

Asfalyi, In Love

by C. P. Boyko

From afar, Asfalyi, your gaze met mine, and the cosmos gasped.

I was first to look away blushing.

I, Asfalyi, watched my professor's supple mouth move in speech.

You, Asfalyi, asked me, Yarom, to lend you my notes from class.

I had taken none.

With a cry, you pummeling fell upon me.

From afar, Asfalyi, you watched me smiling and laughing, listening and speaking: I, you could see, was ardent, and unconstrained, and attentive.

Later, you glimpsed me sneering, and changed your mind: I was surly, callous, and ill at ease, you decided.

You, Asfalyi, and I, Yarom, at our clumpers silently worked.

You, Asfalyi, were drawn to me from across the room.

Our hearts quopping, haltingly we from nothing made conversation.

“What kind of music do you prefer?” —“I guess noise-pop. You?” —“I like jazzpop mostly.”

Our hearts each saddened a little.

For hours, Asfalyi, you sought through pages of text the flaw in your spell.

You found it at last: you'd written what should have been a comparison as an allocation—a virgule only was missing.

quop: to throb, to pulsate.

virgule: a thin sloping or upright line (*/*, *|*).

Groaning, you smacked yourself in the face.

From afar, a glimpse of my face convinced you, Asfalyi, that I alone could rectify your existence.

Asfalyi, rereading what you had written, you were dismayed. Your purposed mash note—an amiable, light expression of admiration that anyone would be gratified to receive—had grown to the sort of ponderous, supplicating loveletter that would discomfit even a lover.

Ponderously you lengthened the letter with an apologetic acknowledgment of its length and tone.

I, Asfalyi, sat on the steps with you, Yarom, drinking red wine and white. Flirtatious, we swapped confessions.

“I fall in love when I’m drunk.” —“Me too. When I’m overtired, too.” —“It’s dangerous.” —“I get oversensitive.” —“That’s exactly how I get.” —“Everyone’s so attractive.” —“Exactly.” —“All my defenses crumble.” —“Mine too.”

We kissed.

Asfalyi, you, at the rate of one word per minute, booked to Yarom a note:

‘We, last night, were ‘drunker than water is by the drowned.’ ’

Yarom, after scrutinizing these words for subtext, replied, ‘ ‘As drunk as a dizzy flagpole’ were we.’

I, Liwi, and you, Asfalyi, infatuated, abashed, pretended to be relaxed.

But our conversation was as generic and anodyne as an epitaph or a nameday card.

“Would anyone like this muffin I couldn’t finish?” asked Shtuli, passing your door, Asfalyi.

mash note: a letter that expresses infatuation or gushing appreciation.

anodyne: unlikely to provoke a strong response; inoffensive, bland.

Your glare was answer enough.

“Your parent,” I, Yarom, twitted you, after Shtuli had gone, “is actually quite a heartling.”

Your glare was turned now on me.

A randy oldperson who was riding the omnibus grinned, and, winking, asked you, Asfalyi, “You at your age are fucking a lot, I hope? Making babies? Oh, to be young again!”

Asfalyi, each time you looked in a mirror, you were surprised a little to be reminded that you wore eyeglasses.

I, Liwi, and you, Asfalyi, unseeing walked through the streets. We shared one umbrella, though it no longer rained. From our conversation there blossomed silences.

“I hope that you’re having plenty of sex,” said your Grambi Pamoj to you, Asfalyi. “My adolescence was rife with sex, I remember. That’s the best time for it: when you’re young and healthy.”

“I’m hardly longer an adolescent,” you muttered.

Side by side in the rooftop garden, Asfalyi, you and I, Liwi, fidgeting sat.

I asked, “Are you hungry?”

Hardly longer an adolescent, and still a virgin, Asfalyi frettingly mused.

Alone in the kitchen, Liwi and I, Asfalyi, built mushroom sandwiches, fleetly dancing around each other, our very wordlessness now unisonous.

I, the grocery storehouse clerk, turning, smiled.

twit: to tease, taunt, or reproach, in a goodhumored way.

randy: lustful or sexually aroused.

fleetly: swiftly and nimbly.

unisonous: performed in unison; showing agreement or harmony.

Asfalyi, your heart in tender amazement bloomed.

Asfalyi, you in your room secluded yourself, and mooned.

We, Asfalyi and Liwi, went to a jazzpop concert.

The xylophone was warm ice; the trumpet as clean as bleach; the piano, candy on marble stairs; the guitar pearlescent. The drums!—the drums were like kindling catching.

Our shoulders touched. In the darkened fug of the songhouse, we, like the music, thrilled with a lightsome confidence.

I, Shtuli, heard you, Asfalyi, coming in late.

“So how was the concert?”

Closing your bedroom door, you said, “Fine.”

We, Yarom and Asfalyi, yawning and stretching, rose from our studies.

“Hungry.” —“And stiff.”

We ate, and then, dancing, shook out our limbs.

“Would anyone,” Shtuli asked, “like to fetch some groceries?”

I, Asfalyi, rose, trembling.

“I’ll go!” Fiyatsi cried.

I resat, relieved and dismayed.

I, Asfalyi, wondered why Liwi hadn’t yet booked me.

You carried a single apple, Asfalyi, up to the checkout counter.

The clerk said, smiling, “An apple only?”

You simpered, nodded, said nothing, left.

reclude: to shut up or confine.

moon: to indulge in sentimental daydreams; to yearn or pine infatuatedly.

pearlescent: lustrous like mother of pearl. *mother of pearl*: a smooth, shining, iridescent substance forming the inner layer of the shell of some mollusks.

lightsome: graceful, nimble, or merry.

Liwi, you wondered, when would Asfalyi book you?

To ask for a person's callnumber or to flirt with a person while they were working was, after all, Asfalyi, indecorous and uncouth.

The clerk's "Happy eating!" hummed in your ears all evening, Asfalyi.

My, Asfalyi's, professor made an announcement: one of our classmates—Davu—was pregnant.

Everyone turned in envious admiration to look at Davu, who stood and blushinglly curtseyed; then we all sang the Ode to a Baby Bearer, and cheered.

"I never noticed before," Yarom, you admitted, "Davu's attractiveness."

I, Asfalyi, had to confess I never had noticed *Davu* before.

"O maker of persons, birther of life: without what you do, no we would there be! Humanity heaps upon you its praise! Our thanks and congratulations are yours!"

From afar, Asfalyi, you watched me, Davu, and yearned.

In Lubberland, at the time of this tale, there raged a debate, again, among university students, as to the social value of study: whether it should be categorized as foodwork or not.

You listened, again, Asfalyi, to us, Yarom and your other friends, as we tried to vindicate claiming foodhours for all our labor and lucubration, and urged you too to so claim.

indecorous: improper; in bad taste.

uncouth: lacking good manners or grace.

lucubration: laborious (especially nocturnal) study or meditation.

Although you could find no flaw in our arguments, and indeed agreed with our reasoning, you stopped short of following our example. Instead, you worked your ten hours a week at some sickhouse, kitchen, or farm, thus earning each week your positive balance.

Asfalyi, you from afar admired my intelligence, as revealed, you felt, by my beauty.

“You’ve,” said Yarom, “a narrower definition of “benefit to society” than the rest of us.”

You expostulated, Asfalyi.

Asfalyi, you didn’t know me, but wanted to.

You felt sore but taller, Asfalyi, after a day of apricot picking.

You, Asfalyi, learned from Yarom my name, and repeated it, as you lay in bed, like an incantation.

Asfalyi, no matter how many times you looked up ‘jejune,’ you couldn’t remember what the word meant.

From afar, Asfalyi, you saw me.

Wanting to run toward me, you, overwhelmed, instead turned away.

I, Asfalyi, forgot to turn off the automatic request submitter; it ran all night.

Of the half a million odd souls thus summoned and staked and summoned and staked repeatedly, almost half of them later proved to be junk.

“And that,” the professor grinned, “is attenuation in action. Thanks for the demonstration.”

I blushed.

You flirted by book, Asfalyi, with public library friends you never had met in

person.

“Blushing’s the cause of acne, you know,” Yarom, you told me, Asfalyi.
I blushed. You laughed.

‘I’m hungry for you,’ you recklessly wrote, Asfalyi.
‘I’m naked,’ answered your distant, fully clothed friend.

You, Asfalyi, and I, Yarom, talked about attraction.

I said, “I think I prefer shortpersons to tall.”

“But that’s like preferring yellow to purple paintings, or southern poems to northern ones!” you objected. “How can you make such generalizations? Surely there’s greater difference among the short than between the short and the tall on average.”

“I’m only speaking about the average. Besides, ‘Your color, your kids, and who you’re attracted to ...’ ”

You by reflex muttered the rest: “ ‘ ... are things you don’t choose.’
Yeah, yeah.”

You, Asfalyi, agreed to meet me, a public library friend, in person.

You rose in dudgeon when I arrived: I by far was older than I had told you I was.

“A liar,” you, leaving, said, “is no friend of mine.”

I by shame was chastened.

Yarom said, “I can’t help liking curvaceous persons ...”

“Oh, barf!,” Asfalyi broke in. “Not everyone short is curvy.”

“And persons not overhairy ...”

“Stereotypes! In fact there are lots of perfectly glabrous tallpersons.”

From afar, Asfalyi, you watched me smiling and laughing, chatting with

dudgeon: a feeling of offense or deep resentment; indignation.

glabrous: having a smooth skin, free from hair or down.

friends.

You quivered with wretched longing.

“Tell me what *you’re* attracted to,” said Yarom.

You, Asfalyi, opened your mouth to speak.

From afar, my gaze towards yours, Asfalyi, meandered—

Quickly you froze your face in a bland expression of prim, complacent aloofness.

You, Asfalyi, sleepily tried to braid into logicpatterns some unstretched clumps.

Quipped Yarom, “The string must be taut before you can strum it.” — Laughing, your other friends teased, “You can’t on Dreamsday take Spoon-day’s breath.” And: “An unfurled flag never flaps.” And: “First lose your pants, virginity second.”

Feigning exasperation, you writhed with stifled guffaws.

From afar, I watched you, Asfalyi, smiling and laughing, chatting with friends.

“The traits I find most attractive,” Asfalyi said, “are adaptability; versatility; practicality; and resourcefulness. And a curious and inquisitive mind is very important: someone who’s always learning, because there’s so much to learn. Not someone who’s wise or erudite, necessarily; just a passionate, energetic selfteacher: someone whose brains are supple and lithe and open to new ideas. I’m attracted also to persons who, though ambitious, driven, and resolute, still are patient, calm, and unhurried—and I prefer ambitiousness to success, which is accidental. I love a confident, selfsufficient, and humble person. I love a person whose sense of humor is unabashed, and who knows to laugh at themselves. A generous, kind, considerate person pleases me well. But what I find most attractive of all is happiness—glee.”

erudite: having or showing great knowledge or learning.

You, Asfalyi, felt galvanized by the sight of me from afar. You wanted to run and holler, to scale precipitous cliffs, to risk life and limb, to valiantly, if I asked you to, die.

You dreamed, Asfalyi, of being pregnant.

Yarom said, “Yes, yes; but physically, on the outside ...?”

Asfalyi, thinking of someone, said, “I like sparkling eyes.”

You dreamed, Asfalyi, of being loved by a pregnant person.

“Did you say thank you? ... Where is your other shoe? ... Wipe your mouth, please ...”

“Ugh,” said Asfalyi, turning away. “I never will be a parent.”

Yarom agreed. “They’re so bossy.”

You suggested, Yarom, “Let’s take a day off from studying.”

I, Asfalyi, said, “... Sure.”

Bossing demeans the bossed and the bosser both.

We, Yarom and Asfalyi, riding the omnibus to the fairgrounds, vouchsafed our seats to two gorgeous pregnant persons, who granted us in return appreciative grins.

All four of us blushed.

You volunteered a few hours, Asfalyi, refilling applebowls.

“We are drunker than water is,” laughed Yarom, “when there’s a simoom.”

Asfalyi, you cried, “As drunk as a giddy fledgling are we!”—and stum-

vouchsafe: to give or bestow in a gracious manner.

simoom: a hot, dry, suffocating, dustladen wind.

bled, and, laughing, fell.

“I’m thinking of making cocoa,” said Shtuli, passing. “I could, if anyone wants, make extra ...?”

Your gaze, Asfalyi, was ample answer.

Yarom, when Shtuli had gone, rebuked me. “Your parent’s precious.”

I sighed, admitting it.

Asfalyi, your lazy gaze, unexpected, drifted across the courtyard.

Your eyestrings all of a sudden tautened and thrummed, your limbs on their hinges loosened, and squalls of restlessness shook and troubled your blood.

You saw, for the first time, slouched on a seatback, me.

Yarom, you longed to again be pregnant.

Royahn.

Like a pecking bird, you, Asfalyi, gobbled up furtive glances at me, Royahn.

You were never able to catch me glancing at you.

You, Asfalyi, saw me, Royahn, again the next day.

I didn’t see you.

In bed, Asfalyi, you lay emotionally if shadowily imagining conversations with me, Royahn.

Asfalyi, you, from a distance, watched me, Royahn.

You didn’t yet know my name.

You, Asfalyi, sat at a table near to one I, Royahn, and my friends had sat at the day before.

shadowily: indistinctly.

But we didn't come.

You, Asfalyi, eavesdropped on me, Royahn, and my friends, who sat at the table next to yours.

I, Yarom, returned with the information you sought, Asfalyi.

“Royahn.”

“Royahn,” you repeated savoringly, still clutching my arm.

Unfortunately, I also had information you hadn't sought.

Your heart dried up and your body's fluids, Asfalyi, came to a stagnant standstill.

Royahn was in a relationship.

Your professor's hair, though a different color and length and style, made you think, Asfalyi, of mine, Royahn's.

I, Asfalyi, in my grimoire read something reminding me of Royahn. I read it again, and lingered awhile, adream, at the word 'conjunctively' ...

Asfalyi, you filled a page with my name, 'Royahn,' in a hundred various fonts and sizes.

You wanted to die, Asfalyi.

“What's new?” asked your younger sibling, Fiyatsi.

Gloomily, you, Asfalyi, replied, “I think I'm in love.”

Fiyatsi naively said that that sounded wonderful.

Asfalyi, you thought continually about me, Royahn. My posture, my smile, my voice, my mere name invaded your mind a hundred times every hour.

I was unattainable. I was in a relationship.

adream: dreaming.

But your brain, an animal caught in toils of its own creation, searched, struggling vainly, for some escape.

Drunk on red wine and white, you, Asfalyi, saw me, Royahn, and, grinning, galumphed my way.

“I’m Asfalyi.”

Touching your hand, I said, “I’m Royahn.”

“I know,” you admitted impishly.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, shouting to hear ourselves over others shouting to hear themselves, talked of books, professors, and lectures candidly.

After a night of bravening dreams, you woke to a note, Asfalyi, from me, Royahn.

“You were fun to talk to! I got your callnumber from your friend, who was pretty sure that you wouldn’t mind. p.s. Do you?”

Asfalyi, you didn’t eat, didn’t leave your bedroom, till dusk—because you and I, Royahn, back and forth were booking each other playful, polite, explorative notes all day.

You, Asfalyi, and I, Fiyatsi, that morning went for a skip downtown. We admired the skyily colored skyscrapers. Every street corner had its street poet, and we listened to one declaiming an ode to rubbish collectors.

“Yes,” I, agreeing, mused, “what a satisfyingly useful job that would be!”

You wistfully murmured, “Sure”; you were thinking, though, of Royahn, whose sonorous voice was so like the poet’s: tangy and smooth. How full it would sound poured into your ear!

toils: a net or nets into which a hunted animal is driven.

galumph: to move in a clumsy, heavy, or noisy manner.

braven: to make brave, embolden.

skip: a gait in which a hop on the same foot follows every stride.

Did you, Asfalyi, love me, Royahn? It seemed mad to love without hope of love in return; but madness was ‘pathognomic of love,’ some poet had said.

Yarom, your gaze met another’s briefly, electrifyingly.

Asfalyi, you’d never tell me, Royahn, you loved me.

Instead, in silence you’d worship me from a distance, gleaning what crumbs you could from my table. No one would ever know how you felt. Your sacrifice would be sweeter for being secret.

A glimpse of Royahn’s bare clavicle made you dizzy, Asfalyi.

Asfalyi booked to Yarom, ‘Why do we shun a love unrequited? Doesn’t this prove that, more than to love, we want to be loved? That, more than we want the other, we want their want? —I, for once, at last, am content to love, only love. My love for Royahn is selfless.’

Asfalyi, you wrote an ode to Royahn on paper—and burned it.

To Asfalyi Yarom booked, ‘Selflessness isn’t one of love’s attributes. A delicious meal can’t be loved unselfishly, can it?’

Asfalyi, the thought of my, Royahn’s, nakedness—gracile, smooth, the color of syrup—harrowed your brains; my nakedness pressed against yours was unimaginable: as literally unthinkable as eternity.

Asfalyi booked to Yarom, ‘A person is not a meal. My devotion doesn’t need nourishment. I’m a hermit fasting, a mystic paying the cosmos homage.’

Casually you, Asfalyi, invited me to an open reading of *Drestan’s Phasm*, a play that you as a child had loved.

pathognomic: characteristic or indicative of a particular disease; symptomatic.
gracile: gracefully slender.

I, Royahn, booked back in a minute, ‘Sure! It sounds fun.’

You marveled, your vision dim, at such positivity so succinctly expressed.

Yarom booked back, ‘You compare yourself to a saint devoted to the divine. But aren’t saints just cowards who choose an object to praise that cannot be proved unpraiseworthy? You refuse to risk disappointment; you put Royahn on a pedestal. That, I think, *is* selfish.’

I, Royahn, drew the part of Olbig the Phasm, which I performed with gusto and dash. The heart in you sank dejected, Asfalyi—until my mispronouncing a word rebuoyed it awhile.

But later, alone, you chided yourself for being so petty. Maybe the word had several pronunciations. You looked it up.

It was you, not I, who’d been wrong. You shriveled a little.

Yarom, you received a note from Asfalyi:

‘What should I do, then?’

‘Be friends,’ you booked back. ‘Soon you will find that even Royahn is human and flawed. Like me.’

You, Asfalyi, invited me to a drumming class. I, Royahn, replied in a flash, ‘I’d love to!’

I brought my sweetheart, Karuni, with me.

Karuni drummed like volcanic lightning.

Your spine retracted a little.

I, Asfalyi, though I’d not heard the joke that Royahn was laughing at, grinned appreciatively, expectantly.

phasm: a phantom.
dash: spirited vigor.

From afar, Asfalyi, you glared askance at Karuni, whom you would fain despise.

I, Royahn, invited you to a bicycle dance, Asfalyi. You brought Yarom.

“Is Karuni coming tonight?”

“Karuni,” I sighed, “hates bicycle dancing.”

Roaring, your heart expanded to fill your torso. You featly wheeled round the velodrome like a bird in flight.

You were caught, Asfalyi, in conversation with me, Karuni.

I, clever, waggish, and genial, charmed you, despite yourself.

You disliked my likableness, but nevertheless liked me.

While walking across the campus, Royahn, you took my, Asfalyi’s, hand.

All the blood within me reversed its course for a moment.

You, Asfalyi, daydreamed about revealing to me, Royahn, that you loved me. Turning away, avoiding my gaze, you’d say, “You do know, I hope, that you’re wonderful? I adore you deeply, completely. Please don’t reply; there’s nothing I need to hear. Just remember always that you are loved. —Now goodbye forever.”

These daydreams always concluded with a farewell. Your underminer recognized that a declaration of love was never a gift, but rather an ultimatum.

Late into the night, Yarom and Asfalyi, hunched and exhausted, shoulder to shoulder sat and wrote spells, deflating each other’s texts.

“I like,” said Royahn directly, “your way of smiling.”

Asfalyi simpered. “My what?”

fain: gladly, with pleasure.

featly: with graceful agility; nimbly.

waggish: humorous in a playful, mischievous, or facetious manner. *facetious*: treating serious issues with deliberately inappropriate humour; flippant.

“Like that!”

If, Royahn, you were free to love me, Asfalyi, would you?
I’d never ask.

I, Asfalyi, scanned the refectory for your face, Royahn.

When you entered, holding the hand of somebody not Karuni, my eye-balls trembled in consternation.

You, Asfalyi, and I, Royahn, were on Knifesday planning to hike the water-slide trails.

All week you prepared with brainteasers, jogs, and salads.

“How’s Karuni?” Asfalyi asked.

Said Royahn, “Karuni’s Karuni.”

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, sweaty and limber, stood on the sunlogged hill-crest.

We tossed the drybag that held our lunch and our change of clothes down the waterslide.

With a running start and a whoop, we followed.

Sputtering, laughing, rocking and spinning, clutching each others’ wet wrists and ankles, passing through tiers of sunshine and treesshade, rapidly we, Royahn and Asfalyi, slid.

Your book, Asfalyi, correctly guessed what you’d meant to actually write, and silently fixed your error for you.

Royahn, your feelingless pantleg touched my, Asfalyi’s, feelingless shoe; my foot, though, from shoe could feel, and your shin from pantleg could feel, the pressure, and there resounded through each of us an electric thrill.

Royahn, you called me, Asfalyi, over, and introduced me to who was holding your hand: “My sibling.”

I lavished bonhomous salutations on both of you.

You, Asfalyi, sat at your desk, while I, Royahn, lay a fathom or less away on your bed and played with your braiding board, making choruses of a hundred souls sing in harmony (more or less) a popular song.

“So why don’t you live,” I asked, “on the university campus?”

Sighing, you said, “I worry about my parent.”

I made a moue. “You’re too sweet for children to eat.”

Embarrassed, you shrugged. “Besides, there’s too much distraction on campus. Nobody studies.”

“No, they do other things.”

We both blushed.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, screaming with laughter, tickled each other.

I, Royahn, asked, “Are you and Yarom ...?”

Asfalyi, you said, “No no, no no no.”

“I wondered.”

You, agitated, replied at random: “We’re friends. Just very good friends. Which isn’t to say— Yarom is the sweetest person, but isn’t— Not that I’m any— Outwardly, we, and actually, we—”

“There’s friends and there’s friends,” I said in an inadvertently husky voice.

We both blushed.

Passing your door, Asfalyi, I, Shtuli, popped in my head. “Would anyone like a sugarsop slice?”

Your withering glower answered me overadequately.

bonhomous: full of cheerful friendliness.

fathom: a measure of distance equal to the span of one’s outstretched arms from fingertip to fingertip, or, for practical purposes, two strides.

moue: a pout of mock distaste, often flirtatious.

You, for all of a day, Asfalyi, received no notes from Royahn.
You fretted.

‘Guess who broke up?’ Yarom to Asfalyi wrote.

Heart in your hands, Asfalyi, you, disingenuous, asked Royahn how Karuni was.

Royahn, disingenuous, said, “Oh, fine. Doing great.”

Your heart fell to earth and, moldering, burst.

I, Royahn, asked, “Are you and anyone ...?”

You, Asfalyi, embarrassed, airily said, “I’m more or less voluntarily single, presently.”

“Oh?”

You, shrugging, implied a horde of persistent suitors.

I blushed.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, queued for an hour to borrow a speedboat.

Out on the dazzling water, we skimmed and thumped over clashing legions of waves, the wind in our squinting eyes.

For a while we moored at an offshore dock, and beside each other lay softly rocking, the sunshine painting upon our eyelids chrysanthemums and carnelians.

Inscrutably, scrutinizingly, we, Royahn and Asfalyi, looked at each other long.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, wanted to kiss, but didn’t.

We longer look and we look more longingly out opaque than translucent

molder: to decay or disintegrate, especially because of neglect.

carnelian: a translucent, reddish orange, semiprecious gemstone.

windows.

Prone in the sun, Asfalyi, you lay rereading your favorite book, *A Goetic's Principles*—which seemed filled with familiar passages you had never, before today, understood.

'Goetics are anxious persons,' you read. 'They cannot relax if something remains obscure. The unknown unnerves them; doubt makes them itch. So they scratch, and scratch, till the truth at last is revealed. And civilization reaps the rewards! The planet, without goetics, would still be swaddled in ignorance. Their discomfort drives knowledge forth. As sages have said: "Dispel fog by walking into it." '

You, Asfalyi, were scanning my, Royahn's, public shelves when your book, inquisitive, chimed. Your heart skipped a beat; the incoming note, however, was just from Grambi Pamoj.

'Is this how you send a note with this thing?'

Asfalyi, were you or were you not a goetic?

Anxious, you mused: It's better to prove the worst than to guess the best.

You would know the truth.

We, Asfalyi and Royahn, showed each other our favorite parks and secluded spots round the city.

Asfalyi, you cast the spell you were writing.

Nothing occurred. You, after five seconds, cancelled the spell—but not before all the souls in your braiding board had established, millions of times, the lessness than two of one.

You, Asfalyi, and I, Royahn, in the orchard, warm in the shade, atop the

goetic: a practitioner of goety. *goety*: magic performed by the invocation and employment of demons.

same ladder, cherrypicked cherries, eating the bulk of them right away, and, spitting out pits, outspitting each other.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, swallowing giggles, chatted of every inconsequential thing as it crossed our minds.

“Your mouth’s still red,” said Royahn.

“So’s yours,” said Asfalyi.

A silence on us, Royahn and Asfalyi, fell.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, stared at the chalklike scrawl of the cirrus clouds on a blueboard sky.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, opened our mouths to speak.

“You were saying?” —“Nothing. And you?” —“Oh, nothing.”

With painstaking pluck, Asfalyi, you wrote a note to Royahn. ‘There’s something I meant to ask you today.’

The answer seemed long in coming, but came:

‘What was it?’

You wrote, Asfalyi, ‘I wonder if you can guess.’

‘I have an idea; but maybe I’m crazy.’

‘What’s your idea?’

‘I’m scared to be wrong.’

‘You shouldn’t be!’

‘Also scared to be right.’

‘What scares you?’

‘A) Too much sadness. B) Too much happiness.’

cherrypick: to selectively choose the best or most desirable items from what is available.

outspit: to surpass in spitting; to spit farther than.

‘Could whatever I have to say really make you happy or sad?’

‘Euphoric or wretched, actually.’

‘Your admitting that makes *me* rather euphoric.’

‘Beast!’

‘What I meant to ask you was this ...’

‘No, wait.’

‘Wait for what? Wait why?’

‘We should maybe do this in person.’

‘All right. I’m coming over.’

‘No, wait.’

‘Wait why!’

‘Never mind. Come over. I’ll wait for you in the garden.’

You, breathless, bicycled through the nightblooming scents of summer, Asfalyi, agilely dodging lions and cars.

You, Royahn, in the garden, fidgeted, plucking leaves from their stems compulsively.

Your book, Asfalyi, was gently throbbing.

Royahn had sent you another message. You read it.

‘If what you meant to ask me today was whether or not I love you, the answer’s yes.’

You, Asfalyi, fell from your bike.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, kissed.

My, Asfalyi’s, face flushed with love.

Your heart thrilled with love, Royahn.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, didn't dare speak.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, wrigglingly kissed and fondled each other.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, tried to undress each other without disjoining.

You pressed your body against mine, searching; pressed parts of you into parts of me, finding one warm place that embraced you like a prehensile flower that exuded lubricant musk; and meanwhile I pressed my body against your body, and pressed my parts into parts of you; one exquisite part, as smooth and slippery, hot and muscular as a tongue, sought and found your innermost, sweetest, ticklish, warmest pleasure, and didn't linger, but visited and departed, visited and departed, each ingress followed by egress, egress by ingress, alternately; we witlessly whimpered, and, when our mouths were free, whispered, begging: empty me, fill me, swallow me, feed me, come with me, go; our bodies from pate to toes were afire with tingling delight; this moment of perfect blissfulness vindicated all pain and suffering everywhere, for all time; you loved me, and I loved you.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, intertwined slept.

You, Asfalyi, springingly through the park in the rain went running, in love.

Everyone was in love! The omnibus drivers, they were in love. The rubbish collectors too were in love. And so were the windowwashers, the cooks and bakers, the grocers, streetcleaners, nurses, teachers, and poets! Animals, too, and things were in love. The birds were in love; the clouds were in love; the sun with the steaming streets was in love!

prehensile: capable of grasping or holding.

ingress: going in or entering.

egress: going out or exiting.

You, Asfalyi, told me, your Grambi Pamoj, all about Royahn.

Your infatuation was heady. Wistful, I grinned, “It sounds like a perfect calfllove.”

You primly asked for a definition of ‘calfllove.’

After a pause, I said, “That intense and powerful love that young persons feel.”

Though pleased, you denied that age was a factor.

You, teasing, Asfalyi, asked me, Yarom, who I was in love with.

“No one,” Yarom said, laughing. “Not everyone is in love.”

Royahn and Asfalyi, you with your mouths made noises like happy lasers, and laughed.

You admitted, Yarom, “Well, maybe there’s someone ...”

Crowing in celebration, Asfalyi clutched you and hopped in place.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, vowed that we’d never be like those silent couples we saw who, numbed by long years of tedium, seemed to only be tolerating each other; never would we find nothing to say.

Drinking red wine and white, Yarom and Asfalyi eulogized love.

Asfalyi, you looked up ‘calfllove’ and frowned.

You, Asfalyi, and I, Royahn, hand in hand went skipping downtown. The city, refreshed by rain, seemed as new as dew and as bright as fire. We decided that we would climb a skyscraper.

“There.” I pointed to one that had at the top a belvedere.

Thirty strenuous minutes later, we, sweating, stood at the railing,

calfllove: an intense but relatively shallow romantic attachment between adolescents.

belvedere: an open-sided gallery at the top of a building that commands fine views of the surrounding scenery.

happy, with all the world at our feet.

You wished Karuni were here to see you, Royahn, the way you were now.

Asfalyi, you, with a raised, not rising, inflection—less like a question than a reminder—said to Royahn, “I love you.”

Royahn replied with a firmly falling inflection.

‘Asfalyi kisses you,’ wrote Asfalyi.

‘Royahn,’ wrote Royahn, ‘adores you.’

From old components, you built, Asfalyi, a questionbox—and it worked.

You sent to Royahn a celebratory note—which began, the longer it went unanswered, to seem vainglorious.

You, Yarom, and your sweetheart, murmuring twaddle tenderly, cuddled.

Asfalyi, you wrote, ‘Asfalyi’s forever smitten with you.’

‘Asfalyi dotes on you,’ wrote Asfalyi.

‘Asfalyi tonight will dream of you,’ wrote Asfalyi. ‘Good night.’

Royahn, your gaze and another’s joltingly met.

You, Royahn, at the mudpark, didn’t go near the mud.

I, Asfalyi, showed my concern.

You didn’t know what was wrong, so denied that anything was.

Royahn, you received a note from Asfalyi. ‘Fancy a walk?’

At length you replied, ‘I’d rather stay home and study tonight.’

Asfalyi, you wrote a spell that would find the flaws in the spells you wrote; but it had a flaw that you couldn't find.

We, Royahn and Asfalyi, waited in line for spongecake in silence.

Royahn, you didn't know what you wanted; nor did you know what you didn't want.

Royahn, you forgot to meet me, Asfalyi.

'Sorry,' you said. 'My memory isn't perfect like yours.'

You wrote a note to Royahn, Asfalyi, but didn't send it.

Asfalyi, you saw Royahn and a stranger standing together, talking and laughing.

Asfalyi, I, your professor, asked you a question twice, but you didn't hear me at all.

Asfalyi, were you or were you not a goetic?

Royahn's reply promptly came.

'The only thing wrong's the fact that you're always asking what's wrong, when nothing is wrong!'

Royahn, you had been your best with Karuni, who, it appeared, had found your best lacking.

Maybe your best would never be good enough.

'You lately,' Asfalyi wrote, 'have become laconic and sullen when we're together.'

Stung, you, Royahn, denied it.

Royahn, you hated to hurt Asfalyi.

You simply wouldn't.

'Something has changed,' Asfalyi insisted.

'What?' asked Royahn. 'Your feelings for me?'

Karuni had broken your, Royahn's, heart. You wouldn't break mine, Asfalyi's.

Defensive, tearful, bewildered, querulous, we, Royahn and Asfalyi, booked back and forth till dawn.

Yarom, you hugged me, Asfalyi.

"What have I done?," I said through a sob. "I should have been less importunate."

You, Asfalyi, and I, Royahn, though we didn't know it, were breaking up.

Asfalyi, you pleaded, 'Shouldn't we talk this over in person?'

'Talking won't change the facts,' wrote Royahn.

You, Karuni, had broken up with Royahn for reasons beyond your own understanding. Something had not felt right.

You had made, perhaps, a mistake.

But what were the facts?

'But why?' asked Royahn. 'What good would it do? The same exact thing would happen again.'

You had been too demanding, Asfalyi. You had been unappeasable.

querulous: complaining in a petulant or whining manner.

‘Apologies sew no buttons back on,’ you proverbied, Royahn.

“No, you did nothing wrong,” said Yarom. “A person can love too little, perhaps, but never too much.”

Asfalyi, you saw Royahn and Karuni sitting together, laughing and holding hands.

“You loved,” said Yarom. “And well.”

You wanted to die, Asfalyi.

Yarom, your sweetheart demanded, “What are you so damn gloomy about?”—and willfully misconstrued your reply.

You, Asfalyi, I, Shtuli, saw, were in pain. I yearned to console and comfort you.

Yarom, your sweetheart and you broke up.

Everything—rain, the campus, the city’s skyscrapers, eating, gardens and parks you’d lain in together, even the sky and ocean—reminded you of Royahn, Asfalyi.

Drunk on red wine and white, Yarom and Asfalyi vilified love.

You, Asfalyi, on paper wrote to Royahn a long and beseeching letter. You sealed and mailed it without first reading it over.

Later, in bed, half sleeping, you misremembered your words, and shuddered in shame.

You, a mailperson, warmed by selfadmiration, valiantly trudged through sleet to deliver letters to ardent lovers, to doting parents, to steadfast friends.

You, Asfalyi, and I, Yarom, were fed up with love.

“I renounce romance.” —“Yes! Infatuation is fatuous.” —“Yes. I’m sick of having a broken heart.” —“We should have unbreakable hearts: we’re marvelous persons!” —“Anyone who can’t see that can’t be too marvelous, can they?” —“*We* should be breaking hearts!” —“Let’s begin today —with a moratorium on dating.” —“Yes! I will date myself for a while.” —“We’ll practice the art of being alone.” —“Inuring ourselves to loneliness.” —“Persons find independence sexy.”

We kissed.

“Oops.” —“Sorry.”

Royahn, you opened Asfalyi’s letter, morosely riffling its many pages. Then slowly, dutifully, you started to read.

Asfalyi, you hugged an ebonytree.

Royahn, you stowed, in a special drawer, my, Asfalyi’s, letter, intending soon to reply to it.

From afar, Asfalyi, you saw a person who looked a bit like Royahn.

Our—Yarom’s and Asfalyi’s—friends tried to cheer us up, first with jokes, then teasing, then tickling.

Only the tickling worked.

Pining, you, Vetru, gazed at Asfalyi needily.

You wondered if you were pregnant, Royahn.

You hoped that you were.

inure: to accustom or habituate.

pining: languishing or suffering a decline because of emotional pain.

Vetru, you smiled with only your eyes.

With eager and irrepressible smiles, the nurses all gathered round you, Royahn, to tell you, in unison, the good news.

Asfalyi, you smiled with only your mouth.

Unreal to yourself, you walked through the streets, Royahn.

Did a pregnant person walk thus?

A grin like a firework surged up your spine and flooded your face with pride.

You put down your glass of wine and allowed yourself to be kissed, Asfalyi.

Your parents and siblings, gibbering praise, embraced you, Royahn.

Asfalyi, your leaden gaze and my, Vetru's, lustrous one intermingled.

Your friends, suppressing their envy, tickled and squeezed and stroked you, Royahn.

You, Asfalyi, took off your clothes and waited, eyes closed, in bed.

Royahn, your professors, clasping your elbows, offered their thanks and help.

Asfalyi, to keep from reading them, you deleted the notes that you and Royahn had written each other.

Your classmates cheered you, Royahn.

Asfalyi, you and I, Vetru, went to a public poetry reading.

Wanting to match my judgement to yours, I listened with alternating,

experimental distaste and pleasure. I didn't know what my true opinion might be, or whether I even had one. It seemed as though I could choose to like or dislike the poem at will; moreover, in either case, I was right.

I later, half lying, said that I'd thought it admirable. You, lying, agreed.

You lazed and rested that week, Royahn—and still earned (the maximum) twenty foodhours for being pregnant.

Asfalyi, you and I, Vetru, walked through the snowy streets arm in arm, my voice in your ear a meaningless stream of phonemes.

You, humorless, laughed, Asfalyi.

Asfalyi, you blamed your failure to braid a viable logicpattern on junky demons, and freed them.

Asfalyi, you sank your face in my, Vetru's, belly and, burbling, groaned.

You, Royahn, were a procreator, a biological parent!

Strutting, you beamed.

Departing, I, Vetru, asked you, Asfalyi, when we would see each other again tomorrow.

You hesitated. "We both," you gingerly said, "could use, don't you think, a break? For a week we've spent every day together."

My face but briefly betrayed my hurt and surprise. I left without kissing you.

Royahn, you dreamed of the many places your child might live in, the many parents it might be reared by, the many families that might accept it with love as one of their own.

burble: to speak murmurously or incoherently.

You, Asfalyi, tried the next day to fully explain your feelings by book.

‘Our spirits are too congenial. I feel so comfortable in your company, it’s as if I’m alone. I catch myself farting, picking my nose, or belching as if you weren’t even there.’

You felt, Royahn, like a tree in seed.

Asfalyi, you wrote: ‘But worse is the way I talk to you: like a baby, I coo and gibber.’

You, Asfalyi, despite your candor, felt false.

‘The truth,’ Asfalyi, you wrote, ‘is that I dislike the person I am with you, at least lately. Maybe some time apart will allow my self to regrow its armor and patch its masks. I suspect, however, that ours is rather a love of friendship, which soothes and slackens, instead of bracing and girding like a romantic love.’

Paining others is painful.

Vetru, by disappointment embittered, booked back, ‘But friends don’t make us dislike ourselves.’

We, Yarom and Asfalyi, vowed to improve ourselves.

“Till we’re irresistible.” —“That’s not why we’ll improve ourselves, though.” —“Of course. We’ll do it to please ourselves.” —“Yes. Henceforth our motto will be: Please only yourself.” —“Be only yourself.” —“Be someone you’d love.” —“Be someone you’d fall in love with.” —“Yes. Be the person the person you’d fall in love with would fall in love with.” —“Yes. Be today the person you want to be when you meet tomorrow the person you’ll want to be with.” —“Be someone that the someone you’d love would love.” —“Yes.”

We kissed.

“Oops.” — “Sorry.” — “We’re not too good at this.”

You, Asfalyi, spotted a pregnant person who looked a bit like Royahn.
Who was, it turned out, Royahn.

Laughed Royahn, “You can hug me tighter than that!”

“And may I,” Asfalyi laughed, “hold my ear, for luck, to your belly?”

Royahn, you pensively wrote a note to Asfalyi.

Asfalyi, you to Royahn wrote pensively back.

‘It certainly was! I’m pleased for and proud of you. And a little jealous.
You look so healthy and glad! Is this your first pregnancy?’

Back and forth, we, Royahn and Asfalyi, booked to each other playful, polite, explorative notes all week.

“Let’s take a day off,” suggested Asfalyi.

“Sure,” said Yarom. “It’s beautiful out.”

Asfalyi, you told Royahn reassuring stories about the effortless pregnancy that Yarom had gone through a year ago.

Your gaze from afar, Asfalyi, met mine.

You looked away smiling, smiling looked back, and lifted a hand in quizzical greeting.

We, Yarom and Asfalyi, bicycled fast through sunlight and shade, the sunlight as soft and warm as the air that wafts from a bakery on a chilly morning, the shade as cool and as soft as seabreezes on a sweltering afternoon.