

## TITLE UNDER CONSIDERATION

By Agáta Prairie-Brejchová

There's a dull glow on my face and I'm reading. Her correspondents are:

Dolores—another student of hers;

Owen—her dad or brother—these conversations are rare but intimate, both eager to share at length. “Congratulations on your promotion,” “thanks and how are your students,” “some are better than others,” “good to hear and will you be coming home for Easter?” “Yes I will and I'll bring and we should talk about” and so on.

Malta—these are too candid to read from top to bottom—I just skim, gleaning enough warmth to get off with a rosy buzz in my head.

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I've just come in the Liberal Arts Building. My walking is stilted and so is my breathing—I'm heading down the hallway to her office and as I approach it she's leaving. “Were you coming to see me? I can stay a few.” “No, see you around.” I walk past the office, loop back to it, and I drop a letter on her desk as another instructor gives me the eye. Then I follow the path she led until the building's exit. I get my breathing under control and sit down outside on a curved concrete bench. Even having just seen her, I cannot seem to bring her image to mind. Whenever I try, her face is distorted as a reflection on the surface of a pond, recently disturbed. Rain clouds are beginning to appear as I recall:

A few months before, we had a meeting about my future—it was sort of like advisement. Being an instructor for a few of my classes, she had plenty to say about what I might want to do. We sat in a café and she shot down each of my ideas with a frankness that would be heartbreaking if not for her perfect intentions. While she was running through them, I kept my eyes on her cup of water. “You’re too anxious to teach, too humorless for fiction, and lexicography doesn’t seem likely (though it sounds charmingly boring, so perfect for you if you could make it work).” She said my talent was scholarly, the best she had. I stammered through an answer to the compliment and the conversation shifted to casual chitchat. I occasionally let my eyes dart to hers and then back to their position aiming at her cup, like I was some kind of dope or spree killer. She said her absolute favorites were Balzac and Proust. I hadn’t read them but I said I had. I said my absolute favorites were Joyce and Faulkner, and I hadn’t read them either. We rose and I left with a sunny impression in my head—I think she was too nice to say what was in hers.

The rain has started so I get up from the concrete bench, go back inside, and head up the stairs. As the light rain turns into a deluge, I can see this through a tall window on the third floor: students are leaving the building, filing out into the courtyard under their umbrellas—some people are in pairs or groups, and the most common umbrella colors seem to be dark blue and black, with some loud pinks and colorful patterns among them. Individuals move close to each other to say something or to hear the other in the midst of the rain and wind, but back off when their umbrellas collide or they are hit with some water coming off the other’s umbrella. I watch this frustrating dance playing out among a few members of the crowd until they settle on a distance that enables chatter without

bumping umbrellas or getting splashed, although not without strain of hearing. The swarm of trembling umbrellas is not a happy sight, but it is beautiful. People are moving either individually or in a stupid dance of multiples, and whenever a gust of wind sweeps over them, I can see its effects as umbrellas waver, crumple, and some turn inside out. “It’s really coming down out there, isn’t it?” “Yeah, sure is.”

It’s evening now, and I’ve left campus to head home. I’m walking on the edge of a grassy lot to avoid mud, and so I can enjoy the fragrance of some honeysuckles on a nearby fence. As I walk beside them, I recall the last time I got a graded assignment from her. I sat in class reading it after she handed it to me, pausing occasionally to mentally vocalize what she wrote. Illuminated by her handwritten comments, my writing was now a muddled mess to anyone with eyes—I winced with shame at the confidence with which I had brought the paper to her. In order to force that memory of my head, I simply start saying “fuck” out loud again and again. Just a few seconds of that is enough to escape that memory, and a few minutes later I’m home. After I lie down to sleep, though, a sequence of equally painful memories arises of every moment I made my idiocy clear to her until sleep mercifully ends it.

I wade into our class, and ripples appear by my ankles as I advance toward my seat. She’s speaking and I’m looking at my submerged feet which are surrounded by sunshafts blue pink and yellow. Dolores is reading aloud: “What does man gain by all the toil, what plague fills the pendulous air that hasn’t killed before? All streams run again where they ran and the wind returns in its circuits. All is vanity!”

“That was lovely, thank you.”

As the ripples beneath me scatter and disappear, the reflection of my face comes together so I raise my head and Dolores is gone and yes the subject of my ugly liturgy is smiling as the rest all file out. She enters my eyes and meets my hand—a letter—and yes all the colored grooves she left behind, yes I read the impression of her voice: “love is a stream.” “What d’you mean?” “I couldn’t say I feel the same way but you’ll find your head kindly so yes I care and you’re just as well as likely to meet someone someday goodbye.”

I recollect my image of her weightless career from the scene—a nightingale riding a draft into its valley, with the sun come through its wings. I saw her for one split-second.

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