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WE ALL HAVE TO OCCUPY consensual reality together. How we can do this, though, I haven't a clue.

"Don't come in," my wife says. "I'm in the bath. I don't want you to see me."

By this she means her face.

She doesn't want me to see her face. Naked in her hot bath, however, is the only time I can stand to look at my wife, so I ignore her.

She grabs a towel to cover her head. I stroke her jaw through it and she whimpers. There are adhesive marks on her collarbones and I rub my thumb against them.

Around the sink is a still life of preposterous things. Liquid latex. Spirit gum. Plastic wrap. Vaseline. Modeling clay. Toothpicks and paintbrushes. Brown and yellow tooth enamel and great strings of crepe hair in every shade of green, so lovely, like lianas draped on the linen cupboard below.

I swallow.

"You are making a new mask," I ask, quietly, my hand on her belly. She arches her body into my hand like a cat. She does not mind my touching her. She just doesn't want me to see her face.

"We can't go on like this," I say, after she comes, her legs thrashing like a mermaid's tail.

My wife is nothing like a mermaid. A mermaid goes from monster to maid. Sasha, on the other hand, has gone from maid to monster. Willfully.

"You must accept that Sasha Beneke is dead," she says, muffled under the towel. It is a salmon colored one her mother gave us when we married. It says "His," in loopy embroidery.

"You do understand that Sasha Beneke is my wife? I love her. I love you, Sasha. I don't want you to be dead."

"Perhaps you are in denial. I read about this phenomenon among the humans. They are weak to see the truth."

When my wife, a true child of Red Bank, New Jersey, dusky and buck-toothed, speaks English as if she had learned it from her wet nurse in the Carpathian mountains, I feel—enraged.

We could continue to argue like this, I suppose. We have dozens, no,

hundreds, of times. But tonight I am too tired and sad. And my own anger scares me.

I just want whiskey.

I leave the bathroom, closing the door to keep in her precious steam.

She needs it for the spirit gum.

She needs steam for the spirit gum as I need a goddamn drink.

I have brought this upon myself somehow, I think. I am in love with a woman who now claims to be somebody else.

Somebody else. A nonhuman sentient being with bilateral symmetry, cultural mores which we invented together, but which largely reflect my own moral preferences, and a language limited by being the invention of one person.

One person, which by its nature, if we are to believe Wittgenstein, dooms a language to stillbirth.

One person.

A human linguist.

Me.

When I met her, Sasha was a Klingon hobbyist. She had—has—had a fleet mind for languages, but no particular desire to ever speak to anyone. Kids like this from richer towns, with more sophisticated parents, might take up Latin or Attic Greek or even Sanskrit.

But Sasha, in her mom's Airstream, climbed a TV mountain, and taught herself Klingon with a correspondence course designed by other geeks like her.

She was—is—was—she's lovely. She has an overbite, one which somehow suggests that she's eternally biting her lip, trying not to think about sex. And she is so fantastically awkward that her gestures come out the other side of klutzy, a kinetic car crash you can't take your eyes off.

I fell for her on sight, at the Constructed Languages Convention ("ConLang") eight years ago in San Diego. I'd been working on an artificial language and I was curious about what more serious proponents of artificial language were up to.

There were rumors that some of the native speakers of Esperanto—people actually raised with a constructed language as their first—would be there. This interested me, just having a drink with them, taking their measure. I was inventing a language, but I had my doubts about the viability of such an endeavor. Esperanto is not a success, but it is less of a failure than any other, out of hundreds of attempts across time, and I wanted to know why.

I'd arrived at the conference thirty-six hours late. And registered casually, taking my first morning in San Diego as a beach holiday. My university paid my fees, of course, a perk I gave no thought at all.

Sasha, on the other hand, had scrimped and saved her tips working as cocktail waitress all year to get to San Diego to ask one question and it mattered to her more than anything else in her short life.

The authors of the Klingon *Hamlet* had not been given much podium-time. Even among conlangers, the Klingonists are considered geeks and pariahs of a whole different order of magnitude. They were on a small stage in an auditorium at the San Diego Marriott.

The room was named for its wallpaper, which depicted the *Andrea Doria*. Many of the people in the audience were in Star Trek costumes. The whole thing struck me as absurd, but in an amused way. I'd just popped in for a moment, out of idle—no, morbid—no, idle curiosity. I sat down next to a woman wearing a pith helmet.

The authors spoke briefly about their process, about the Klingon Shakespeare Restoration Project in general, about the years of labor the translation required.

The word “translation” caused a fuss and buzz, a fuzz, a buf; this fuzz-buf grew into murmur and thence into a groundswell—and then a kind of nasal coherence emerged from the crowd:

“In *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, Klingon Chancellor Gorkon says ‘you have not experienced Shakespeare until you have read him in the original Klingon.’”

The speakers laughed broadly, and allowed, “Okay, restoration, then.”

And they opened the floor to questions.

Sasha stood, twisting the straps on her handbag. I noticed the handbag first. It was the type that we meager Terrans might call “leathern,” or anyway, might’ve centuries ago. Sasha’s gestural ballet, as I’ve said, was so extreme that I thought at first she was simultaneously translating her remarks into a semaphore for others present.

That I thought this, that I called her purse “leathern” even to myself, ought to give you some idea of my own ridiculous nerdiness. People who invent languages, practitioners of “the secret vice,” as Tolkien called his own obsession with Elvish, are heroically uncool.

It’s a thing. We’re used to it.

Sasha was something else again. *Sui generis*—part golem, part cocktail waitress, with an ass like the great outdoors.

She had read the Klingon *Hamlet*. It was the only book she’d read since

high school, and she'd read no Shakespeare back in Red Bank, you can be sure. She'd read it carefully, twice, with a yellow highlighter and a notebook and her Klingon dictionaries, going back to it between customers' passes and puke-filled ashtrays, night after night.

It had taken her most of the year and she had a burning question, her hands afurry. She stood with one foot tucked against the other thigh like a stork. In an Uhuru miniskirt that left her legs visible up past Thursday.

She spoke for a moment or two.

Klingon has a voiceless velar fricative, and voiceless uvular and lateral affricates. It has both glottal and voiceless uvular stops. It has no velar plosives at all.

In other words, in normal words, it is impressively unearthly, especially to a native English speaker—like you're gargling rats.

The speakers looked first dismissive, then interested—then turned-on. And then mortified.

The taller one recovered his composure first.

"The young lady," he spat into the mic, "wishes to know why, given that Klingon is a language of warriors"—and here the Klingons in the audience made a gesture *ensemble* which was obscure to me in meaning but which recalled footage I have seen of Hitler Youth—"a language of action, a language in which, as she put it, action itself is the secret subject of every sentence, why we chose to translate this particular epic? *Wil'yam Shex'pir's Khamlet*, she says, has got to be the least Klingon person she can even imagine, and 'to be or not to be,' a question no Klingon in his right mind would become paralyzed by. Anyone would choose death. Khamlet, she says, is a man of inaction, unworthy of the language we have put in his lips."

The audience sniggered. Sasha had awakened the easily stirred misogyny of a roomful of dusty old farts-in-training.

The shorter man on stage gave a sadistic smile.

"To be or not to be—*baQa' Qovpatlh, toy'wl'a qal je jIH*—appealed to me for that very reason, honey. Your accent is pretty good for a girl, by the way. Next question."

"What an asshole," muttered Pith Helmet. "What she actually asked was way more clever and he didn't even answer it."

There may have been a next question, although I tend to doubt it.

Conlangers are antsy as a rule, and the Klingon linguists had been included in the convention only in the hopes of some media attention for the gathering. I doubt if their panel had been awarded more than hour's slot. And once Sasha had been run out of town, they'd've been anxious

to get on to the next bit of business as quickly as possible.

In any case, I wouldn't know because I was following Sasha as she ran out of the room. I did not then know that she had come up with her disturbing insight and pinched every penny to get there and share it with her peers, only to be dismissed so breezily and summarily. I didn't know that her trip to San Diego had been her first plane ride, and first truly autonomous action as an adult.

But as a freak myself—my entire face is a port wine stain, my skin the color of a seeping wound—I knew what it felt like to be a freak, to put yourself right in the middle of a convocation of freaks, to do so at great pains, just so that you might be yourself—and then to be treated as a freak by the freaks.

My freakishness is manifold of course, but in its most obvious face, it is an external thing. Everyone has to grapple with it, and they do—with hurtful results until you get used to it. Sasha's freakishness—her shyness, her fleetness of mind, her weirdass bent, her preposterous clumsiness—were largely hidden, and thus more burdensome even than mine.

In any case, I was overcome with a mad admixture of compassion and lust. Here was a woman who thought Hamlet was a boring dick. I loved her for it instantly.

She fled, and I was right behind her. And thus I was right on hand to help her gather her papers when she tripped at the back of the auditorium, a sprawling pratfall, miniskirt flapping, thighs like iron.

I was—enchanted.

And resolved to do whatever it took to stay right there by her side. I already had an inkling what that might be.

Klingonists later took on *Gilgamesh*, which seemed to me to take Sasha's criticism on board and which pleased her greatly when she heard of it and, at my urging, read it. Sasha liked Gilgamesh's style. There have also been attempts at *Much Ado About Nothing* and the Tao, which, on the other hand, seem to run roughshod over Sasha's insight to their own detriment.

Klingon, such as it is, is a language of warriors. Klingons, such as they are, act first, rush in where angels fear to tread. I don't think she's wrong that what these hobbyists choose to translate needs cultural relevance or else it is a meaningless exercise in intellectual frippery.

Sasha didn't even take it that far, though. She just wanted to know what imp of the perverse had seized them in making the attempt. She just wanted to acknowledge their wit, and be seen in return.

Be seen. Not as a black woman, not as a cocktail waitress, not as someone with a rack like forever and Pam Grier's ass.

Just to be seen. As herself. In a room full of people who were, in some sense, her true tribe and with whom, by their very presence in that room together, she had consciousness of kind.

I'm a geeky twit with a face like a hunk of raw sirloin like I say, so I got it, immediately, intuitively—and with a desire to keep on getting it, for her and from her, forever.

We read the translations together, in bed.

Laughing.

Laughing, because by then Klingon, in all its stillborn Samurai glory, was no longer a part of our marriage in any meaningful way. Just a silly part of our pre-history.

And our story is so much more.

So much worse.

Thinking of it, the bed-laughter recalled to my throat makes me gag. I take a huge swallow of whiskey.

Because now our story is a different story, so much worse.

Perhaps it is simply this: I Married a Monster.

But maybe instead, it is this: "Abhorred monster! fiend that thou art! the tortures of hell are too mild a vengeance for thy crimes. Wretched devil! you reproach me with your creation; come on, then, that I may extinguish the spark which I so negligently bestowed."

We all need to occupy consensual reality together. The alternative is madness. Where has our consensual reality gone, mine and Sasha's? How can it be that my wife no longer views herself as human?

Not human, as defined by a Klingon in Klingon: "Ugly bags of mostly water." Not human, as defined by a Mok in Enepe, the language I created for my beautiful young wife: "Critters (I have seen) Who Stumble on Evidence."

That last is Sasha's translation.

I miss her.

I ache for her.

What is our marriage if our reality isn't consensual? And how can we even occupy space together if our reality is no longer consensual?

My wife was a Klingon hobbyist. Soon after we met, she quit first Klingon, and then her job. I learned Klingon for her, and then I invented a new language for her, and together we imagined the people who spoke

it. They were our ideal people, it is true. Imagining ourselves as members of the race that spoke our language made us feel very, very good about ourselves. I'd be lying if I said it did not infect our love life. From time to time, yes, there was some roleplay.

Sasha was a Klingon hobbyist and then a Conlang hobbyist. She went back to school, and Enepe, our language, became an avocation for her. Then, without warning, it became something more like an obsession and, over my objections, she dropped out of community college and went back to being cocktail waitress. She got into serious cosplay, and she wanted money she owed to no one to pay for her masks and costumes.

I could not rightfully deny her this, but I felt her slipping away, and taking our creation with her. There were many fights, and I acted a rageful fool. And then she got a job in a kink joint, where she could wait tables and strip by turn, in costume, and out.

As a Mok, speaking Enepe. Speaking Enepe, our language, but outside the bonds of matrimony. Outside the bounds of matrimony. And outside her goddamn clothes. Speaking Enepe, in a strip joint. Speaking Enepe, dancing on a pole for other men.

In a few short years, my wife's hobby turned into an obsession, and that obsession into a mental illness. And thence into something more like a metamorphosis. I have had a hand in this transformation, so I mostly blame myself—and try to live with it.

With her.

Frantically writing and rewriting our consensual reality as the consensus between us buckles in time and space.

Her claims that Sasha Beneke is dead, however, are brand new. And they may be more than I can bear.

What fresh hell is this now?

She claims to be dead.

Does she also claim not to be comprised of oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus, potassium, sulfur, sodium, chlorine, and magnesium?

Does she claim, transformed into a child of a different star, to have different constituent bits?

This is something I will have to ask her.

Next time I catch her in the bath.

And once I invent a word for phosphorus.