

Andrei Molotiu's Transfigured Nights

Contributed by Andrei Molotiu

Â Â NIGHTS, TRANSGURED Â Â It's only lately that he's begun thinking of her again; what he best remembers is her body.Â It comes through, now and then, in traces and tatters:Â a sweetish smell, an ivory tint, a powdery texture on his tongue's tip or the give and flex of some tendon between his fingers.Â He finds it harder to recall her face, or at least anything of it beyond the ragged strokes of charcoal or the harsh acrylic stains he so often turned it into:Â the swift half-circles of her eyebrows and nose, the oily stains of her pupils and lips.Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He'd met her...Â wh long after, a spanking new M.F.A. in his pocket, he'd moved back to the city, to a string of miserable dayjobs and a ramshackle studio apartment strewn with dried paint-tubes and torn-up drawings.Â She knew Tina, his friend Chris's girlfriend; they were introduced once ("Frank... Nastassia; Nastassia, Frank," names Chris screamed over the din of the party; and he had to shift the beer bottle from his right hand to his left to shake hands); and for the two months or so that followed, over the smothering summer, he caught glimpses of her at dank rock joints, at all-night diners on Avenue A, in the park after curfew or just strolling down St. Mark's with nothing to do.Â They'd say hi, or nod, and once danced, two people apart, then almost side by side, at 2 a.m. at Nightingale's.Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Then, late in August, Chris and his came to town again, on their way back from Brussels to New Haven:Â called him up, and, as it turned out, called her up too.Â The four of them spent a Sunday together:Â they rode the subway uptown, picnicked in Central Park (where, under the hazy sun, he saw clouds of charcoal dust rising from the denim of his jeans), then rented a boat and rowed on the still pond, drinking from paper-bagged cans and laughing.Â Nastassia spoke the least; but once, as Tina and Chris began splashing each other with water, he caught her staring at him, lost, and she blinked, startled, when she saw his eyes locked into hers; or maybe it was the few drops that had just touched her shoulders. Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â They returned the b then meant to catch the subway or a cab, but ended up just meandering down, all four of them, all the way back to his place; by the time they made it, it had turned dark.Â They got dinner from the Chinese take-out on his block and ate it on his hastily swept floor as the rain started, then stopped, outside his wide-open windows.Â When Chris and Tina finally left, they didn't invite Nastassia to join them, as all along he'd been afraid they would, and she didn't say she had to go; so, after he closed the door behind them, he turned around to see her, still there, sitting on his couch.Â She spent the night.Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The next morning it was she who woke him up; he can still remember her, leaning over, all dressed up, h edges melting against the blinding daylight.Â It took him a few seconds to make out her features; she was saying, "I have to go to work now.Â Listen, I'll call you, all right?Â Can I come back tonight?Â Is that o.k.?"Â Half-asleep, he said, "Please;" then she gave him a peck on the lips, and ran out the door.Â Â He thought of her all day, joyful and giddy.Â That evening, over dinner, he found out things like her last name, what she did (editorial assistant), and her age (twenty-four); he told her about his work, about the group show he'd be in, come December, and couldn't stop looking into her dusky brown eyes.Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â September came, and they began spending almost every night together, at his place, since she roommate.Â Every evening she'd bring the next day's working clothes over, her two-piece suits, her black jackets, her black pumps, hang them in the corner of his closet, then gingerly push its squeaking door closed.Â Sometimes, as he painted at one end of the room, at the other she'd stay up and edit by the warm light of his bedside lamp, wearing, say, just a turtleneck and stockings; sometimes she'd nod, unwillingly, and let the pencil drop from her hand; she'd catch herself, take off her reading glasses and lie down on her side, waiting for him to finish; then she'd fall asleep.Â When he was done for the night, he'd often turn around and see her, her closed eyes, her soft cheek flattened against her sleeping fingers, her half-open lips and her steady breathing, and feel her unconscious beauty inside him like a knot in his stomach, or a void in his throat.Â Sometimes he'd pick up a pencil and a pad, and sketch her as she lay there; yet, when her eyes opened, when she'd smile and whisper, "Frank, come here," he'd leave off his drawing in the middle of a stroke and come over to touch her, to tell her again and again, "God, I love you so much." Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â That was at least wh wanted to say.Â When he did say it, she bristled.Â She'd mumble something noncommittal.Â He'd get angry.Â He would pull away, close himself off.Â Then she'd come to him:Â she would hold him, caress him.Â He'd repeat it, but by then she'd have unbuttoned his shirt; she'd kiss his chest, knead his thighs; they'd make love.Â And though, from her sighs and her touches, he thought he could tell how much she loved him, he never felt perfectly sure of it.Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Maybe th what started it; maybe there were other things (these days he can't exactly remember); but then the fights began.Â One day, it was over his coming to some literary affair:Â that ratty blazer was all he had?Â It wouldn't do.Â She wouldn't take him along looking like that.Â Another time it was over his paintings.Â "Here, tell me what you see," he shouted, sitting her down in front of a jumble of scribbled words, black lines and dark washes; "You like it?Â Why do you like it?Â You have no fuckin' idea."Â And she stood up, sending the stool crashing to the floor:Â "Oh, fuck you, Frank.Â Fuck.Â You." Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Then, once, who knows what he had said to provoke her (funny, he can't even remember that), she slapped him, hard; in her palm lay the weight of her entire body, which twisted as she hit him.Â Almost instinctively, he hit her back, a slap across her shoulder; then, as he just stood there, dumbfounded by what he'd just done, she turned away, fumbled for a second with the locks on his door, got them open with a loud clang, and ran out.Â He rushed after her down the dimly lit staircase, past the front door's iron grill, which, closing behind her, almost knocked him off his feet; then down the front steps and into the middle of the deserted midnight street, lined with the grey remnants of an early snow.Â She was already half a block away, running awkwardly on her three-inch heels, her elbows tightly by her sides, her forearms waving and fluttering away from her body with each of her strides.Â All of a sudden he felt totally drained; he stopped and, leaning over, his palms on his knees, tried to catch his burning breath; he watched her disappear past the stoplights.Â Then he turned back, to go home; but the front-door had locked behind him, he'd left his keys upstairs, and had to buzz all the neighbors and beg to be let in. Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He'd thought she'd call the next day, if for no other reason, at least up the winter coat that she'd forgotten in his closet; when she didn't, he called her, more than once, but each time her roommate told him she wasn't around.Â It took almost two weeks before he heard from her again:Â late on a December

night, past midnight, his phone rang; he picked it up off the windowsill and, as he answered, stared through the frozen glass at the still park below. As soon as he heard her voice on the other end of the line he promised himself he wouldn't be the first one to apologize. But there was no need to worry: she just wanted to hold him again; she felt lonely, that was all. Tonight; yes, tonight. "Well then, please come over. No, no: please. I've missed you too. Very much." She got there in fifteen minutes; she'd taken a cab. They touched again, they kissed again, and so on; next night, and the night after that; but things felt different now. They never brought up anything important anymore, never talked about themselves. He never tried to tell her again that he loved her. It was about then he began to paint her: he hadn't dared, or even wished to, ask her to pose for him before; he couldn't have envisioned her just sitting there, mute and obedient under his searching gaze. He had much preferred to hold her, to kiss her. Now that a distance always seemed to lie between them, it no longer made any difference. So, after work or sometimes on weekends, she'd sit herself on his bed or on a stool by the window, open a book and bury her face in her sweater's thick collar, raise her woolen-socked feet onto the stool's rung, and read, motionless, only turning the pages every minute or so with her thumb or with a quick thrust of her hand. He'd stand behind his easel and pick his brushes or mix colors on the large pane of glass he used as a palette; he'd sweep up a lump of paint and raise it before him to see how it matched up to her skirt or her hair; then, steadily, he'd trace her silhouette onto the canvas, or fill her profile in. When, these days, he thinks back on those sessions, what he best remembers is the silence: he'd always painted, when by himself, to music; but the attention he now had to pay to her shapes brooked no distractions. So, in the quiet studio apartment, he could hear both of them breathe, the stool creak, cars drive by, sable hairs rub the canvas, and, every once in a while, neighbors climb the stairs, or the heating pipes gurgle and hiss. Spring came. When they weren't busy modeling or painting, they spent long, cool and bright Saturdays, Sundays together, shopping in Soho or going to the galleries. As she'd try on some pair of shoes much too expensive for her or some dress she'd never have where to wear, or else as she'd just saunter down the street, then stop randomly and try to squint into darkened plate-glass windows past the late-afternoon sun's reflections, he'd watch her longingly, fascinated by what he had in her and yet didn't have. Then he'd promise himself he'd soon remind her that he loved her; he'd soon ask her what was going to happen with the two of them; tell her he wanted to be with her forever; all such things. Before he ever had a chance to do so, one day in early April she came by, at four o'clock in the afternoon, as he was trying to paint something, anything other than her. She walked over and turned off his stereo: they had to talk. She wouldn't take a seat, though he asked her to; she wouldn't even unzip her jacket. What was the rush? She was going to go away for a while. A long while. What? Here was the deal: her boss, well, he was taking some time off to write a book--the book he'd always known he had inside him--and he'd asked her to come with him and be his secretary; he was going to rent a place down in the Keys: the sea, the beach lapped by the gentle waves, the cloudless skies; so, see... For a moment he tried to speak, but no words formed in his throat; then all he could come up with was: "Yeah, right, his secretary! He's just trying to get into your pants!" She kept quiet for a few seconds, pursing her lips, seeming to follow with her gaze the cracks in the hardwood floor by his feet; then she raised her head, looked him in the eyes, and, with no bitterness or anger in her voice, but seeming almost tired, or perhaps resigned, said: "Frank? You know what? He got into my pants a long time ago. And I've been fucking him ever since." Then she left; and after the door slammed closed behind her, he realized he was still holding, in his left hand, a loaded brush which had all along been dripping ochre slashes onto his old docksiders and the floor. He'd long stopped thinking about her when he saw her again. It was the evening of his first solo show's opening, at a rising gallery in Chelsea. He was their rising star; and all the paintings had been sold in advance. Other dealers, Artforum critics, Park Avenue patrons' wives and hangers-on, all air-kissed him, or, touching his forearm, deeply impressed, told him how affecting his recent work was. The new canvases, eight-foot high and unframed, still smelled of fresh paint; rough pinks fought sullen purples and metallic golds. In the back room he'd hung some ink drawings and some older pictures, some of them of Nastassia; not the ones he'd made in front of her, but later, once she'd gone away, when her image had twisted and turned in his mind and hadn't let itself be exorcised for almost two years. It had taken him a while, but now he liked them: now he could look at them coldly and see how he'd played with her forms, how he'd used them, attacked them, combined them. He liked the blues; he liked the greens; he even liked the ochres. After he'd toured them for the fifteenth time, to say goodbye as it were, he'd go to the tables by the windows, for some more champagne. He'd talked to an old art-school friend now teaching somewhere upstate and furiously trying to harass him for connections; he'd looked down, bored, toward the shimmering street, where cars, three floors down, drove by with big wet plumes of water rising from their tires; and then he'd heard his name called, twice. The first time the voice had broken: then it had tried again. He turned around and there she was. He blurted: "Hi... It's you?" And she answered: "It's me. Hi." Then she shrugged, with an embarrassed smile: "I hadn't realized it was going to pour tonight." Her hair, cut short now, stuck to her forehead and dripped streamlets of water down her temples; and her green raincoat was totally drenched round the shoulders. He leaned over and kissed her on her damp cheeks; then, before she could say anything else, he pulled her into the office, draped her coat over the back of a chair, and found a handtowel in the bathroom; once she'd dried her hair, he combed it back with his fingers. She looked thinner: her cheekbones showed like they never had before; older too; but then, it had been, God, how long?... Almost five years. She told him how, just a few days earlier, she'd seen his name in the art listings; and, nervous, she'd only called the gallery today, found out about the opening; then she'd rushed out, barely made it in time... All he could do was listen, watch and smile; he felt no hate or anger like he'd always thought he would; nothing but an aching need to touch her lips again, her face. He walked her through the show; she found the large canvases gorgeous, but didn't recognize herself in the scraggly outlines in the back-room; he preferred to keep silent about it. Besides, neither of their minds was on the art; and so, ten minutes later, he found himself fleeing his much-anticipated opening with two unopened bottles in his hands. Outside, where only a drizzle still kept falling, she made a dash for a cab that had passed them only to stop two doors down the block; she waited, her teeth chattering, as

a copper-haired lady in Chanel paid the driver, stretched out a white-stockinged leg and a blossoming umbrella, and stepped out; then she held the door open for him to get in. In the cozy darkness of the back-seat they were unable to stop grinning at each other, as the taxi took them through rain-emptied streets to his new loft, where he'd just moved, weeks before; and their knees touched. Once inside, sitting side by side on his leather couch, in his living room still strewn with big cardboard boxes and crumpled newspapers, the wine bottles and their glasses leaving wet rings on the coffee-table's glass top, they spoke for at least twenty minutes before kissing; and it took them at least as long again until they'd moved to the bedroom and made love. It was only once they lay naked side by side, trying to catch their breath, exhausted, that, turning on her back and staring at the ceiling, her hand holding his and squeezing it now and then, she told him the story of her last five or so pitiful years. There wasn't very much to it, actually: various disappointments, her boss going back, after ten months, to his wife and his children, and how she had just not been able to face New York again, to face him, really, had lived with her parents for a while, then California, other boyfriends... She'd only come back to the city last month; was sleeping on the sofa at Liz's, her old roommate; and was going to try again. He leaned over to kiss her; and she put an arm around him and wouldn't let go. Then, her face buried in his shoulder, her voice beginning to tremble, she told him how sorry she was, how truly, truly sorry, for everything that had happened; she'd gotten herself really messed up there for a while; she couldn't really explain it: "Please forgive me. Please. Please." She started crying, softly; he caressed her back, his thumb tracing her spine up and down, his fingers grazing her ribs, and said: "Of course. We won't even think about it. Everything's fine. Everything's just fine. Of course." They only fell asleep very late that night, after sunrise; throughout the morning, the warmth of her body pressed against his reminded him that she was back with him: he slept happily. When he woke up alone, at two, in the bedroom's shuttered darkness, he was disoriented for a second; but then he called her name, and, faintly, she answered. Naked and still half-asleep, he followed her voice into his hollow new studio where, his eyes hurting from the day's brightness, he found her, wrapped in a sheet, looking at his unfinished paintings that were stacked two or three deep against the walls; with one hand she was holding the sheet's bunched-up folds between her breasts, while with the other's stretched fingers she tilted toward her the canvases in front, bending her head the better to see the ones in the back. In his memory, the wondrous days that followed still linger, the nights, transfigured, still glow. Each other, they slowly lost their grip on time: they'd step out at three a.m., smelling of sex, and roam the empty streets, trying to get dinner somewhere, pick up some cigarettes; or else, barely awake, they'd call for takeout, then answer the door wearing little more than a robe or a T-shirt, bare-legged and bleary-eyed, their hair unkempt, while the city around them braced for the evening rush-hour. He had nowhere to go, nothing to do; he could afford not meeting any prospective buyers: plenty more were waiting for their chance. She missed two job interviews she had lined up and couldn't have cared less; her fourth evening there, she took a cab to Liz's place to pick up some clean clothes; otherwise, what else could they have needed? Nothing. One day, after about two weeks, a Saturday, he leaned over her as they were still in bed; and, toying with her bangs, he said: "You know, I've been thinking..." why didn't she, you know, bring over all her things; maybe move in for good; because, well, he'd like her to... Laughing, she threw her arms around him and squeezed him tight: of course she would! Of course. She would pick up her stuff tomorrow; when he asked, why not today, she gave many answers: she didn't feel up to it quite yet; was too tired; just felt like hanging around; besides, Liz probably wasn't around anyway. He shrugged: "All right. Tomorrow then." And she smiled: "Yes. Tomorrow." After lunch, after she'd showered, then slowly combed her hair before the fogged-up window, she pulled some art book off the shelf, then read it, all curled up in a corner of his couch; as the afternoon grew quiet (sometimes trucks would rumble by; but no neighbor blasted arias on the stereo, no one screamed or fought, and no jeep thundered hip-hop down the block), the windows' parallelograms of light slowly drifted off her and rose, diagonally, up the wall. She stayed mostly silent, just smiling, lovingly, whenever their eyes met, and caressing his knees or his hands whenever he walked past her. He can't remember very well, these days when he thinks back on exactly he knew there was something wrong; she gave brief, clipped answers to whatever he asked her, and sometimes he thought her voice trembled. He listened closely: yes it did. Then, after a strangely muted dinner, as he was flipping through the Sunday paper they'd just stepped out to buy, he caught her staring at him, through him. He raised his eyebrows, questioningly; when she didn't answer, he asked: "What?" "What what?" Why was she staring? What was wrong? She shook her head, as if to chase away a nightmare or a fly: nothing, nothing. But after he'd gone back to reading, unconvinced, he heard her, two minutes later, call his name: "Frank?" He lowered the Book Review: "Yes?" "There's just one thing." "What?" "Listen, I love you so much. So much. So much..." She stopped speaking. "Yes?" She looked down, into her open palms: "Listen... I... I don't know how to put this..." "What?" "Well... Listen... I'm... I'm two--I guess two-and-a-half by now--two-and-a-half months pregnant." She looked up. "You're what?" silence. "What?" She had been warm and finally right, now he remembered the hurt and the hatred, the slaps, the fights, the distance and the longing. Now she told him? How could she do this to him? Now that--now that he loved her again? As she cowered under his screams, wrapping herself up in a cotton throw, he turned away, clenching his fists, walking in circles, then back toward her, adamant: no. He was sorry. No. Not... not father to someone else's child. No. No. She asked, choking: "So what then, shall we just forget it all?" "It's only been two weeks, big deal." "But," she screamed after a silence, "I want to keep the child!" "Who's keeping you, go ahead." She bent over, as in pain, and her voice died down as she said: "But I want to keep you too..." Then she went on muttering "I love you"s; he meant to hiss back something hurtful, but his voice just couldn't form the sounds. Then, as he stood there, not moving, not reacting, just watching her, she pulled herself together: she stood up, gathered the sides of her black cardigan, then, beating the rhythm of her words with an outstretched arm and one, then two stretched fingers, her mouth bent with wounded anger, she said: "O.k. We'll give it one day. No, two. Two days. All right? Two days: I'll come back on Monday. O.k.? Then we'll talk it out. O.k.?" He let her walk out the door: what else could he have done? He mused that weekend. On Monday, she never did come back, though he waited up till four; he was too numb to worry. Only late

