m a kind of guru. And a guru must always walk barefoot around the world to be in contact with Mother Earth.”

“We thought you were the iron wolf,” Agnieška said and burst out laughing.

“I’m not the iron wolf. My name is Dievas. I travel around on my vessel. From time to time I descend from the sky and wander among simple people, among peasants. And that is why I came to you.”

“But we’re not peasants, we’re intellectuals,” Markič declared.

“Oh well. I get it wrong sometimes. I intended to participate in the everyday life of peasants. This time, let it be the everyday life of intellectuals, whatever that may be.”

“I intend to participate in the Eurovision pop-song festival,” Agnieška said. “I wandered among the intellectuals by chance.”

“You’re also an intellectual, just a woman,” Algirdas comforted her. “My ex-wife also signed up for Eurosong once, even though she lectures in Ancient Greek Literature at the University of Kovno. That’s how you women are: you constantly have to be in the center of attention.”

“Tell me, what’s the life of an intellectual like? I would be happy if you could demonstrate it to me so that I can visualize it,” Dievas said.

“Markič will best explain it to you. He had to go through real hell in life to reach the level of intellectual,” Algirdas said.

“You know,” Markič began, “I once lived the calm life of a technical education teacher. I thought that I had realized my life’s mission and that I would retire as an educator. But a guilty conscience suddenly began knocking on my door. I said to myself: ‘Markič, will you really end like that? You have to make something of yourself; otherwise you don’t deserve to be alive at all.’ So I began studying Baltology and Indo-European linguistics. I finished my studies in record time, and soon after that

I submitted my doctoral dissertation. I had become an intellectual. And now I live the life of an intellectual. I no longer look at beautiful women when I walk down the street but rather think about serious linguistic problems.”

“I still like to look at beautiful women, even though I consider myself an intellectual,” Algirdas said. “Because I’m an artist, beautiful women inspire me. When I feed myself on their beauty, I obtain creative power. There’s no force more powerful than creative power.”

I did not know what to say, but I felt obliged to speak up and illustrate my intellectual essence: “The Lithuanian *dievas* is related to the Latvian *dievs* and also to the Old Prussian *deivas*, and they all come from the Indo-European *deiwos*, which the Greek *zeus* comes from too.”

Everyone there applauded me, but Markič condescendingly frowned: “Where did you read that? Everyone can boast of the discoveries of others, but a true intellectual comes to his own conclusions. Allow me to explain to you where the name *praying mantis* derives from....”

Markič gave the explanation, and an even more thunderous applause followed. I felt exactly the same as twenty years ago – like a small and helpless boy.

“I see that the life of an intellectual is quite thrilling,” Dievas said. “You all have a rich and diversified spiritual life. So, you deserve the most. And the most that I can offer at this moment is to take you with me, if, of course, you want to.”

“Where?” Algirdas asked.

“To heaven,” Dievas replied. “But don’t worry, not for good, just for a trip. For a short glimpse and then back.”

“How will we get there?” Markič asked.

“I’ll take you, on my flying workbench!” Dievas said and burst out laughing.

“On a flying workbench?” we said with amazement.

“Yes. Master Perkūnas remodeled it, and now it serves me well.”

“This will be interesting!” Algirdas said with enthusiasm.

“Let’s go, let’s go!” Markič urged.

“May I come along too?” Agnieška asked and looked at us tenderly, seeing that we had somehow forgotten about her.

“But you have to get to the studio as soon as possible to record the Eurovision song,”

Algirdas said and offered her his score. “The deadline is tomorrow; the competition will be over soon.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I’ve finished my pop-song career. Thank you, Mr. Algirdas, for the marvelous song; nevertheless, I think that it’s better that I dedicate myself to intellectual pursuits.”

“Well, alright, come along,” Dievas said.

5. Heaven

After old Dievas switched on the flying workbench, we sat on it to be taken to heaven, our reward. We took off and climbed higher and higher toward the sky. Although it was night, we saw the lighted city below, for the times of power outages had long since passed. We flew over St. Anne's Church and Gediminas's Hill, where the castle with the tower stood. We flew over the cathedral beside the tall belfry. We flew across the Vilnia and then the mighty Neris. The top view of the ancient city, shrouded in the night-time silence, was outlined below us; the buildings became increasingly smaller, the houses changed into small houses, and the cars were like toys we played with as children. With great speed the workbench pierced the first layers of clouds, and then we got cold. I pressed myself against Agnieška Olšauska. The wind completely disheveled her hair; her hair covered her eyes. I was hugging her with one arm, and with the other I was holding the workbench's iron frame that probably once served as a vise for clamping plywood or some other type of wood intended for processing. Algirdas and Markič were positioned in the front directly behind Dievas, who skillfully controlled the unusual vessel. They giggled playfully, excited about the wild voyage to the land beyond.

All of a sudden it began to thunder fiercely. Lightning bolts shot out of the clouds, and we found ourselves in the middle of a terrible storm. In an instant we were soaked to the skin. The workbench became unsteady and rocked wildly across the sky.

"Perkūnas is angry," Dievas said. "He becomes jealous if I transport peasants on his workbench."

"But we're intellectuals!" Markič yelled.

"Now, you explain that to Perkūnas!" Dievas screamed. "Peasant, shepherd, sports commentator or intellectual – he can't tell the difference."

One of the lightning bolts struck the workbench's metal undercarriage, and big sparks shot from it. Our electrified hair stood up, and Agnieška's looked especially terrifying because it extended almost a meter in width and height. The workbench shook, and we nearly fell off, but fortunately we grasped the frame in time. We were being tossed across the sky. We were losing altitude and screamed in fear. The workbench eventually steadied, but it sounded like the engine was seizing. We were losing altitude, and an indescribable panic engulfed us.

"Uh oh, it's dying!" Dievas screamed. "What are we going to do?"

"Oh no, oh no," Agnieška cried.

"Markič, you're an expert on workbenches. Fix it!" Algirdas exclaimed.

"I haven't dealt with workbenches in more than ten years," Markič lamented.

"Try anyway, perhaps you'll succeed," Dievas said and yielded

the pilot's seat to him.

Markič made his way to the front and occupied the post. He did not have a lot of time to recall his former technical knowledge. First he tried to stabilize the control handle, which was moving unrestrained in every direction. He pulled pieces of chewing gum from his pocket and wedged them under the handle. Then he opened the hood and checked the fuel flow. The heavenly manna, of which there was still sufficient in the fuel tank, propelled the workbench. Markič lay bent over the engine and closely studied the fuel injection device.

"The vacuum valves have broken. We'll have to make an emergency landing!" he screamed.

"Oh, holy virgin of the Gate of Dawn! Oh no!" Agnieška cried and clung to me tightly.

"Where will we land?" Algirdas asked with a frightened tone.

"Wherever we can!" Markič answered and tried with great difficulty to shift the handle.

The workbench spiraled increasingly lower among the old buildings, and Markič tried to tame it like an unruly horse.

"Watch out, watch out, there's a school there! We're going to crash into it!" Dievas warned him.

"I'll try to land alongside the river!"

"Turn already, we're going to smash against the school's façade."

"Oh no, we're going to fall onto the roof!"

"We're going to break to pieces!"

With considerable speed we fell onto the building that stood beside the school. Fortunately the workbench was equipped with a flexible spring system, so the landing was not too hard. We were thrown from the vessel anyway. We lay dizzy from the blows, each of us on a separate end of the flat roof. We slowly came to our senses and began to look around.

"The river is below. Do you hear it rushing?" I said.

"I know where we are!" Algirdas determined. "On Petras Vileišis Street. The Gymnasium is next door and the statue is below. Do you see them?"

"Look at that, we must have landed on the Lithuanian Language Institute," Markič concluded.

"Unbelievable!" I exclaimed. "We were bound for heaven, and now we've landed here!"

"I still can't believe that it ended so well," Agnieška said. "I thought we were going to die."

"Forgive me for not being able to take you to heaven," Dievas said sadly.

"Another time, Mr. Dievas," I said and patted him on the shoulder.

"But..." Markič spoke up.

"Yes?"

“As a matter of fact...”

“Markič, what would you like to say?” Dievas asked.

“Perhaps...this is our heaven,” Markič said. “At least I think so. What about you?”

“We do too, we do too!” we agreed almost in unison.

“If that’s the case, then there is no reason for sadness,” a cheered-up Dievas said. “Come, I’ll treat you to heavenly manna!”

This was heaven! There were no television hosts and sports commentators, no song competitions, no Eurosong and no dialectal pop song; there were no skiers or skiing, no Skumavc and no Žmavc, no Špela Skumavc, and no Beštrov Tonček from Žiganja Vas. There was only pure, perfect Baltology and Baltological truth. There were morphological analyses and ancient word roots. The roof of the institute was simultaneously our semantic base and derivational plane. We, the participants of verbal action, converged and diverged around the roof, and each pecked at his own lump of heavenly manna. Day began to break.

“Markič, the moon is setting and dawn is lighting the sky,” a poetically disposed Algirdas said.

“Indeed,” Markič agreed and likewise stared at the dawning horizon.

“Each night brings with itself restlessness and intoxication,” Dievas said with satisfaction.

“Look over there in the distance!” Agnieška exclaimed and tugged me by the sleeve. “The *kmiel* that Lithuanians make beer from is growing over there!”

“Oh, you’re right!” I said with excitement. “What a lot of hops!”

“It’s such a beautiful morning,” Agnieška said quietly. “I have never experienced such a marvelous sunrise.”

“And *jodajki* are grazing over there. Look!” I said. I pointed out the black cows in the distance and hugged her. In that moment I thought the cows looked like a herd of mighty brontosaurus.