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## Atanilindalë

Sam Keyes

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# Atanilindalë

by Sam Keyes

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She was able to only remember, after those long nights of replenishing the inkjet printer and petting the cat and wiping the tables and reading the newspapers, how, when she had first learned to play the piano, there was this sensation of leaving, as if, here, now, the world was no longer and there were raspberries and rabbits, frolicking on sand dunes or verdant hills in a Mesopotamia on a faraway world not unlike what Venus might have been if its beauty continued past the swirling gases on its surface; in these thoughts she would drift; they changed, of course; but in Mozart or Prokofiev or Scriabin she was lost, never to return. And so she would play and let things fade; she no longer practiced—the old songs would just come over and over; sometimes she would forget or skip, or play an F sharp in the wrong place; very often, in fact; she would pause and think how nice a day it must be in Bavaria and then continue, for music no longer mattered to her. While thinking this she would sip her Earl Gray or chocolate milk and munch on Carr's crackers; she would remember the shoes drying on the porch and the Camembert that had to be picked up; one must have an ordered household; one must, she thought, have an ordered household.

It was unfortunate, of course, that she hadn't a real instrument. Air was sufficient, or just neural impulses when space disallowed:

the children didn't care; they played their games; Mike didn't care; he didn't care about much of anything except pot roasts and dissertations; the cat was much better than her mother had been (that mangy vermin, who, after refusing for 7 years straight to use the litter box, had gone and birthed 7 more of her kind; definitely, the father was a decent fellow), and she wasn't about to interfere with her mistress's musical career; to the contrary, occasional meows engendered incredible rhythm, attention to style, further distraction from reality. Amen, she would say, to a cat that knows its place. Amen again, she might think, for the children who never bothered her with unwanted problems (for most of the problems, she might think, were such a pleasure; she lived for the moments when her son would complain about school and she would be able to tell him that his father had a Ph.D., and he was perfectly smart and that it would be fine for him to flunk out of math because of the wonders of specialization and the modern dissolution of the Renaissance Man; and then Mike would come in and say that he really did need to do well in math and that perhaps it was history or English that he should flunk out of because they didn't really matter anyway; and then she would agree and say that this was why one got Ph.D.'s in these areas, because they were so useless; then they would together confer upon him the virtue of

useless things and he would be utterly confused and go back to play video games and she would go back to playing her piano; his sister was no better or worse, only, being 13, she was inclined to ask about boys, and was always frustrated when her mother told her that men were bores and women were even worse; a properly ordered household). Amen, finally, for the talent of using tricolon crescens, anaphora, Spanish, French, Latin, preterition, metaphor, love, hate, poetry, the ablative absolute.

Oh but her wonderful rendition of Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* was interrupted by the knock at the door. She wished that it could be ignored. Ignoring it, she supposed, would place her in the category of a rather annoying group of people; she could also run the opposite direction, of course; this would make her a felon (the shout in the street, so to speak, as her husband would drone to her about interpellation and other such nonsense—why oh why could the man not simply read his Joyce or Woolf or *Gilgamesh* and be done with it; she always rejoiced in reading Auden and Stevens until he started explaining to her the wonders of deconstruction and she found herself caught in a sort of collapsing room between the forces of meaning and the forces of Chaos: she remembered the tales of Hesiod that Mike, before he was enlightened, would recite; how Chaos had birthed Night and Earth, or Heaven and Earth, or something such with wonderful cosmological significance; Mike, certainly, would throw aside this whole image; the difference was the source of the meaning, he would say, not the meaning itself; but she would retort that she had always been fond of

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**Yes, she vomited, and she immediately started playing the piano. What were they doing to these children? What were they doing to them? What new indoctrination was this, making Eeyore happy?**

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pears and she always would be, and no matter what he said when she said this that was always what she meant and what everyone else would think; no matter, no matter; somehow she was sure that something in the universe

would remain constant; chocolate, for example; or her mother's intuition concerning men).

And there was the door still. She really didn't want to answer it. She had watched too many movies about people answering doors. She had read too many books about people

answering doors (there was no telling how many hours over her lifetime she had spent thinking about the subject). Yesterday she had thought of writing a story about someone answering a door. My goodness, she thought, and here is this person at the door and who knows how long he's been waiting.

And just as she had decided to scold the visitor for knocking on her door and probably waking up her cat, she opened the door to find nothing but a note on the doorstep and a glimpse of a perfectly uniformed boy scout walking a few doors down selling popcorn (she had already ordered three boxes from her nephew two weeks ago).

She placed the note in her pocket without reading it and proceeded to the kitchen. Elizabeth was standing there, reading the mail. She (Anna, that is, for her name could no longer be denied; not in the presence of her daughter) caught her in the corner of her eye, and it ruined her concentration.

"Mother, what are you doing?" There was scorn in her voice. Not terrible, but certainly not especially kind. It was a tone that had been synthesized from the remainders of English still being taught to her in school, the conversations she had on the telephone with her exceptionally stupid friends and the chat-

ter that came on the television at 1 a.m. when she would usually turn it on just for the sake of rebellion (she knew, of course, that nothing came on at 1 a.m., nothing at all; they didn't have cable, and the major networks were full of either paid advertisements or reprisals of past specials on the life of the pear in aboriginal Australia or the reason that the Hungarians took so long to get to Europe).

"I don't know," said Anna. She waited. Two seconds. "Do I ever?" Three seconds. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Oh nothing, just reading the mail." A little relieved, perhaps, recognizing her rudeness. "There's a letter from Aunt Michelle. It looks like one of her usual copied yearly letters. I don't know why she doesn't send them out at Christmas like everyone else."

"Throw it out."

"What? Oh come on, Mom, it's not that bad. What would you think if it was your letter? I'll read it if you don't."

"Why would you want to read it? Her letters are the same every year. She has a document on her computer in which she simply replaces names."

"Oh that's awful." She let loose a sort of moan expressing her maternal angst and walked out and immediately smiled when she realized that her favorite television program would come on that night and she had nothing in the world to be upset about because her mother was perfectly right anyway.

Anna slumped. She walked around the room slumped over, her head slightly bending forward, almost, but not quite, like a turtle. She caught herself and straightened. She prepared for what was about to come. Any moment now her entire family would walk in through different doors, not say anything, and then walk out.

There, she thought, they've done it. What? She questioned. What had they just done. Oh yes, they had just walked through the room in silence, not seeing each other, each peering over his respective remote control, banana, textbook.

The note burned a hole in her pocket; it smelled like burning fruit. How pleasant, she murmured, and reached for it: "Call 423-5588 if you'd like to order some delicious popcorn. Thanks! Mickey Stanford, BSA Troop 218."

*Zut*, she thought. And here she was expecting some sort of fantastic letter from the Queen of Sheba, who, having found herself captured in a guarded tower in the midst of the Sahara, found no better idea than to entrust a small letter explaining her situation to an unfortunately scrawny rat, who, having died during his trek across the sands, was discovered 14 hours later by a brilliant Swiss physicist named Claude, whose nephew was at the time in need of a Kleenex. The nephew, though, upon finding that his Kleenex was actually a note, decided to not use it after all and rather use it to cover his bald scalp from the sun; having returned to his summer home in Paris after the desert hike, he accidentally let his head-cover drop into a fruit basket he was sending to his mistress in America, who, upon discovering it in her fruit basket, dumped him immediately and left it to blow

in the wind until it arrived at Anna's doorstep, lusting for readership.

Blast, she thought. Bother. She had completely forgotten her nephew's 5-year-old Winnie the Pooh

birthday fête. She walked outside to her vehicle, but was not even remotely startled when she found herself lifted up into the air and away over the rooftops. While she was flying

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**A marvelous little black roller ball, lovingly crafted in Taiwan by cheap labor, lovingly glued together by inhuman mechanisms, lovingly placed on the shelf at Wal-Mart.**

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she thought about nothing but the reasons that Lancôme had switched models; she was never very happy with them anyway, and much preferred to go plain (“You have a pretty face, my dear; don’t let’s be a savage and paint it”), but at this moment she ignored her great aunt’s advice and reached into her pocket to find the exactly perfect shade of blush. Ah, she said. Ah.

And she found herself on the ground in front of her sister’s house. What a dump. What a charm. She knocked, four times. One, two, three, Aha! Where have you been my darling sister I’ve been just dying to see you today (never mind that we married a wealthy contact lens salesman who had very large oil reserves in Asia and since then have completely disassociated ourselves from you

and your house; it is a pity, is it not, that our mansion is not closer to your shack) and Ford has missed you I am sure and certainly your always delightful presents but you must be cold standing out there, come in, come in, come in, come in—too many, she was sure—we already have cut the cake, and here’s Eeyore—she was quite sure, oh

“Hello kids, I am very sad, haha, haha.”

Anna vomited immediately.

(Oh dear, oh dear)

Yes, she vomited, and she immediately started playing the piano. What were they doing to these children? What were they doing to them? What new indoctrination was this, making Eeyore happy? What new indoctrination? What indeed? Where—the Revolutionary etude—would they learn—banged quietly in the background—about gloomy things—Poles dying—and the glory—da, da da, da-da—of being blue that one could only discover after having spent several years speaking in Russian and playing music (both of which one would not know) or

grinding lenses for cheaper glass companies or developing vitamin marketing solutions and then scampering off to Indonesia to learn that it didn’t matter who became president but that someone, oh yes, someone, must consider the effects of reading too much Joyce.

“Oh who wants to help Eeyore pin his tail back on?”

“I do, I do.”

“Me, me.”

Anna found herself struck by the repetition. Oh, ghastly day, when everything was repeated twice. Everything repeated twice. How would she handle it?

“Yes, Yes.”

No one had noticed her, because she had remained perfectly still. A nice smile littered her face. She had not said a word since enter-

**It was an absurd name, they all thought, but so were dandelions and antifungal creams.**

ing the estate, and now Eeyore was looking at her. Eeyore looked away. He must have known that her smile was not genuine,

must have seen the vomit on the floor, known the tears she had cried, felt the agony implicit in her cheekbones at a Milnian loss of innocence.

Oh, but the party was over. Thank you everyone, thank you Aunt Anna for the gift. I’ll use it every day.

She had given him a pen, with his name on it. Her sister had looked at her funny and she had said simply, “Ford will one day win a Pulitzer.” Of course, no one really believed she was clairvoyant, including herself, but she wasn’t going to let that ruin her perfect gift. And what a gift it had been! A marvelous little black roller ball, lovingly crafted in Taiwan by cheap labor, lovingly glued together by inhuman mechanisms, lovingly placed on the shelf at Wal-Mart. She was in a state of ecstasy when she presented the pen to the clerk at the fancy store in the mall and asked to have it engraved. He had refused, and she had just as eagerly given the pen to her son,

who meticulously worked at it with his pocketknife so that it said "Ford de Michel." It was an absurd name, they all thought, but so were dandelions and antifungal creams.

"I'm going to go back to my place, very boggy and sad," she commented as she walked out. She heard someone say that she probably was excited by today's surge in the stock market ("They must have loads invested in plastics," she said). But they did not, and she was not. Nor was she excited by anything anymore. Nothing at all. Absolutely nothing. She refused to be excited.

Oh! Was that the *Sunday Times* she saw lying in the street? She immediately picked it up and poured through it until she found the stock report. Oh but today was Monday. Drat fate, drat the indices, drat Ovaltine and whatever that ghastly substance was out of which they made pantyhose.

She walked home.

**M**ike was home, as he should have been.

"Well that was a bore."

"Why did you go?"

"Because she's my sister."

"Yes, and...hmm."

Their minds were remarkably in tune, and they suddenly disgusted each other. It was absolutely filthy, the realization. Such intonation only happens every once in a while, and while it only took a moment on a normal day to realize that each was human (the dropping of a grapefruit, the missing of a button, the running over of a squirrel), the moment, for that was all it was, was so startling that she fell headfirst on the ground and he, having fallen back against the refrigerator, was obliged to pick her up.

"Terribly sorry, dear."

"Oh yes, sorry."

"Well, I guess we uh, hmm."

"Yes...well that wasn't very pleasant."

"No."

"I'd almost rather go back to that party."

"Oh don't say that, dear. I'll make us some tea."

"Oh Mike, don't, don't. It's really nothing, nothing at all."

"You don't suppose," she said.

"Oh, really I do, you might say," he said.

"Look, why don't we ask the kids? They're bound to have something to say about it," she said.

"Why did you look at me like that?"

"Because you're incredibly gorgeous today."

"As are you."

"I'm sorry; I just didn't realize that you were so, so, I don't know, old. It seems as if your brain's so old it's lost control of itself and is getting crap all over the place. That's what disgusted me."

"You know, I could say the same about you. Well I should, now that I think of it."

"Do you think it's bad?"

"I don't know, I don't know. Perhaps we should wear diapers for our brains. Do you think?"

"What would the

"You don't suppose," he said.

"Oh, really I do, you might say," she said.

"Look, why don't we ask the kids? They're bound to have something to say about it," he said.

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"Do you think it's bad?"

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"What would the

neighbors think.”  
“Last thing I’d think about.”  
“It worries me. Sometimes I really do think that the world has fallen asleep, and here we are just left here.”  
“Perhaps we are,” said he.

neighbors think.”  
“Last thing I’d think about.”  
“It worries me. Sometimes I really do think that the world has fallen asleep, and here we are just left here.”  
“Perhaps we are,” said she.

“Oh now don’t start that again,” she demanded.

“What?”

“That blibbety blibed about our unknowledge and the lack of logic or reason.”

“You’re the one who suggested it.”

“What?”

“You just said it, ‘Perhaps we are.’ You’re the one admitting the possibility of our unreality here.”

“I...no.”

“Hmm, yes, and?”

She was probing his depths, those cerulean depths, searching for something that would come shooting out and dancing around his irises: “I love you.” Oh but it was not that. It was already there, plain as day, tattooed in the white of his left eye, just visible to a discerning soul or nose, what was more important, what was more important, she said. Oh but she did not know. What was it?

He was searching in each of those Glastonbury-green, hazy orbs, Palantírs of wisdom, cairns of majesty hidden in the lush highlands of her face; he wanted these verdant sibyls to speak to him, sniff the perfume of oracular acumen and say “this is it” or “hark” and he would be done with it. He would know. And in a whisper the grasses parted to reveal *love* but it was inevitable and infinitely insufficient.

In consummate frustration their lips

embraced. They knew then suddenly that they would be able to tell one another nothing.

And it was evening, and it was morning. The first day.

**I**t was Thursday, and he had not done his paper. It was Thursday, he thought. Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh. Ah, the night. The computer. There was a page, there were two, there were three, and a third, and ten, and then here a quote there a quote everywhere a fry and soft drink.

He sat. (In the background: “Maggie was looking for you yesterday, where were you.” “Oh yeah, I know, I was avoiding her.” “Sure, Duke, but what about Maggie, don’t you care about her.”) He pondered some more. He should have accepted the invitation to lunch. Should have. Wendy’s didn’t work, especially when one had to write a paper.

He left and drove to a small park situated in between some houses in one of the old neighborhoods at the center of town. He grabbed his laptop and scurried out to sit at one of the picnic tables. He found it littered with sand and bird droppings. It was quaint, though.

He noticed a girl, high-school age, sitting on one of the benches reading and smoking pot. This must be her hangout, he thought. Kind of lonely, but nice. Before he sat down he ambled over to see what she was reading.

Before he said anything she launched into an elaborate defense on the practice of smoking marijuana; there were no harms, she said, no harms at all; she had worked for years against the evils of tobacco, but she had never found anything wrong with marijuana; in fact, with her current parental persecution, it was the only thing that made her feel even remotely decent; really, she said, it was perfect.

He didn’t say anything in reply, and she continued reading. He didn’t know if she

would listen or not, but he asked her anyway what she was reading. And she replied, “Oh, Tolkien; it’s for my literature class.”

He walked away, stunned. Why had he forgotten? But he must have forgotten, he must have. It was like a mist rising out of the wooded glade at the back of the park that slowly sucked itself up his nostrils and into his cranial cavity where it expanded and became an amazing reminiscence; what, he thought, could he have been thinking. What, indeed. And finally he remembered:

*O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!*

*We still remember, we who dwell*

*In this far land beneath the trees,*

*Thy starlight on the Western Seas*

Oh and he felt like ice, like ice. The numbness started on the tip of his nose and spread almost instantaneously to the hairs on his toes; he would have cracked if it had not been a sunny day, had it not started to immediately melt in the face of competition. He turned to his laptop. It was sitting happily, ready to crank out another argument on the value of this or that, the devalue of this or that, the incomprehensibility of language, the stupidity of truth.

He stifled the urge to vomit. Anna had told him about her experience at her sister’s. He was not that sick, not that sick. He hoped that his computer died.

He would eulogize it well, but it would not deserve it. Not at all.

He reached out his hands and felt air.

Nothing but air! Oh the torment! And he thought, is this the way I end, feel-

ing nothing but air. Can I not taste, feel, see, hear, speak, smell anything but air, he thought. O muse, he pleaded, raise me from the grass. But no one answered, and he realized that there was no muse, and the God that his parents had once trusted in was not known to

him. He desperately grasped at the air in front of him, searching for a B flat, an f sharp minor chord, anything, anything to take his mind off the harsh realities that were continually bashing him in the head, which swayed back and forth from blow after blow, one wrenching grip and plunge after another into a bath of cold, cold, icy swarming seas of dolphins and salt-infested sea snails and trees and elves(! As if the dream was not enough that the girl had suddenly infused him with; her smoking was irrelevant; students today; oh but had he forgotten, had he truly forgotten?) and light of the most varying colors that upon seeing them in reality he would have been forced to immediately cover his eyes and ears for fear of exposure to a divine essence not meant for man.

His laptop’s LCD shattered on the ground as the girl accidentally bumped it on her way out. She didn’t notice. He ignored it. Irrelevant. Irrelevant.

She sensed his desperation from across town. Or she thought that she did. But in a moment she convinced herself that it must surely be over or he would have appeared by now. She screamed.

On the kitchen table was the largest

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**She was probing his depths, those cerulean depths, searching for something that would come shooting out and dancing around his irises: “I love you.”**

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cobra that she had ever seen; not that she had ever seen one. They weren’t especially common in the Western hemisphere.

“Don’t look at me like that,” it said.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. I’m not going to bite you. I’ve been de-fanged. I could try kill you anyway, I suppose, but you needn’t make a scene.”

“Oh, of course.” She was calm now. In





| *Scott Olmstead*

the back of her mind something told her that the entire encounter was out of place, but this was pushed further back as she considered the realities in front of her.

“Now, I know that you’re an excellent musician.”

“Well...” she began. She stopped.

“Of course you are. I’ve listened. So has anyone else who has half a mind. Your husband doesn’t, I suppose.”

“Not really.”

“Amazing that you can be so close and not, but that’s none of my business.”

“I should say not. . .”

“But to the point.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, well it seems I’ve rather forgotten.”

There was an extremely heavy moment. She started to look into the serpent’s eyes, but stopped herself. She had indeed read too many books.

“Good day, then,” she blurted out.

“Good day. Sorry to bother you.” He then slithered out of the room and out the front door. She didn’t see how he opened the front door, but he went out. She watched out the window as he slithered across the lawn and then down the street. As he passed he seemed to notice her eyes and turned up his head and wiggled his hind portions in a sort of impromptu serpentine farewell gesture. She did the same; that is, she tried, and tripped.

Her son walked in.

“Hello, Mickey.”

“Hey.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you have one of these granola bars; that should hold you over till supper.”

She smiled and stroked his head. But had she been to the grocery store. She had not. Oh but she had not. She tore out after a brief

yelp of where she was going. She wouldn't have normally left them alone, but it was desperate. Mike should be home soon anyway.

Without thinking, in the car, she placed her hands on the piano. The car drove itself. She played some Debussy preludes. They were calming. She needed calm, she thought; when the car reached its destination she stopped playing and put the car in park; she walked inside; what would she need; she did not know; she had forgotten her list; had she made a list, she asked herself she had not, or had she; oh oh these matters of propriety; she did not know; she simply did not know. She had been distracted. There was no explanation any more than there was the fact that here she bought some tomatoes, here she

bought some decongestant pills, here she bought some pita. Then it encountered her: the meat, the meat. It was sitting, glistening; ruby red like a diamond or a glistening troll's eye,

sparkling, glistening: ring, ring, ring like a jingly bell and its glint that makes a sound more than the animé chime with a sparkle of metal and chop, chop, chop here were some pork chops and she now had onions and some peppers, but no, no, not at all: two, three: infinitely rush down the aisle and bang, click, whir, bing, swish, (Ah! We're waiting for Godot. Ah!) yes, no, onward.

She drove home with her own hands and found that dinner had surprisingly not cooked itself in her absence, and her family was waiting. Mike volunteered to cook, but she refused, continued to be flustered. Why would he, she asked herself? Where was it? Ah, and she found the boards and the pans and the knives and the dishes. It was miraculous, simply miraculous. Her husband and her daughter and her son stood and simply stared as her hands moved deftly from one plate to another,

er, from one bag to the next, chopping this, dicing that, killing this, tasting that, smoothing, skimming, smashing, beating, stirring. It was masterful, and though she had never cooked before in her life (that had been part of the agreement, she remembered now indistinctly; you cook, I'll wash; *there*) except when she was three and her mother asked her to cut cookies and realized that she had no sense, no sense at all for gastronomical aesthetics, she felt relieved, amazingly satisfied, as if suddenly her work (whatever it was) was worth it, oh yes worth it every little bit: she was triumphant, Galadriel in all her glory, her splendor revealed to the lowly halflings watching her, light shining in every direction: she spun in her pool a masterful image, a vision in

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**Every time she had sat down, the cat had started feigning death or the children had started getting the flu or the newspaper delivery boy would call and ask to be paid.**

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which unheard of truths existed and only the truly enlightened could partake, a vision that startled her so suddenly that she dropped three spoons and a half

head of lettuce right in her lap as she fell to sit on the floor.

Why was everything so obtuse? Why so enigmatic? Why must she do these things, why, why? Why hide from her family on the floor? There, she said, I'll do it. I'll tell them. And she said, What I've just seen: I have just seen the only real portrait of the Lady of Shallot. But she slumped, her head bent forward, her eyes searching the kitchen tiles for dirt; she had failed. It was a lie. It was not what she saw at all. She was sure of it.

Mickey clucked and said that he was very impressed. Elizabeth agreed. They started to gather the dishes and prepare them for the meal.

Mike reached down his hand and stroked her ear, which was sticking out just so from her unruly hair in the wake of a national dis-

aster. She almost smiled. What had been her vision, she asked herself, what. It was nothing unusual. Too much. Very much too much. She had started making visions out of everything. Why did she have to behave so? What was the point in having revelations in the middle of supper?

Mike did smile, then, and his hand smiled also as it touched hers and tugged it back up to sea level.

And it was evening, and it was morning. The second day.

Saturday was remarkably uneventful. The exterminator had come to kill the roaches, termites, fleas and ants. The dog had been taken to the vet to get sprayed for fleas. Anna assumed that it was August 21<sup>st</sup>. Mike was not sure; he had calculated that perhaps it was the 22<sup>nd</sup>. They sat on the back porch. Looking for four-leaf clovers.

“Really I’ve never been able to find them.”

“You know that’s because you’ve been looking for them too much.”

“Yes I’m sure that’s it.”

They were taking on a more definite narrative structure.

Well supposedly the pyramid doesn’t work always, Anna thought, but she had found that in herself there existed always a huge number of climaxes, turning points, rising and falling action; she knew her husband was the same way. They had decided that dialogue was in the end the best solution to all their troubles. Dialogue and a bit of background information, like the color of their hair, their mothers’ maiden names, the state of the atmosphere at the time of their birth.

“So,” she said, “what’s the latest, if you can call it that?”

He didn’t say anything. He was looking at something he thought was a frog. She said, “Don’t worry, it’s not a frog.” He sighed. She was very particular. He wished suddenly that he had an enormous piece of spinach in his front piece that she could point out to him. He needed to be embarrassed.

“No. Oh, well, I don’t know.”

“Well you must know something.”

“I know that it’s not working.”

“But not working *how*?” She was leaning close. Her breath was a heavenly pistachio.

He choked briefly, then laughed. “I...” He thought. “You know that your mother will say things.”

“Since when...” she stopped too. Since when had anyone been even remotely concerned by anything of the sort, she had meant to say. But it had occurred to her suddenly that things had changed. Why point out the obvious?

“Yes, ah, your hair is a bit messy.”

“Why point out the obvious?”

“Exactly.” Four seconds. “Non, non, je m’excuse. I didn’t mean that at all.”

It was most certainly time for a new twist. She knew it, and he knew it. Even the kids would have known it had they been reading the signs: the cabinets left open, the beds left undone, the characters left undeveloped, the words left unwritten, unsaid, a cucumber half-chopped, a zucchini half-fried, a cow half-killed.

Yes, it was quite time, quite time. Not a new part of the rising action, not at all. Perhaps a parallel universe. Perhaps a non-parallel universe with exactly 387 intersections with this one. Perhaps a new character.

Her mother arose from the depths of North Dakota to visit them.

“Oh, mother, I didn’t expect you.”

“You never do. I told you I was coming two months ago. You said there would be plenty of room.”

"And so there is. So there is. Mike will be delighted to see you, I'm sure, as will the kids. How long has it been since you've seen them?"

"Only a year."

"Only a year, humph, that's not too bad, is it?"

"Oh, well I suppose you'd better come in."

"I was wondering if you were going to let me."

"Oh, no no, silly me. I'm sorry, it's just. Hmm. How did you get here?"

"I drove. It's really not all that far. Well I think that it should be for an old lady, but I'm not that old."

"Actually I'm quite old. I drove anyway. I didn't stop."

"Mother! You could have killed yourself. See anything interesting along the way?"

"No, no, not at all. Rather boring. I do remember seeing a hill or two, a few trees, some grass. A really nice cow which I decided to call Thelma. I don't remember anything else. I ate chocolate the whole time to stay awake."

"Ghirardelli?"

"Haha, no. I'm not that expensive. I'm American, anyway. I have disposable diapers and disposable houses, not disposable income."

"Ghirardelli *is* American."

"Yeah right, so is T.S. Eliot."

"Hmm."

Mike came in at that moment, holding the cat, which was struggling in his grip, sinking its claws into his arms and his sweater.

"Anna, why doesn't this stupid cat want to be held. Most decent animals like to be petted. I demand that she be still and purr. Oh, hello."

"It's good to see you Mike."

"And the same for you." Mike quickly embraced her. Anna hugged her too, after it occurred to her that she had not. The cat scrambled out of their entangled arms.

"Kids! Grandma's here!"

"Mike I hate that word."

"What word?"

"Kids. It sounds really stupid. It sounds like cable television. Oh, Mike, mom just made a comment about T.S. Eliot. Have any idea where he was really from?"

"He never went there, but I think that he was a Tahitian at heart."

Mrs. Buford, for that was her name, found this quite amusing. She continued laughing as she

went into the kitchen to start making rhubarb pies. That was all she ever did when she came to their house. Neither of the children liked any berries very much (she thought it was criminal), and Elizabeth in particular thought that apples were fattening (she had gotten the idea from the latest edition of *Meretrix* magazine). No one really knew what rhubarb was, so they didn't mind eating it.

That night they tried very hard to keep straight faces as Mrs. Buford explained to them exactly what she had been doing for the past year. Apparently she had been very productive. And quite literally; she had started part-time employment at some sort of microbe breeding laboratory. All she had to do was check the instruments and make sure that the little critters were reproducing properly.

And it was evening, and it was morning. The third day.

A few weeks had passed. Nothing at all had happened. The twist had not worked at

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**Was the story failing? It had had quite a boost the other day, really quite a boost. Not exactly a plot twist, she would say, but it was important; oh yes, it was quite important.**

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all. The plot was suffocating. Pretty soon it would lose all hope and plunge itself over the side of the Grand Canyon.

**T**hey had a family meeting. Everyone was there: Anna, Mike, Elizabeth, Mickey, Mrs Buford.

Anna started, "I wanted to see what everyone thought about something."

No one said anything.

"Well?" she said.

No one said anything.

"It might help, dear, if you were a bit more enlightening," said her mother.

"I am not Mr Potato head."

"No, dear, certainly not."

"What she means," cut in Mike, "is that we haven't the slightest idea what's going on."

Still no one said anything. Or, the kids didn't say anything. Suddenly Mike launched into a cross-examination of Mrs Buford about Russian pronunciation.

"What's going on?" asked Anna.

"You're losing it," said Elizabeth.

"It's lost," said Mickey.

Yes, yes, thought Anna, they are right, they are ever so right. And she immediately started playing the piano. She really didn't know what she was doing. She had been having surreptitious conversations with Mike for the past year, but she didn't yet know what they were about. They had such an odd relationship. What, she thought, was it all about. Here she was again, here she was again, why was it that when she played Scriabin (and of course now she was playing his most ecstatic concerto) she had thoughts about everything, the sort of cheese one eats on Thursday, and the purpose of her marriage, the purpose of her kids, the purpose of her having a mother and having a dead father, the reason that she couldn't think of the French word for *roller coaster* when she needed too. Oh! Oh! She felt light as air, as if she were in an airplane

that was experiencing bumpiness and was lightly bouncing in her seat, drinking in oxygen like champagne, listening to a haunting Arvo Pärt melody that seemed to delve right into her soul and fill her like a sponge, plunging her again and again into a single line of arpeggios that stretched all the way from the end of the universe to her pocket.

She reached in her pocket and discovered again the note that she had found at the door many many days ago. She looked at her son. "Are you a boy scout?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. Is this yours?"

"Yeah."

Why was she so dense, why was she so dense.

So that was her last name, after all. So she had a last name. She looked at her husband and whispered, curling her lips ever so slightly, "Stanford."

"You knew it when you married me."

"Yes," she spoke. Yes. His eyes suddenly started gushing with something completely unlike tears; his irises were full of the truth of blueberries and they knew action and suffering and they found suddenly a verdant shore upon which to throw their waves. In a locked expression they stared at each other without blinking. They blinked, and during the blink they were transformed to another place, one in which he was riding away on a boat in a river from a pointed plain on which stood she in all her radiance, singing

*Ai! laurië lantar lassi súrinen!  
Yéni únótimë ve rámar aldaron,  
yéni ve lintë yuldar vánier  
mi oromardi lisse-miruvóreva  
Andúnë pella Vardo tellumar  
nu luini yassen tintilar i eleni  
ómaryo airetári-lírinen.*

And he immediately fell asleep with the peace of swan feathers on softly dancing snow, opening his eyes again a moment later

to discover her closing:

*Namárië! Nai biruvalyë Valimar.  
Nai ehyë biruva. Namárië!*

Golden leaves fell in his mind as he finally opened his eyes; she opened hers too and looked to again find her children and mother sitting just as they were one moment before.

“No, no, Anna, darling, my only love, do not leave!” He was desperate. He was holding her shoulders and repeatedly kissing her face. He was completely losing his ability to know anything at all about the world, he had already lost touch completely with symbolism and allegory and theory and semantics; he could no longer read Joyce with any understanding, there was only this lone radiant face that mattered more than anything in the world.

“I thought it was you who was leaving,” she said. She was relieved, but she did not know if she should show it. She decided that she should, and she opened up her icy hands and placed them in his, drawing heat from them.

Mrs. Buford had gone back to make more rhubarb pies. Mickey and Elizabeth had continued to sit, but each was considering why on earth Planck’s constant was really important, and furthermore what they would be doing tomorrow.

And it was evening, and it was morning. The fourth day.

**S**aturday the twenty-third of May. They took a road trip down the Natchez Trace to some deserted town. They were having a picnic. No one was very much liking it, but everyone was content to sit on the grass and look at various things: the sun,

the clouds shaped like Elvis (which Anna insisted were absolutely necessary to find when one was in such a place), the mockingbirds, the magnolias, the abandoned churchyard over the hill.

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**She really didn’t know what she was doing. She had been having surreptitious conversations with Mike for the past year, but she didn’t yet know what they were about.**

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Was it necessary to go on, Anna was asking herself. She did not quite know. She might have asked Mike. She did not. Elizabeth would not care. Her mother had already returned to

North Dakota (quite some time ago, actually). Was the story failing? It had had quite a boost the other day, really quite a boost. Not exactly a plot twist, she would say, but it was important; oh yes, it was quite important.

“Are you cold?” she asked Mike.

“No, why would I be?”

“Just wondering.”

“I think it’s hot,” said Elizabeth.

“Shut up,” said Mickey, who had gone off to chase a squirrel up a tree.

All these dialogues had driven her crazy. They were all too vague. Everything is too vague, she thought, when one talks. What does one talk about, after all? It could be always the weather, or always the town, or always the relationship. What were these things. My stars, she thought, what am I doing here?

She stood up and walked over to the old churchyard that was part of the abandoned town. She walked straight to the oldest grave she could find: “Marybell Smith, 1832-1880.”

“Who’s that?” asked Mike. He had followed her. Of course, of course. It was inevitable. It always was. It was necessary for the action, so that there could be more dialogue. Always, always.

“I refuse,” she said.

“What?”

“Your proposal, of course” she said. He

stopped for a minute.

“Eh?” He really didn’t want to think about this much longer. It was making him nervous. She was continually making him nervous. Was this a surprise, it was not. He did not know. What? “What?”

“I’m sorry, I was only remembering.”

“But what?”

“When you asked me to marry you.”

“Is that what you wished you said?”

“Oh, no no no. I thought that’s what I did say. But it didn’t come out. I heard something else instead. I didn’t mind, I guess.”

“Aha,” he said. Why was she telling him this? Dare he ask?

“Don’t ask,” she said. “I don’t know either.”

**I**t had been quite a long while since she had played the piano for any extended length of time. Every time she had sat down, the cat had started feigning death or the children had started getting the flu or the newspaper delivery boy would call and ask to be paid.

And here she was, playing something, out of nowhere. She hadn’t any idea what she was playing. No one could hear it but her. It wasn’t Bach, it wasn’t Mozart; it wasn’t Debussy or Ravel, Muczynski or Rachmaninoff, Prokofieff or Copland. It was she, and where it had come from she still did not know. But she played on.

Play on, play on, said Mike from the next room, though he could not hear a note.

And it was morning, and it was evening, the fifth day.

Things were dying down. It had already happened. What. No one knew.

Mike was neck-deep in nothingness, and it was frightfully annoying to him. He went in to his office every morning and called home immediately to confirm that the world was

still spinning. Sometimes Anna was hesitant:

“I’m not sure. Why don’t you ask Socrates.”

“My God, woman! What do you know?”

“Oh come on dear, it can’t be that bad.”

They were spinning their story quite regularly now. They did not really know where it was going, but they were anticipating its ending. They needed the rest. They needed it badly.

Wednesday he arrived to find no one home. He panicked. Where are they? Where have they been, will they be, are they being, were they, had been.

He fell asleep. It was something, he did not know what, the sixth day.

**S**unday the third of May, two years later, his family suddenly reappeared in the living room. They woke him.

“You fell asleep, didn’t you?”

“I think so.” He noticed his beard.

“Rather Winklish if I do say so myself,” said Anna.

She was excited that she had no perception of time. Neither did he. He only noticed, as did she, next to his chair, on the floor, a rock, stupid and gray, holding its head up and exuding the most exuberant song he had ever heard. He did not know what to make of it. The kids disappeared (into the back of the house), and they stood listening to the rock.

It was a melody that both had heard and not heard before. It was almost entirely imperceptible. Did they really hear it? Where were they? She began to wonder, have we died? And he said simply, no, probably not. He was beginning to wonder. He was thinking too, of what he did not know. Was he Prufrock after all? Of course not, of course not, she said.

The song was melting their ears and their senses into platinum so that they drooped towards it to listen; they could hear nothing, they could hear everything: an F, she thought? A G? A C dominant seventh? An H? He asked. She laughed.

Neither of them could contain their smiles. They were determined. Was it possible? They did not know. It was the seventh day. How long did they have?

Looking down, shyly, she played the first note. He followed, crossing his right hand over hers. It started soft, like an echo, gradually growing to be a full melody, each playing his or her part. At first it was minimal, like a

Williams poem or a Pärt solo, and then suddenly it imploded, creating something central

**He only noticed, as did she, next to his chair, on the floor, a rock, stupid and gray, holding its head up and exuding the most exuberant song he had ever heard.**

and dazzling that could not be understood: the green pastures of Valimar, halls of kings, heavenly mountains peaked with blue diamonds... Perhaps they listened alone. They did not

know. But they listened. As they played the rock became quieter, as if contemplating. In a few minutes it died out altogether, and sat there, like any other old rock.

**T**hey had stolen its tune.

[Linguistic Notes]

Title: "The Music of the Humans", like "Ainulindalë;" Quenya

<sup>1</sup> From Galadriel's parting song: "Ah! Like gold fall the leaves in the wind, long years numberless as the wings of trees! The long years have passed like swift draughts of the sweet mead in lofty halls beyond the West beneath the blue vaults of Varda wherein the stars tremble in the song of her voice, holy and queenly."

<sup>2</sup> "Farewell! Maybe thou shalt find Valimar. Maybe even thou shalt find it. Farewell!"

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*Then the themes of Ilúvatar shall be played aright, and take Being in the moment of their utterance, for all shall then understand fully his intent in their part, and each shall know the comprehension of each, and Ilúvatar shall give to their thought the secret fire, being well pleased.*

—Ainulindalë