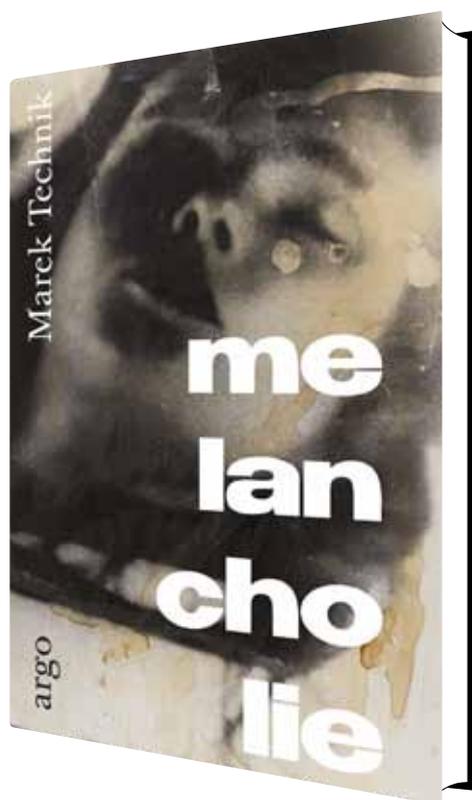


Melancholia

by **Marek Technik**



Existential solitude can be both healing and dangerously isolating

Sisi once had a promising career as a model and a relationship with a successful photographer, but when her body betrayed her, everything began to unravel. Now alone in a rented apartment, surrounded by an indifferent world and tormented by memories of her mother, who mysteriously vanished, Sisi searches for herself – wandering along the Vltava River and attending a theater premiere where she can momentarily become someone else.

At the same time, a stranger watches her from afar. Locked inside his own mind amid dark memories, he struggles to find meaning in life. His journey brings him to the same place as Sisi, and perhaps their paths will cross.

The novel asks: Is it worth living by the rules of the world around us, or should we follow our own inner voice – when ultimately, we're all headed toward the same end?

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Marek Technik: Melancholia

Plot summary

A young woman's carefully managed life fractures under the pressure of being seen, while elsewhere a second consciousness drifts toward ritual, doctrine, and violence—both drawn into a world where perception itself becomes unstable and meaning begins to feel possessed.

Melancholie unfolds as a novel of perception under strain, tracing how meaning attaches itself to bodies, images, and rituals until ordinary reality begins to warp. Its first movement follows Sisi, a young woman whose life is organized around visibility: modeling work, artistic collaboration, and the constant management of surface—appearance, discipline, attention. The book opens with her encountering a theatre poster that depicts her as a melancholic figure in a river, an image that feels more real than the city around it. From there, the narration tracks her through a single day of errands, memories, and observation, as an unnamed “Eye” frames her movements like a camera, turning the city into a stage and Sisi into both subject and object of watching.

That act of being seen becomes increasingly unstable. Sisi recalls the physically punishing photo shoot behind the poster, her relationship with Matouš—the photographer and her partner—and the subtle power dynamics embedded in admiration, possession, and imprint. The day culminates by the river, where her dissociation abruptly breaks when she discovers a dead rat at her feet, forcing her back into bodily awareness and flight. From this point on, the novel narrows its focus inward.

Much of the first part is set in Sisi's apartment, which becomes a sealed system: underheated, dim, and watched. She struggles to tolerate solitude, misses calls, pretends not to be home when Matouš knocks, and begins to experience perceptual disturbances—apparitions, temporal gaps, and a growing fixation on a dark stain near her door that seems to form a pointing silhouette. The stain functions as omen, mirror, and invitation. Her body fails her as well: dermatitis spreads without clear cause, medical testing multiplies possibilities, and she is quietly replaced in the theatre project led by Adrian, whose conceptual framing of melancholy as an inhabiting force—rather than a mood or diagnosis—casts a long shadow over her breakdown.

Attempts at reentry into social life take the form of masquerade. At a premiere party Sisi appears in a rabbit costume, moving through the crowd as spectacle and shield. Her encounter with Adrian sharpens the novel's central tension: visibility as intimacy, intimacy as extraction. His insistence on unmasking—on seeing her “for real”—turns philosophical speculation into coercive pressure. The evening ends with an uncanny recognition that something is watching back.

In parallel, care escalates into diagnosis: psychiatric evaluation, medication, and a fragile stabilization. Her father re-enters as both anchor and wound, and long-suppressed truths about her absent mother surface. Sisi resolves to seek her out.

The novel's second part shifts perspective into a second-person voice, introducing a different consciousness whose inner life is structured by fantasy, hostility, and a desire for transgression. This narrator moves through domestic claustrophobia, mechanical labor, and obsessive memory, haunted by a dead friend, Holov, whose charisma, encyclopedic recall, and eventual collapse form the emotional and mythic core of the past. Behind Holov stands Mára: mentor, mythmaker, and origin point of a body of recordings, rituals, and half-articulated doctrine.

What begins as predatory imagination gradually hardens into action. A manuscript titled *Sursum Corda*, distorted audio archives, and a lenticular image recur as charged objects, hinting at an informal order built on hierarchy, ritual testing, and acts that cross irreversible boundaries. Meaning here is not explained so much as enacted—through small sabotages, humiliations, and finally pursuit.

As the two parts proceed, motifs echo rather than align: observation, possession, surfaces that flip into something else when viewed from the right angle. Relationships collapse, identities harden, and the distinction between metaphor and act erodes. The novel closes not with resolution but with pure seeing: a final scan of landscape rendered as signs whose messages cannot be trusted, because they are not intentional—yet still arrive with the force of revelation.

Melancholie is an experimental work of literary fiction that fuses psychological breakdown, essayistic reflection, and occult unease. It is a novel about what happens when perception itself becomes the site of danger—when to see is no longer neutral, and meaning, once attached, refuses to let go.

Marek Technik: Melancholia

Translated by Bruce Bybee

The Eye of the beholder floats near the ceiling, absorbed, fixed on the girl below: a stiff nape, a furrowed brow dense with indistinct unease, long legs she traces probingly with the pads of her fingers. Testing the surface—the way an art connoisseur delicately examines a rare artifact. Then, unscrewing the lid of a white jar, she carefully spreads a thin layer of lotion over her fine skin, almost as if preparing to sunbathe.

At times she tends to regard herself—or rather her life—as a kind of artwork. Perhaps she serves as inspiration to someone, but she doesn't think of herself as a Muse. She is a creative act in her own right, and simultaneously her own creator.

She paces the apartment like an animal in a cage and stops by the door, facing the large dark stain on the wall. Roughly the size of a human figure, it gives Sisi a peculiar feeling. Up close the formation is almost impossible to distinguish against the blue pattern of the wallpaper, yet she notices it nearly every morning the moment she rises from bed and looks in that direction. From that vantage point it appears clearly enough—a shadow standing watch over her. She doesn't know its origin; beneath the old wallpaper, the wall is just as firm there as anywhere else.

The shadow rises from the floor in the vague shape of a shrouded figure, like a bedsheet ghost; at shoulder height it even seems to have something like the stump of a limb, casually pointing towards the apartment's front door. It is a few centimeters taller than she is. In the evening, as she prepares for bed, the stain feels faintly spooky and reminds her of her childhood—as if she were back in her room, fearing ghosts. This memory paradoxically calms her, and she's always fast asleep. Sisi studies the shadow silhouette as she would herself in the mirror: with an intense focus on detail and the sense that she is watching an image through someone else's eyes. As though the shadow, with its protruding limb, were luring her outside, pointing the way she's meant to go. Yet the stain looks different from every angle: when she takes two steps to the left, the light in the window shifts and the outline of the imagined limb disappears into the dark hues of the floral pattern. It's like those images that change depending on the angle at which they are tilted—she has one in a box of things her mother left behind. On one side, a young girl in a white dress walks beneath a blazing sun, its rays threading the space around her. Sisi doesn't know what the card means or where her mother got it, but since childhood she has imagined the girl as herself. Tilted to a certain angle, the image—about the size of a playing card and as stiff as a payment card—replaces the girl with a knight in black armor, upright and facing straight ahead, his removed helmet in his left hand, a sword in his right. It seems to Sisi that his eyes are different—one blue, the other black—though she can't tell whether this was intentional or merely a small manufacturing defect.

She doesn't remember her mother. She left when Sisi was still too young, and as far as Sisi knows they never met again. People say they were alike—except that Sisi is even more beautiful, her father always adds dryly, and that is usually where it ends, since even after all these years he still feels utterly betrayed by her mother's departure and fiercely resists any

memory of her. As a child, Sisi carried on imaginary conversations with her mother; sometimes she simply imagined her voice, calling her *my beautiful little girl*, assuring her she was *the best daughter in the world*. She knows her mother only from one short video and a handful of photographs; the remaining memorabilia her father burned in the garden.

Sisi inhales, a strange idea passes through her mind. Slowly, she unlocks the safety bolt on the front door and peers into the corridor the shadow-hand is pointing towards. The corridor is long, quiet, and empty—its walls painted in washable ochre, a copper macaroni of gas piping runs beneath the ceiling in the far corner.

3. MEL: CRASH

She sits on the bed like a statue, almost completely still.

In the room's gloom, the Eye can barely distinguish the surfaces of objects from living form. Gradually it adjusts, acclimating to the dimness, and from the gray emerge edges and planes that gather into more definite shapes and volumes. Only the colors seem to have gone missing. The air is cold: the window fails to fully insulate what is inside from what is outside. The space heater is set to 22 °C, yet it barely warms at all—the radiators beneath the window, by the door, and in the bathroom remain lukewarm. She stares at the wall beside the front door, one leg stretched out from the armchair, the other tucked beneath her—but only at the foot to avoid excessively blocking circulation. Most of her skin is hidden by the shaggy knit of a sweater and the fabric of her trousers. Her right arm props up her head, slightly bowed, her gaze fixed on the floor; the silhouette of her loose hair forms a fringed lampshade over her face, a little askew, as if refusing to obey the tedious laws of vertical symmetry. The frame respects her rigidity: not a single glaring vector shifts for entire minutes that stretch asymptotically towards the vanishing point of subjective eternity. The room is saturated with gloom. From the outside, it is impossible to tell how alive the mind inside the skull is—whether it pulses along an appointed track or unfurls its sails to the drift of freely blowing associations. In the end, movement wins out, and her arm slackens and her body sinks into a more horizontal position. Only then does she register the stiffness in her muscles: she sits up, stretches her arms in the pose of a crucified Christ, then lets them fall into her lap. Tense sculpturality gives way to lethargy, which to the beholder reads as dejected resignation. Outside the window it's been cold for some time now—clammy, raw, creeping—and consciousness descends into interior landscapes.

She emailed the owner several days ago to say the heating in the apartment doesn't seem to be working, and that soon it will likely get truly—drastically—cold, at which point it will become a real problem. Mr. Hellman still hasn't replied. The building has thick walls that probably insulate well, so for now the cold remains mostly outside, yet she can feel warmth steadily leaking through the old windows and cold creeping inward—into the room, and into Sisi. On the bedside table there's a digital thermometer; readings from the last ten days range from 17 to 20°C, with the lower bound occurring almost exclusively at night, from 23:00 to 7:00. But the essence of cold and gloom seems to be soaking gradually into everything around her, including herself.

When she looks out the window, she sees an empty street. During the day, a car passes only rarely, as the city's ring-road artery lies two blocks away. Roughly once every thirty minutes a bus appears, usually stopping at the nearby stop, where on average one or two people get off and sometimes one to three get on, so it seems that the neighborhood is steadily emptying out, draining away, until only she remains, completely alone. Hidden in this apartment, she will go on gazing out and watching that bus until one day it stops swallowing and spitting out residents altogether and merely drives past, nervously speeding, as if it were passing through an

abandoned—and thus potentially dangerous—district. The driver will be tense, fearing the engine might die and force him to stop, for who knows what horrors might catch up. In any case, at night—since Sisi doesn't sleep much at night, God knows why she can't fall asleep though she never used to have this problem—instead of the frustrating tossing and turning from left to right and back again she looks out the window just the same as now, during the day. She's always telling herself that this senseless bus-spotting slowburn will sooner or later bore her to death and she will finally fall asleep, because at night the bus barely comes once an hour and between two and half past five it doesn't come at all, and cars seldom pass at those hours. After eleven in the evening, someone occasionally gets off the bus—not always, but sometimes. They vanish within a minute into one of the nearby building entrances or slip out of her view. No one gets on—or at least Sisi can't remember ever seeing anyone get on here at night—so the overall balance of arrivals and departures comes out to zero, and Sisi remains alone: alone in this cold apartment. Meanwhile, in other apartments—probably just as cold and bleak—other people go on living: people she doesn't know, whom she sees only if they happen to get off or get on or walk along the street beneath her window, who do not see her and do not know her. Still, her consciousness is glazed with another thin but unmistakable melancholic membrane.

A phone's muffled murmur spreads through the space. The smothered sound feels present and distant at once. It seems that the device she'd buried alive six feet under has come back to haunt her with its wretched, whining howl. The truth is that it's merely under the duvet—under a double winter layer of hypoallergenic hollow-fiber and a cotton blanket pulled over it; lately, Sisi gets cold easily. It's not the default ringtone echoing through the room, but something guitar-based—which means it's probably Matouš calling. Or her father. The sound is heavily muted, but Sisi recognizes the Charlotte Gainsbourg–Beck duet, *Heaven Can Wait*. She's assigned Johnny Cash's *Hurt* to Mr. Bertrang's number, and the electropop–postpunk girl-power riot *Freak 4 the Kick* by Sink Ya Teeth to Berenika Kajková's number; the rest are unmarked—so Matouš is calling. Johnny Cash is her father's only musical concession to more popular taste. Otherwise, all his life he has listened to little besides classical music, from medieval *ars antiqua* through Impressionism and Janáček (inclusive), which can be a bit dull. But he truly loves Johnny Cash and plays *American Recordings* in regular mood-waves—practically on repeat over the long run, though he doesn't quite know why. And Sisi remembers hearing *Hurt* almost every day when she was little, so it's a necessary linkage: Father = *Hurt*. As for Beck and Charlotte Gainsbourg, they aren't necessarily Matouš's favorites, but *Heaven Can Wait* played on their first official date (Art Angels restaurant), when Sisi blurted out, thrilled: "Charlotte Gainsbourg!" and pointed at the speaker, and at the exact same moment Matouš blurted out, "Beck!", also pointing to the speaker, which was now broadcasting their newly designated couple's anthem and thus the first question on their lovers' quiz of running jokes. The bed-muffled *Heaven Can Wait* plays twice, then again halfway through, which means Matouš kept calling her for almost six and a half minutes before giving up.

She doesn't see many pedestrians from her window either—not at night, not even during the day. Occasionally she catches sight of someone walking a dog—it's never clear whether the person is old or young; it seems to her that everyone wears almost the same clothes, or very similar clothes, everyone walks with the same cautious gait, and she can't see their faces because, for some reason, they all walk bent forward, as if watching for ice, or searching for some tiny object they've dropped on the sidewalk. With dog walkers she is fairly sure that at the end of the leash nearer the pavement there really is a dog, even if she can't distinguish breeds. She is no longer always certain whether there's a man or a woman on the other end, though she believes she sees perfectly well—she has no need for contacts or glasses. All those people down on the street seem unbelievably similar. Not that it matters. At any hour, day or night, she registers at most one human being—never two or more together, always only one. Sometimes

alone with hands in pockets, sometimes with a dog, usually staring down at the sidewalk, as if in thought, or afraid of stepping in something, or tripping, or falling through an open manhole. All the beings under her window, i.e. at both ends of leashes or without leashes entirely, shuffle their feet or take tiny steps as if frozen to the bone, or as if walking on ice and afraid of slipping, though there is no ice anywhere, at least not yet, since it's still safely above freezing. She wonders how much time she has already spent like this.

Then she realizes the dog walkers aren't actually alone. The ratio of beings with a dog to beings without a dog is roughly one to one. Her initial impression—that she is watching only other isolated beings—therefore needs revision: even a dog counts as someone. Dog breeds mean nothing to her; she can only tell whether a dog is bigger or smaller, shaggy or short-haired. Sometimes a thought creeps in that it is she who is on the leash, sniffing at the sidewalk, taking in other people's shit and piss and spit and cigarette butts and rotting fragments of organisms and scraps of food, gasoline or diesel and oil, dust, rubber particles, trace plastics, perhaps even other people's breath, smoke, smog, with a strap tightened around her neck, telling her where to go.

From up here she can't smell any of it. She opened the window only once, briefly, when it rained, to soak in the petrichor. Sooner or later, though, she will have to go outside—her supplies aren't inexhaustible, and even if she eats little more than a bird at the moment, she doesn't have much left.

Directly opposite her window, the street is lined by a corrugated sheet-metal fence, and behind it there's some kind of yard or a space with ambiguous contents: probably uncut grass, one or two benches, perhaps a shed for bikes or tools or bins. The fence itself dissolves into a series of urban graffiti with no beginning or end, no real narrative, only endless development—seamlessly spreading further onto the plaster of four- to six-story buildings to the right and left, with occasional interruptions, reaching every corner of the neighborhood. Thanks to the enclosure, which in an otherwise built-up stretch of street gives the impression of a missing tooth, and thanks to the apartment's western orientation, the setting sun shines straight into her windows like a necromantic reproach, stretching the shadows of objects evoking Nosferatic expressionism. It's a peripheral part of the city, and day and night a quiet calm reigns here.

She imagines looking at the building from the opposite window and tries to visualize *her* side of the street. She knows that to the right and left there is no other building or fence, only shrubs and grass. Other buildings stand a little farther off; she may live on the periphery, but not on the absolute edge of the city—not in the sense that the building she is in forms a boundary beyond which there is only an indefinite patchwork of fields and brownfields. She feels as if her head has been soaked in foggy vapors from which new shapes of object-imagining constantly form, like an endless topological transformation of a faded cloudy landscape. She feels mildly dizzy, though that could also be hunger. She tries to focus only on what she can see from where she is right now: the empty street, the buildings opposite, a slice of cloudy sky—and inside, the table, part of the kitchenette with dishes set aside, and through the open bedroom door a three-wing wardrobe, then a half-filled bookcase and an ottoman and a chair piled with clothes that looking like they're trying to compost themselves, and a folding screen and cardboard boxes and half-empty shopping bags printed with ads and a propeller on the wall and a fan on the ceiling and the large stain on the wallpaper that resembles a being with a crude loggish stump pointing toward the door. None of it gives her any joy.

From within the bed's hollow emerges a new ringtone—this time the energetic *Freak 4 the Kick*, so her agent's calling. Yesterday she didn't show up for their meeting; she only wrote that she

was sick and would reach out when she felt a bit better. In the end she wrote exactly the same thing to Matouš. Sisi suppresses the urge to reach under the duvet and pick up the phone. It rings for another minute or so and then stops. The original silence returns to the room, carrying the pulsing twitches of near-subliminal panic. She feels as if someone were quietly siphoning oxygen out of her consciousness. How could she show herself to anyone, looking like this? She doesn't understand it—she doesn't get what's happening to her. Her body has betrayed her—when she saw herself this morning, she decided it was better to cover the mirror on the wardrobe door. Mrs. Kajková has already called twice today and about three times the day before. Matouš calls almost constantly. Earlier, an unknown number was trying to reach her. She didn't answer once, yet she lacks the courage—or the will—to switch the phone off. She tries not to think about anything specific. At times it happens by itself: her mind stands still, doesn't move, has nowhere to go. The phone is plugged into the charger, but she has wrapped it in the duvet, the way her dad used to wrap her up as a joke when she was little and she wouldn't even breathe, trembling with excitement. They played a game: “Whatchu think is in this sack?” Usually on a Saturday or Sunday morning, when he didn't have to go to work. He'd wrap her in the blanket and ask, “Whatchu think is in this sack? Must be flour!” He would hug Sisi in her duvet cocoon and rock her to the rhythm of the rhyme. “We have to take a look inside: Hey, there's a girl in here!” And Sisi would shriek and fling herself around his neck like a monkey. That was after her mother vanished—after she left them.

When the phone rings once again in the room's silence, she's startled. Perhaps she hasn't turned it off because it's her connection to the world: when it rings, it reminds her she isn't completely alone. But she can't imagine how she's supposed to respond, no matter who is calling. When she looks up at the ceiling, she sees the fan standing still. The setting sun makes the shadows of its blades creep across the ceiling into the shapes of crooked paddles. Minute by minute the room sinks into twilight.

Sometimes her mind becomes a river that flows on its own—she doesn't resist it; she only shapes the banks, performs a half-conscious drainage of the mental landscape. Yesterday, just before dusk, she sat motionless on the bed for long minutes, letting thoughts settle into a post-panic lull—like the dramatic interlude in films where survivors are given a blanket and hot tea—and in the opposite corner of the room, she saw someone sitting. She accepted it without much excitement, as if it were a natural ectoplasmic materialization of subconscious images—something to which she was, in moments like this, unusually open. Only after about half a minute, when it fully hit her what she was looking at—or rather who was staring at her—did she jerk, feeling a bitterness spill through her insides and rise in her throat, as if some pressure reservoir with who knows what liquid had ruptured within her. She stood, turned on the bedside lamp, and stepped aside; under the lamp's light and the new perspective, the apparition vanished completely. She switched the lamp off again and stepped back, but now she saw nothing—only the armchair drowned in dark shadow that looked nothing like the female figure that had been staring at her before, opening its mouth in a mute message. It was strange. She thought of her mother, whom she remembers only from photographs. After a while the surprising experience acted like an inhibitor of wakefulness, and Sisi fell into several hours of dreamless sleep. She woke with a jolt around two in the morning, and after failing to quickly fall asleep again, she began her usual observation of street movement. Watching the night street illuminated by conic lamps, where nothing moves for tens of minutes, began to turn into a regular habit.

That was more than twelve hours ago.

When someone knocked at the door a little while ago—someone standing right behind it, someone speaking to her from only a few meters away—she was frightened and didn't move for a good ten minutes, who knows why. This hide-and-seek feels dreamlike and unreal to her, and probably unnecessarily overwrought. She heard a man's voice: "Sisi, Sisi, hello, hello, are you there?" It was probably Matouš, but because of the corridor's oppressive acoustics, the heavy-duty security door, and unusually charged emotions on both ends, the mechanism of communication failed: Sisi pretended she wasn't home—that she wasn't behind the door, that she wasn't there at all—and after a few minutes the voice went silent. She didn't hear any footsteps—coming or going—so after a while she wondered whether she had only imagined it. But then the phone rang again, and it was Matouš. In that moment she panicked again unreasonably, and because she didn't want the person outside the door to hear the phone inside, she quickly cut off the ringing. At the same time she was angry at herself for reacting to Matouš the way she was; Matouš simply doesn't deserve it. She feels as if her insides have been flooded with thick ink, and in this sepia liquid her soul has lost its former lightness.

She feels like a puppet she can still control via an extended vertical wire, while someone has severed all the fine threads that connect delicate muscles and expressions to the steering will. Everything culminated a few days ago—something definitive occurred within her. As if the incubation period of an illness had run its course and the symptoms had broken out in full: something left her, or else something entered her. Either way, she doesn't want the first thing to return nor the second to go.