

My Friend Natalia

Laura Lindstedt

Translated from Finnish by David Hackston

22.8. 15-16pm Writers Meet: Luise Boege & Laura Lindstedt



(1) My name is Belle Reve. As one who speaks French, you'll notice that everything is wrong with this name, and as a lover of art, you'll understand why. I've overstayed my welcome, as the saying goes, so I'd better continue.

Through me flows the great Mississippi, which as a child my mistress used to call the Pissymissy. I became instantly attached to the place, after all, the river delta is shaped almost like me, and I liked the nickname because, after all, my principle function is to pass urine. I think this is the best way to draw up a travel plan, to see a new form above another old one, to see Italy as a boot, for instance, Croatia as a pterosaur, Finland as a maiden, Argentina as a hitchhiking beaver, China as a flying witch, a river as a vulva, an island as a heart. In this way, a place becomes your own.

The glades around my Mississippi don't have time to decompose or rot, let alone to stink, because the current is so strong. My Mississippi sucks into its vortex whatever it wants. It's a perky Dixieland band. It's a honky-tonk bar, where you just have to shout. (Don't ask whether it's a saloon or a brothel, a casino or something else, it's always something else.) It's "Für Elise" in ragtime, with all those sassy, syncopated rhythms about which big important doctors used to be almost as worried as they were about the debauching effects of train travel on young women. It's a Greyhound with wings grown fast to its tin sides. It's American Airlines, its landing gear pounding curses from the runway. It's a kayak, of course it's a kayak. It is water, sludge, being lost, being found, it is a mangrove tree stretching its roots into the brown water.

My mistress claims she doesn't have an ear for music. It doesn't matter one way or the other, because my Mississippi's melodies are very simple. All you need is a set of drums, a bass and a whistle. Can you whistle, Doctor? The boys in New Orleans sure can! There's a guy who slaps his fat bass in time with the drums while whistling a tune that really gets my Mississippi moving.

Two men, two instruments, two pairs of hands, one pair of lips. A dream orchestra playing my favorite tune at my behest: The Bobcats with – the one and only – Big Noise from Winnetka!

(2) As you can see, I've drawn my genitals from a *dal sotto in sù* perspective. I knelt down, placed my phone on the floor between my legs, took a number of photos. Using my fingers, I held together my inner labia, my *nymphae*, closing them up and opening them again, pressing them gently together, pushing them first to the left, then to the right, then straightening them again, held between my forefinger and middle finger I pinched them in a straight line before finally prizing them wide open again.

In looking for the perfect image, I made a number of fascinating observations. Such as the fact that you really can shape the inner labia. They are not exactly playdough, but neither do they bounce straight back to their original position because there's no such thing. They don't have a fixed position. The labia remain for a moment in precisely the position in which I place them, before straightening out as they please. In Latin they are called the *labia minora*, though they're not really all that small. They're like Dumbo's ears, sometimes like the crinkled, dewlap folds around the edge of a chanterelle mushroom. And they are unique to every woman.

I wanted to see all their possible formations. I took fifteen different shots. Each image was different, and I realized that the potential for metamorphosis is endless.

Translated from the Finnish by David Hackston, coming out from Liveright / W. W. Norton Spring 2021.