

Nuntle Shtuli

by C. P. Boyko

You, Shtuli, went to a school and sang a few songs.

The children, with skybright eyes, listened rapt, their mouths hanging moistly open.

Strumming my balalaika, I, Shtuli, sang.

Shtuli, you asked Asfalyi, your child, to come to a noisejazz concert with you.

“I’d rather stay home and read my grimoire tonight, to be honest, Boombi,” Asfalyi said.

“That’s all right,” you gloomily said. “I’ll go by myself.”

Shtuli, you sang your songs at a pleasureground for some inattentive, cavorting children.

You, Shtuli, went to the Parents Bringing Up Children office downtown, and filled out another form.

At the music gardens, a parent dandled a squalling kneebaby brusquely.

Shtuli, you longed to comfort the child, and press to your breast its sniveling head.

Your nuntle Shtuli and you, Fiyatsi, climbed trees and, mimicking bird-

nuntle: the sibling of one’s parent.

song, waved at the persons passing below.

Some parents, hushing their children, listened to Shtuli sing.

I, Shtuli, suggested, “Face fight?”

You scowled, Asfalyi, but not in fun.

I retreated, joking, “You win, you win.”

You were invited, Shtuli, by weary teachers to sing some songs in their classroom.

I, Shtuli—seated beside you, one of my students, at the piano—listened to your performance.

“It’s getting better,” I lied, then played it myself elucidatorily.

I, Shtuli, sent you an invitation by book, Asfalyi, to go with me on a mud-boat ride.

You replied by book, “I’d prefer to study some more. The book storehouse closes early today.”

Some teachers, hushing their students, listened to Shtuli sing.

I, Shtuli, went by myself, and didn’t enjoy it.

Shtuli, you sang, “A, B, C, D, E, F, G, teach the alphabet to ski. H, I, J, K, L, M, N, lend the alphabet a pen. O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, feed the alphabet burgoon. V, W, X, Y, Z, put the alphabet to bed.”

You, Shtuli, went to a coffee palace to hear a pipeband perform.

The music was loud but blandly ignorable—to promote, or so you presumed, more intimate conversation among the patrons.

But you had no one to talk to.

The form that you, Shtuli, filled every week downtown at the Parents Bringing Up Children office was called officially, “Application for Supplementary Child by Already Childed Parent.”

You, Pamoj, said, “What’s that repugnant bureaucratese intended to mean?”

“It means that I want a baby,” said Shtuli, filling the form.

“A baby request? That polysyllabic verbiage means but ‘baby request’? Oh, woe is the language! Woe is our parent tongue!”

“Yes,” said Shtuli, “woe.”

I, Shtuli, morosely sang: “A mite clutching a mote and a mote being clutched by a mite sailed together through empty sunlight. Said the mite to the mote, “On you shall I evermore dote!” —Said the mote to the mite, “You’re holding too tight.” —“To you I myself shall devote!” to the mote cried the mite. —“Sing you only one note?” asked the mote of the mite.”

Hunching over your braiding board in your room next door, you, Asfalyi, summoning demons, set them in opposition; their tiny crazed screams produced in aggregate dulcet plashings of white noise, drowning your parent’s plaint.

“Then the sun sank from sight and the air turned thick night. “Little mite,” said the mote, “I’m in need of a coat. Again on me dote! Again sing that note!” But the life of a mite is as brief as day’s light. The mite had dried, and died, and let go. Now a young mote and an olden mote through separate darknesses float.”

Marjoey, you and your nuntle Shtuli released your marbles and, cheering, followed their rolling race down the footpath’s slope.

Shtuli, you, fingerpicking your sitar, sang.

You washed in the sink your handkerchief, Shtuli.

At the tumblepark, a disheveled child shuffled, snuffling, nearer to hear you, Shtuli, at song.

Outside in the yard, you, Shtuli, and I, Fiyatsi, constructed patiently, using sticks, stones, and clay, an intricate course of gutters and flumes for water to flow in.

Then, with expectant hearts, we unspooled and readied the garden hose.

Shtuli, you smiled at me, the disheveled child.

I, embarrassed, scarpered.

You, Shtuli, recalled that, one day, when I, Asfalyi, was young, together we rode the omnibus home; my sleepily drooping head, you remembered, snapped, with each bump and turn in the road, upright for a moment; gently you guided it, without rousing me, to your warm and cushiony shoulder.

I, Shtuli, bending my banjo's strings as I sounded them, made a teacher's heart overflow with objectless longing.

Shtuli, you looked for me, the disheveled child, but in vain that day.

Your hearers assumed your heart to be broken, Shtuli.

It was.

Shtuli, you sat beside me, your student, listening tinglingly to me play.

I weekly was getting better.

Shtuli, you sang a song that you'd written years ago, when Asfalyi was still an infant.

"Baby, baby, baby, you're a real loud baby. Baby, baby, baby, you cry

all night.”

I, Fiyatsi, cried, “Face fight!”

Shtuli, you mugged. I grimaced. You winced. I pouted. You sneered. I glowered. You girmed. I wrinkled.

You laughed and, staggering back, collapsed in defeat.

“Baby, you cry: “Waaaaah!” Cry with me baby, cry: “Waaaaah!” ”

The little children, though proudly scornful of infantility, cried along with you, Shtuli, gleefully.

Shtuli, filling a form, you wrote, ‘My relationship with my child, Asfalyi (now grown), was farther than far the intimatest, rewardingest, satisfyingest, dearest, lovingest one I ever expect to know.’

Shyly, I, the disheveled child, asked you, Shtuli, “What is a mite?”

You answered, “A teensy insect.”

I mulled this over awhile. “How teensy?”

You showed me.

Squeezing my index finger and thumb together like yours, I gasped.

Fiyatsi, you asked me, Shtuli, to teach you how to write songs.

I opened my mouth alacritously, then thoughtfully closed it.

You, Shtuli, went to the coffee palace again. The pipeband again was playing.

You listened, this time, attentively—out of kindness first (no one else was listening), then with interest, and finally in appreciation.

I, the disheveled child, asked you, Shtuli, “What is a mote?”

“The teensiest speck of dust,” you replied.

girm: to make a grotesque face.

wrinkle: to pucker the face.

“How teensy? This teensy?”

“Teensier.”

I attempted to crush my finger and thumb more tightly together, striving to bring what space still remained between them to zero.

“Teensier.”

“You start with a tune,” I, Shtuli, said, whistling one.

You, Fiyatsi, asked me to teach you first how to whistle.

The form asked you, Shtuli, “Why do you want to parent another child?”

Your exhaustive answer exactly filled the provided space.

Pursing your lips, Fiyatsi, you blew.

Instead of a whistle, spittle came out.

“Keep practicing,” Shtuli said.

“But these aren’t my clothes,” Pamoj, you objected. “Where are my clothes?”

Said Shtuli, “These, Boombi, are your clothes now. Your old things wore out a long time ago.”

Shtuli, plucking your lute, you sang.

Shtuli asked the disheveled child where its parents were. It replied, “I only got one.”

We, Marjoey and Shtuli, sat in the kitchen, solving a music puzzle.

I, Shtuli, hinted, “Recall the circle of fifths.”

Marjoey, you counted semitones: “. . . five, six, seven is A. So A should have one more sharp than D Major has, which is two—so three?”

I demurely smiled.

Shtuli, you sang your songs at a children’s playfeast. The children, playing

and feasting, paid no attention.

Shtuli, so slowly sang you your merry melodies that they sounded like mournful dirges.

“How come the mite holds the mote so tight?” the disheveled child asked you, Shtuli.

Grimly you answered, “Love.”

Shtuli, sweetlier than a bulbul you sang.

“A baby, before it’s born, is assigned at random a parent,” Shtuli explained to Leni, Marjoey’s friend.

“Yes, I know,” said Leni.

At the instrument storehouse, Shtuli, you indecisively browsed the lavish designs adorning the tins and packets of strings and plectrums.

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

Your withering glower answered me overadequately.

You, Shtuli, dolorous, sang your “Math Song”:

“Eight times three is twentyfour; nine times six is thirty more. Taking two from twelve makes ten, which is five and five again.”

Shtuli, you overheard at the romping garden a parent say to their child, while wiping its runny nose, “Do you know what Boombi is looking forward to having when we get home?” —“A toast bread?” —“A great big coffee with lots of coconut cream.”

The child expressed empathetic delight by clapping its hands and crooning an ode, impromptu, to coffee.

“A baby can get a parent from anywhere in the world,” I, Shtuli, explained.

“A parent can get a baby from anywhere in the world.”

Marjoey, you said, “And sometimes from outer space!”

I denied this.

“Sometimes,” you said, “they come from beyond the grave!”

“You’re just silly now.”

You denied this.

I, the best of your students, Shtuli, informed you bashfully that no longer would I be taking your lessons.

Hiding your disappointment, you curtsayed low in farewell, and urged me to practice often.

I, lying, said that I surely would.

Shtuli, reasonlessly there flashed in your mind a memory of Asfalyi, eyes wide with trust and misgiving, splashingly swimming after you as you, beckoning, backed away.

There’s nothing that isn’t constantly changing.

Seated beside the window, you, Shtuli, listened to children’s laughter afar.

Shtuli, you told some kids at the climbing stadium that the baby assignment formula favored persons who hadn’t yet become parents.

“Yes,” they acknowledged. “That’s so that everybody can be a parent, and everybody can have one child, before anybody gets two. That’s fair.”

You agreed without much enthusiasm.

“That’s only fair!” cried the kids.

We, Fiyatsi and Shtuli, sat at the kitchen table and played a boardgame, *Nutrition Hero*, while Odori, moving around us, cooked.

“Adding six to twentyseven yields the same as three elevens. Multiplying

ones by twelves leaves you with the twelves themselves.”

Fiyatsi, you shuffled clumsily and perfunctorily your nutriment tokens, hoping again to draw all your carbohydrates at once.

Shtuli, you answered, filling the form, ‘I love to watch children grow and to help them grow.’

Shtuli, you played two fats on Fiyatsi’s protein and crowed exultingly.

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

Our hearts quopping, haltingly we from nothing made conversation.

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

Our hearts each saddened a little.

“Supper’s ready,” Odori said, “so let’s clear the table.”

We promised, “Soon!”

You, Marjoey, putting your shirt on, paused with your head inside it, and peered around at a dim and alien world of fabric.

Victorious, Shtuli consoled Fiyatsi, who’d lost. “Here, here.”

There came of a sudden into your head a song that you hadn’t sung in a lustrum, Shtuli: “The Bedtime Song.”

“My boombi tucks my bedclothes in; I’m warm and snug up to my chin. Soon dreams will dance inside my head. Oh, how I love to go to bed!”

It seldom had worked, you, laughing through tears, remembered.

You through the treepark strolled, Shtuli, peering up at the foliage, catching a glimpse occasionally of children at play.

quop: to throb, to pulsate.

Shtuli, you sang: “You’re not like a blooming flower; you’re not like the sky at night. No, you are beyond compare!”

I, a parent, heard in your singing, Shtuli, my own amorphous regrets, sentiments, and hopes.

You, Marjoey, tottering, from your bicycle sideways toppled. You broke your fall with your hands, abrading one palm. There wasn’t much pain; the sight of a welling trickle of blood, however, distressed you, making you cry.

I, Shtuli, consoled and comforted you.

I, a teacher, heard in your singing, Shtuli, my own untameable expectations.

Comforting and consoling a child was cozier when the child was your own, you, Shtuli, reflected.

At night, you, Shtuli, were dretched by dreams of Asfalyi young and alone and hurt and unfindable.

“You’re not like the bee that stings me; you’re not like the sun that blinds. No, you are beyond compare!”

You, Fiyatsi, played with Pamoj’s trumpet, producing, over and over, sounds that were satisfyingly reminiscent of squeaky hinges.

I, Shtuli, clutching my skull, requested a little respite.

I, Shtuli, wrote a didactic song, which I called, “The Baby Assignment Formula Blues.”

I, a parent, hearing you singing, Shtuli, felt both unhappier and aliver.

dretch: to afflict, torment, or vex, especially in sleep.

Shtuli sat at a window, watching two parents walking two children home after school. The adults were trudging wordlessly, heavily laden with bookbags, musical instruments, and discarded clothing. The children round them were prancing, asking them questions, capering, hopping, telling them stories, jiggling, and singing carefreely.

Oh, how often are children wasted on parents!, Shtuli reflected.

A child, I heard in your singing, Shtuli, a not unpleasurable aching yearning to run and grow and discover life and enjoy it.

Shtuli, you sang: “A parent who’s good, a parent who’s kind, is seldom a second baby assigned.”

The sound of my, Shtuli’s, song through the wall unsettled your calm and filled you with contradictory resolutions, Asfalyi.

Shtuli, you sang: “The odds of a second baby, or third, for parents with one, are infinitesimal: a number so small, it comes at the end of numberless zeroes after the decimal.”

Through your door, Asfalyi, I, Shtuli, asked if you wanted maybe to play a boardgame with us.

You, after a pause, inquired through your door, “Who’s “us”?”—though you knew that nothing that I could answer would tempt you.

Shtuli, you through the swamp went walking alone.

You paused on a footbridge, gloomily gazing down at the turbid waters.

Marjoey, you climbed the slide to its top, then froze. It was higher than it appeared to be from the ground.

I, Shtuli, gave mild encouragement, which you could, if you had to, honorably ignore.

You, Shtuli, became aware of a blackcrowned crane watching you distrustfully. To convince it that you were friendly, you whistled, jazzily improvising a tune.

As soon as you stopped, the bird flew off, squawking wretchedly.

Sad, you sighed—not unsatisfied by this vindication of your disconsolateness.

Shtuli, you sang: “With every form filled, one’s chances augment by fractional portions of a percent. Submit, then, your weekly baby request! Who perseveres most will parent the best!”

I, a teacher, asked if you, Shtuli, wanted to sometime possibly join me kitesurfing.

Thanking me, you declined.

Some children requested “Waiting Is Easy.” Shtuli, you sang it dolefully.

“Waiting is easy, you can’t do it wrong. Do what you will, time passes by; but if you hurry it, it takes much smaller steps, and if you hold it back, it flies.”

Asfalyi, I, Shtuli, told you that I was thinking of going kitesurfing. “Care to come?”

You imagined me, your ungainly parent, among the young, sleek, and supple surfers, and cringed.

With thanks, you declined.

The lemonade truck’s monotonous jingle eveningly, Shtuli, nettled your ears, while stirring your heart nostalgically.

Summer soon would be over.

I, Shtuli, glumly was singing “Vowels and Consonants.”

“To say a consonant you grunt or hiss, or splutter, huff, or smack or

eveningly: every evening.

buzz like this: like sss, thh, t'!, and sshh, fff, k'!, and vvv, zzz, b'!—and g'!
and p'!"

You, Shtuli, fingered the darkened spot on your shirt, and found it, thank goodness, cool to the touch; it therefore was only, probably, drying water, and not a permanent stain.

Shtuli, you racked your brains for activities that Asfalyi, being an adult now, would enjoy.

The opera? The theftpark? Logrolling?

I, a parent, embraced you gratefully, Shtuli. "That was exquisite singing. Most thanks." —"Most welcome."

My hands still lingered. "Your back is knottier than a macramé carpet! When was your last massage?" —"I'm not sure." —"No wonder! You ought to let me massage you sometime."

A child was plucking my pantleg.

Stoutly you said, "My back doesn't bother me."

Axethrowing? Poker? Winebibbing?

I, the parent who gave massages, renewed my offer by book. 'I think I could make you feel like a firenew person,' I wrote.

You, Shtuli, deliberated and dithered, wondering: Was I flirting with you?

"Wouldn't you like to read to your nuntle Shtuli instead tonight?" asked Odori.

"No!" cried Marjoey.

Shtuli, you overheard.

Shtuli, you didn't want a romance.

firenew: fresh from the fire or furnace; completely new.

Opium smoking? Horseslapping? Cudgels matches?

Fiyatsi, you urged me, Shtuli, to tell the parent who gave massages the truth.

“Math is always working out; adding up’s what math’s about!”

Shtuli, you wrote a note with Fiyatsi’s help.

‘A massage would be a delight; most thanks! I perhaps should say that I’m not, however, at present, looking for love.’

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

Your glare was answer enough.

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

Your glare was turned now on me.

You, the parent who gave massages, replied, ‘The offer still stands!’ You added, with partial candor, ‘PS: I’m happily married anyway.’

You, Fiyatsi, spoke of your plans abroad with delight. I, Shtuli, grew melancholy, then melancholier, till I finally moaned, “I’ll miss you.”

This touched and flattered you, and you didn’t conceal your pleasure.

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’ll have no one to talk to after you’re gone,” I, Shtuli, complained. “Asfalyi despises me. My own child!”

Fiyatsi, you spoke judiciously: “Time alone’s all Asfalyi wants. —And Marjoey actually is an excellent conversationalist. Just yesterday we were talking about kytoons; it was fascinating. —And I will write to you daily, Nuntle, because I’ll have such a lot to say!”

‘Massages are always sensual,’ booked the parent who gave massages, ‘although the sensual, you should know, isn’t always sexual. If you’d like a massage, the kind that I give my friends, let me know—and we can be friends.’

The swash came rolling in, turning beachstones the way a baker turns buns; the backwash receded then, and the beachstones cracklingly settled.

Whispered Fiyatsi, “Listen!”

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

“So how was the concert?”

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

Shtuli, you wrote a song for Fiyatsi’s wanderyear celebration.

Shtuli, you wrote the parent who gave massages a note of brief, noncommittal thanks.

You took the animals, Shtuli, out for a walk.

The potto, the lynx, the skunk, and the capybara all ran away, and refused, no matter how often beckoned or called, to come.

You returned dejectedly home without them.

You tried, Asfalyi, to think of something that you and Shtuli could do to-

kytoon: a kiteballoon.

swash: the washing of seawater up the beach after the breaking of a wave.

gether—in private, preferably.

The lynx, the skunk, and the capybara had hurried homeward without you, Shtuli: you found them, mewling and looking up at Odori's window, outside the hedge gate. You let them in with bad grace.

The potto, it seemed, however, was gone for good.

You, for the children, wore on your face a smile's simulacrum, Shtuli.

Shtuli, at Fiyatsi's wanderyear celebration, your voice aquaver with love and softened with wine, you sang.

We, except Asfalyi, all turned to listen, our hearts as open and supple now as your voice.

You, Shtuli, felt a persistent pain in your knotty back.

A massage, you thought, might be nice.

After you'd sung "I Like to Keep Candy Handy," you, Shtuli, sang, from a sense of duty, "Remember Always to Brush Your Teeth."

You strolled down the windchime avenue, Shtuli, half hearing songs you later would write.

Meanwhile the potto, hungry, alone, and frightened, through tangled overwood cautiously and adroitly crept.

I, Shtuli, tapped at Asfalyi's door.

There was no reply.

You went to the sickhouse, Shtuli, and asked the nurses about massages.

Portières in doorways were pulled aside to reveal the eagerly smiling faces of other nurses.

overwood: the highest layer of vegetation in a forest or woodland.

“We all,” they said, “give massages.”

You, Shtuli, took us, Pamoj, Marjoey, and Leni, with you to hear the pipeband perform at, this time, a musicpark, where they played vivaciously.

With continual nods and nudges and eyebrow waggings you tried to wring from us clearer tokens of admiration and pleasure.

Shtuli, you, at the scramblepark, on a bench sat watching the children hootingly clamber over the castle towers, the monkey rings, and the climbing mazes.

The nurse, massaging your shoulders, Shtuli, exclaimed, “I never have seen a knottier back!”

This gratified you, because it confirmed your sense of uniqueness.

Shtuli, you loved to watch children playing. They played so earnestly, so absorbedly, so immodestly.

I, Shtuli, feelingly twanged the strings of my mandolin.

Filling another form, Shtuli wrote, ‘I love to watch children play, because when they play, they *just* play.’

There arose, untriggered, a memory in your, Shtuli’s, mind, of Asfalyi calling, from laddertop, for your admiration.

We played the boardgame *Prosocial Ocelot*, which was won by the most cooperative player.

Early, Marjoey, you took the lead by sharing your prey; but in the last round I, Shtuli, by sacrificing my offspring to the pack, clinched the victory.

Minifying my luck, I vaunted my skill.

You grumbled, “I wish Fiyatsi was here.”

Virtuously resolved to spend time with you, I, Asfalyi, tapped on your, Shtuli's, door.

You were making music, and didn't hear me. Relieved, I softly withdrew.

Shtuli, you walked alone through the sculpture garden, and passed a huddle of furtive, whispering children planning some siege, revenge, or assassination.

You smiled with wistful benignness. One of them scowled at you in return.

You, Shtuli, were on your way to the sickhouse for a massage. You asked me, Asfalyi, whether I'd care to join you.

I shook my head in repugnance, picturing scads of dry and decrepit bodies, asprawl on yellowing cots perfused with the tang of medicine, being kneaded by callused hands, to the sounds of cartilage cracking, groaning, and farts.

Filling again a form, you wrote, Shtuli, 'Children remind us adults that life itself is a child: importunate, irrepressible, clumsy, erring, but ever gropingly learning.'

Shtuli, you sang:

"Said the monkey in the monkeypuzzle tree, "This tree is surely puzzling to me. It isn't like a puzzle and it isn't much like me. Its name to me remains a mystery." "

Shtuli, you overheard on the street a parent berate their child: "I already told you a dozen times now to put your jacket back on. Your teachers may let you skylark about in shirtsleeves, but I don't want you again pretending you're sick again, do you hear me?"

Never (you thought, disgusted) had you been anything like so petty and cruel a parent as that.

In passing, Shtuli, you pressed your ear to Asfalyi's door for a moment.

Shamefaced, you hurried on.

I, your massagist, trying to comfort, soothe, and relax you, Shtuli, massaged the webs of your fingers fondlingly with the webs of my own.

I failed.

A child, I was asked by one of my parents whether I knew which hand was my left. I lifted the hand in question.

"That's right!"

I lifted the other hastily.

"No, the first one was right."

By now I was baffled utterly.

Shtuli, you, overhearing, longed to dispel my bafflement with a wellchosen word, a laugh, and a hug.

Marjoey, you poked your head into Shtuli's bedroom and grimaced piteously.

"It's lonely, without Fiyatsi, to sleep alone in my bed."

"I know how you feel," said Shtuli, and, moving over, made room for you.

The university orchestra would perform that weekend a symphony, for which I, a teacher, had two scarce tickets. I asked you, Shtuli, to come.

You gradually accepted the invitation.

Shtuli, you wondered whether you had to wear a clean shirt tonight. But the question answered itself, alas: for to wear a shabby stained shirt would only be thought a lovable quirk in one for whom such behavior was unreflective. Now, having pondered it, you'd no choice but to launder clothes.

The woodwinds tweeted, the brasses blared, and the strings crescendoed.

You, Shtuli, fidgeting, listened.

I, the teacher, afterwards asked you, Shtuli, for your opinion.

“Pure olive oil,” was your honest verdict.

You added, seeing the look of hurt on my face, “The playing was virtuosic, however.”

At the romppark, Shtuli, where you’d intended to sing some songs, your accustomed bench by another singer that day was taken.

You listened.

You, singing, played the theorbo, Shtuli.

“How grown you’ve grown!” You, Pamoj, in wonderment gazed at Shtuli, your clever, beautiful little Shtuli, now fully adult.

Said Shtuli, growing less patient minutemeal, “Boombi, do you or do you not wish to learn the rules of this game *again?*”

Elated, some children made themselves hoarse—and splittly—while singing “Vowels and Consonants” with you, Shtuli.

I, your newest massagist, Shtuli, suggested, after massaging you, that I clean your nostrils and bellybutton and ears and eyelids and fingernails with a swab of rosepetal down.

You quickly sat up.

Shtuli, filling a form, you wrote, ‘I love teaching children—new skills, new songs, and new words—and seeing them changed forever.’

The singer you, Shtuli’d, listened to at the romppark that day now listened to you.

minutemeal: minute by minute.

You, Shtuli, pretended not to know how to use your new book. You, feigning frustration, asked me, Asfalyi, “What am I doing wrong with this thing?”

I, feigning frustration, helped you—and showed you uses that you’d been ignorant of.

You thanked me with heartfelt ardor.

You sang a song you had written, Shtuli, before Asfalyi was born, called “Why Am I Lonely?”

You went to a music festival, Shtuli.

Everyone played and everyone sang so well.

Shtuli, you filled another form, writing, ‘I to my child have been—if Asfalyi’s gentle comportment, radiant health, affectionateness, responsibility, considerateness, intelligence, generosity, curiosity, sense of humor, integrity, and uprightness be any indication—a decent parent. I will, I trust, to a second child be as good.’

“Why am I lonely? Why’m I the only person who’s sad, when everyone’s glad?”

Shyly, I, Shtuli, knocked on your door, Asfalyi.

“Who is it?”

“Boombi,” I said.

Your sigh through the door was audible.

Shtuli, you sang your “Metaphor Song.”

“Wisdom is a rainbow, hope is a balloon, summer is a racetrack, laughter is a spoon. Patience is an orange peel, gladness is a bowl, you and I together, we are casserole.”

I, the singer you’d heard that day at the romppark, Shtuli, again was there, but without my instrument.

“Hi,” you said.

I said, “Hi.”

“Age is a utensil, friendship is a sport, freedom is a phantom, truth is a report. Glory is a sunset, sadness is a shoal, you and I together, we are casse-
role.”

You, Shtuli, and I, the singer who sometimes sang at the romppark, shared an appreciation of minor sixths.

Shtuli, you wrote a song not for children, “When Did My Youthhood Vanish?”

Although its lyrics were bleak, its melody wasn’t.

You tramped through the treepark, Shtuli, where naked branches revealed the derelict forts and hideouts, now sodden ruins, that children had in the summer lovingly, unforeseeingly built.

To some giggling children, you, Shtuli, sang, “I hate it when I wipe my bum, then find there’s still more poop to come!”

You, Shtuli, found in the shade a clump of coarse, dirty ice that had been, a fortnight ago, a snowbank.

You, chuckling fiendishly, formed a snowball.

I, the singer who sometimes sang in the romppark, asked you to supper, Shtuli.

You said, from shyness instead of disinclination, “Thank you, but no.”

Prowling, Shtuli, you searched for someone to throw your “snowball” at; all the children you sighted looked to you frail and humorless, though.

The pipeband, Shtuli, invited you to perform with them.

You replied, as pleased as you were surprised, ‘I’d be honored to, and would love to.’

By the time I, Shtuli, reached home, the snowball had turned to watery, gritty residue—which I wiped on your nape, Marjoey, and leaped back, laughing.

The look you shot me was one of puzzled and disappointed resentment.

Asfalyi, you asked me, Shtuli, to play a boardgame.

I beamed.

You, Shtuli, gaily were singing “Vowels and Consonants.”

“And here’s my definition of a vowel: a letter by itself that you can howl, like aay yay yay, and ee yee yee, and oh woah woah—and you and I!”

Your play, Asfalyi, was desultory.

I, Shtuli, capitalized.

Shtuli, you from the Parents Bringing Up Children office received a letter requesting clarification.

I, Asfalyi, unnecessarily hid from Shtuli my alternating exasperation and boredom.

You, Shtuli, asked me, your new massagist, to use a little less pressure.

You, Shtuli, sat in the sun and listened to my, your student’s, discordant, effortful singing.

Nodding in time, you smiled.

You took the animals, Shtuli, out for a walk—returning with more, by one, than you’d started out with.

“Hey everybody!” you cried. “Come see who found me!”

We gathered around, delighted, to pet and welcome and praise the bashful, bedraggled potto.

The children joyfully sang along; you, too, Shtuli, joyfully sang.