



Nathaniel Rich

[from *The Mayor's Tongue*]

KEFTIR THE BLIND

Keftir was a blind artist who became moderately famous for his effulgent, kaleidoscopic paintings and his assiduous technique. In preparation for any painting he studied his subject with great devotion. For his celebrated landscape series of Kansas cornfields, for instance, the artist collected agricultural histories of the state and annual USDA reports on crop yields dating back fifty years (and had them translated into Braille). He questioned farmers about their harvesting techniques, the equipment they used, their family histories, and what they daydreamed about in the fields. He dressed in the farmers' dungarees while he painted. He slept in the fields, listened to the wind soughing through the stalks and weeds. He had an affair with a farmer's daughter. He ate corn: corn pone, corn mash, corn on the cob, corn chips, corn syrup. He licked atrazine off of a stalk.

Although his landscapes sold well, Keftir received his highest commissions for his portraits. Many of his wealthy subjects simply paid for his company. It was just as gratifying to have a charming, humble



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Still lifes were easiest for Keftir. Preparation for a fruit bowl painting, for instance, took no more than an afternoon of fondling the fruit and the bowl, tasting the fruit, and gently pressing the fuzz of a peach skin against his cool gray eyes. His favorite subject, in fact, was a still life: a glass filled with water. To Keftir, this was the most pleasing image, perfect in its simple serenity. And yet there was also something infinite and inaccessible about it, since he had no way of determining the exact contours of the water in the glass. As soon as he touched the water, no matter how delicately, its shape fluctuated, became something new. The more his paint-stained fingers tried to

have achieved. color that an ordinary, "seeing" painter might not been captured in these lively amalgams of light and his subjects agreed that some essential character was impressive for a blind man. His admirers and melded together by fine brushwork. Still, the result They mostly consisted of splashes of bright color. Keftir's portraits were not particularly accurate. it was to have a portrait of oneself painted. Besides, explore every nook of one's home for inspiration as man listen attentively to one's every murmur and

approximate the shape of the water, the more he disrupted it. This inability to understand his subject obsessed him, and he returned to the water glasses again and again, between larger projects, whenever he sought calm or inspiration. By the end of his career, in fact, he had lost interest in all other subjects.

Despite his many repetitions, the paintings of water glasses were wildly inconsistent. Sometimes he painted large canvasses in which a whole ocean of blue and white swashed against the sides of a thin glass, raging like a tsunami. Other times the glass itself took on gigantic proportions, becoming an immense border that subverted the water, simplifying it into abstract shapes. One critic compared the technique in these paintings to the alternating pluses and minuses of Piet Mondrian's "Pier and Ocean." Occasionally, however, the so-called "waterglass paintings" seemed to depict other scenes altogether: a naturalistic portrait of a line of Union soldiers posing in full regalia before a battle; a vista of the Moab desert, complete with cacti prickling the big country sky; a classical rendition of the Pietà. But in each case, Keftir would stubbornly deny that he had drawn anything other than the very

who had awoken in a place he'd never seen before, without remembering how he got there or even who he was. Keftir, defiant, slammed his eyes shut. He refused to open them again until his implants were carved out and the cataracts, mist-like, began to spread over his eyeballs once more.

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Against his cheek, the flowers felt like the bristles of an old paintbrush, one that had been squashed too many times into a canvas so that its hairs splayed out to all sides. He closed his eyes and a new smell came: lavender, lavender. His nostrils dilated and pollen coated his cilia, which undulated gleefully.

Sorokin returned with the glass, and rested it on the armrest of Keftir's wheelchair. Keftir watched, not breathing, as the surface of the water trembled slightly and rocked back and forth in its container; after some seconds it became still.

"The water," he gasped. "The water!"

"Just like your pictures."

"No—just now—it was flat. Completely flat."

Sorokin frowned, noticing the abject configuration of Keftir's features, his nose straining and his jaws prognathous. "Yes," said Sorokin, "but now, the second you talk about it, it is bouncing about right there on your chair, look at that, and even spilling, oh dear—" and the glass fell to the soil.

But Keftir did not notice the glass falling, didn't even feel the water spill onto his bare foot. He sat stock upright and glanced around him like a drunk

glass that was sitting on the table in front of him and which his assistant had filled with tap water just an hour earlier.

One day a man in a white lab coat came to Keftir's door, introducing himself as one Dr. Anton Sorokin. Keftir told him he no longer did portraiture and began to close the door in his face, but the visitor blocked it with his foot.

"That's not what I'm here for," he said. "I'm not just an admirer—I'm an optometrist."

Keftir gopped towards his visitor, his fingers speckled with dried baby-blue paint, and caressed his physiognomy. Sorokin didn't move at all, allowing Keftir's rough hands to probe freely; the doctor only closed his eyes.

Keftir invited him inside, and after some polite conversation, Sorokin explained his reason for the visit: he'd developed a new procedure that could allow Keftir to regain his vision.

The painter was silent, but his hands fumbled over his face and under his glasses. It looked as if he were using his knuckles to knead his eyeballs deep into his brain.

"Are you in pain, Mr. Keftir? Have I startled you?" He stood up.

Keftir only shook his head, one of his hands flying up, as if in self-defense. The hand was wet with some kind of frothy liquid.

"I don't want to hurt you, sir," said Sorokin, "I only wanted to help—"

Then the doctor realized: Keftir was crying tears of joy.

A week later Sorokin performed the surgery, scraping off the artist's cataracts and implanting a microchip in each retina. Keftir convalesced, with the help of heavy painkillers, for more than a month at Sorokin's lab, his entire head wrapped in bandages. After a few weeks, a nurse wheeled Keftir into a circular, subterranean chamber sealed off from any light source. A second nurse trundled in a wheelbarrow filled with clunky plastic objects that protrude copper plugs. They were shaped like animals: elephants, giraffes, hippopotamuses, and tyrannosaurs. The nurses, holding the night-lights in their hands, stood along the walls of the room, their mouths slack with anticipation. Sorokin positioned

The nurses chered.

After some further rehabilitation, Sorokin decided that Keftir was ready to be exposed to daylight. He wheeled Keftir into his private garden, under the hanging boughs of a live oak tree. Sorokin then handed Keftir a pile of mated drawings and sketches—prints of Keftir's most renowned works. He had purchased them at the gift shop of the nearby art museum.

Keftir regarded them with confusion. "The colors," he said, "they seem faded." Sorokin explained that Keftir's sensitivity to color might still be partially impaired, but Keftir wasn't placated. He demanded that Sorokin give him a glass of water, without ice.

Sorokin ran off, leaving Keftir amid the dappled sunlight under the bright green leaves of the oak. Beneath his bare toes, a beetle waddled between silken blades of grass, its black carapace flashing as it passed through alternating regions of shadow and light. Keftir bent down and picked a stem from a lavender bed by his feet. He examined it closely, its purple, saucer-shaped flowers strung on its stalk, with their exotic smell. He could not recognize this smell.

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himself next to Keftir, holding a pair of scissors. A nurse flipped a switch, and the lights went out.

Sorokin cut off the bandage and, one by one, the nurses plugged in the nightlights. The first, a blue cow, was so dim that its aura did not even reach across the room to Keftir's wheelchair. The second, a red antelope, caused Keftir to moan in pain.

Sorokin ordered the nurses to plug in a third light, and Keftir protested: he was in agony.

"It's not pain you're feeling," said Sorokin, with great solemnity. "It's vision. Since it's an unfamiliar sensation, your brain's natural response is to reject it."

One by one the nurses plugged the animals into the band of outlets. An electric menagerie flickered into being. To the nurses' astonishment, Keftir started to laugh.

"Is he dying?" asked one of the nurses.

"No," said Sorokin. "He is confused—he can see only pale forms and shadows. Later, when his eyes have developed more fully, everything will become clearer."

"But I can see perfectly now," said Keftir. "What marvelous animals."