Walter or You jerk you didn't call me up
A conversation in four scenes

CHARACTERS:
I
WALTER
YOU
JERK *a voice on the telephone*

PLACE:
Layr, Singerstraße 27, Vienna.

SETTING:
After six. I stands in the entrance area of the gallery. WALTER stands beside me. Freestanding wall structures have been placed in the open gallery space, recalling a salon or an antechamber. Over the course of the play the characters move through the exhibition. Its title borrows two figures: Walter from Robert Musil's The Man Without Qualities and Jerk from Bernadette Mayer's sonnet You jerk you didn't call me up. One is governed by the expectation of a future life, the other by its failure to arrive.

I

It was after six and, as no one else was coming, one could begin. I said one, though only I was there.

WALTER I can't imagine that.
I What?
WALTER Being flayed.
I Why not?
WALTER Because one always imagines oneself with skin.

In Titian, Marsyas hangs upside down, his legs apart, his body more thing than person. The others stand around him and look as though they have a job to do. With Brook Hsu the scene had become long and green. The bodies emerged from the ink and went back into it; in places one could no longer tell whether the skin was missing or whether everything had become skin. Hsu had painted Marsyas years before, very small then, on wood. Now he was almost two and a half metres wide.

I thought of you.

WALTER You're thinking of him.

I looked at him.

I Who?
WALTER Jerk.
I That's what you call him.
WALTER That's what *you* call him.

I had given a person a quality and found Walter's use of it unfair. Cowardly, generous, difficult, brilliant, artist, lover, arsehole. So long as one uses such words oneself, they seem movable.

I His name isn't Jerk.
WALTER And is my name Walter?
I Yes.

A little mountain came to mind. Takezaki's *Double Negative*, scarcely larger than a sheet of paper, dark and triangular, a mountain like the one you draw in Pictionary.

WALTER *Double Negative.*
I Yes.
WALTER Two mountains?
I Two mountain ranges. South of Marugame. They protect the city from wind and heavy rain and at the same time keep water from it.
WALTER Practical.
I Very.
WALTER And impractical.
I That too.

Takezaki painted the picture in 2023. A year later he was dead. The picture knew nothing of it.

WALTER Now it's a late work.
I For us.
WALTER Not for the picture.

My phone lay on the table.

WALTER You could call him.
I No.
WALTER Why?
I Because he said he'd call.

On the television Lili Dujourie stood at the window. She smoked. She went out of the picture. Something of her remained in the glass. Walter looked at me questioningly.

WALTER Is she waiting?
I Maybe.
WALTER Earlier you said she was waiting.
I Then I take it back.

Had Jerk come, he'd have put a coat down somewhere, taken a glass or not, stood in the way. His body would have set his limits. As it was, he could be everywhere.

WALTER Is that drawn?

The question was about Kai Althoff. Or at least I took it that way.

I Printed. The original is drawn. Nine sheets. Coloured pencil and felt-tip pen.

The edition reproduces the image and the nine parts as well.
In the middle lay this blue-green blanket, covering something. On the right a large woman with drawing pens, beside her the small figure with the red helmet; on the left men whose action one might have taken for violence until someone supplied a religious explanation that did not make the picture much more comprehensible. The sizes didn't match. Neither did the stories.

WALTER What's happening there?
I I don't know.

I looked again. On the nine printed sheets the joins between the nine drawn sheets were still visible.

WALTER You always hope withdrawal is something other than indifference.
I Sometimes it is.
WALTER Sometimes not.

II

WALTER Is that old?
I No.

An old man sat in Sergej Jensen's picture. The surface looked as though the picture had survived several bad decades. For a long time Jensen had made pictures in which fabric, bleach, seam and stain were enough; later figures and old image sources returned. Here a story had returned, but apparently not all of it.

He looked at me.

WALTER You used to know more.
I I used to claim more.

Clarisse had seen a genius in Walter, at a time when that might still have sounded like a description and not yet like a demand, and when the works failed to appear she had scarcely allowed him not to be one.

WALTER That sounds unpleasant.
I Is it wrong?
WALTER That doesn't make it any more pleasant.
I You could have worked.
WALTER Clarisse thought so too.

He was silent for a while.

WALTER You could have called.
I I didn't promise anything.

III

WALTER So what's the original now?
I Of what?

Braque had painted birds and guitars. Saint Laurent put them on dresses and capes in 1988. The dresses were worn by models, the models photographed; years later Otto-Knapp transferred the photographs in watercolour onto canvas and washed some of the colour out again. Painting had become clothing, clothing had become movement, and movement had become a picture again.

I Braque, perhaps.
WALTER Pretty.

He waited.

I What?
WALTER Nothing. I thought you'd disagree.
I Not today.

For a while no one said anything.

WALTER What does one really know of someone one loves?

Details. Words he uses differently. Questions he doesn't answer. Things that suddenly catch his attention. A mole. The way someone closes a door. A smell that later you no longer know whether you remember or invented.

WALTER You're talking to him again.
I I'm talking to you.

WALTER Your *you* wanders.

You is an unreliable grammatical person. I say you to Walter and mean Jerk; I say you to you and don't know who I mean.

WALTER That doesn't belong there.

In Evelyn Taocheng Wang's *Schnitzel on Imitation of Agnes Martin*, a schnitzel lay in a pale Agnes Martin grid.

I That's why it's there.
WALTER That's not a reason.

Wang reconstructs Martin's grid from reproductions and memory. The deviation doesn't enter later; it is there from the start. Food from South Tyrol entered the works of 2026 as well. In one picture the schnitzel; in *Strudel on Imitation of Agnes Martin* a strudel, handwriting and a red seal stamp. Things with a place, a cuisine and an image history of their own suddenly sat in a painting that had long tried not to need precisely such things.

WALTER You find that comforting.

When I turned round, you were standing behind me. I don't know when you came in. Perhaps you'd been there all along.

I Did you call?
YOU I'm here.
I I can see that.

Walter went to the window. He pretended to be looking out. Perhaps he was looking out.

YOU What are you thinking?
I Nothing.
YOU Good.
WALTER Oh.

We looked at him.

WALTER Sorry.

You had almost missed Vunkwan Tam's *Galliard*. A small transparent plastic body, like packaging with nothing inside.

YOU What is it?
I *Galliard.*
WALTER A dance.
YOU It isn't moving.
I Perhaps it's danced itself out.
WALTER Then it's a dance after the dance.
YOU It's empty.
I It contains air.

I had spent all day explaining things. Slowly every because began to seem suspect.

WALTER Sit down.
I No.
YOU We could both.

No one sat on Franz West's *Diwan*.

YOU Perhaps that's company.
WALTER If discomfort's enough, certainly.

I went to the window.

WALTER Is that landscape?
I What?
WALTER Outside.

There were two pictures by Oscar Kargruber, both *Untitled (Landscape)*, both 2025, both the same size. One had gone almost pale, as though someone had held a light on it too long; above the white field was a dark zone. In the other it was the reverse. Almost everything was dark, only a narrow yellow-green area at the top remained open.

YOU They really have the same title?
I Yes.
YOU Why?
I Because the title doesn't name a place. More a category.
WALTER Landscape, because otherwise you might not notice.

I realised how little it takes for a horizontal division to become a horizon; a light field is enough, a dark one above it. And then it was winter.

WALTER Where?

Trevor Shimizu's *2025 Midwinter Break* was full of blue and green. He paints the landscapes from memory; seasons kept apart in the calendar can therefore appear together in the picture. Winter could mean that it was painted in winter, remembered in winter, or that in winter he thought of something that wasn't wintry. In *Branches (Hudson River)* branches stood in front of the Hudson River. Or the title said that they were branches and the Hudson River, and once one knew the title, one found both. The branches blocked precisely what a landscape usually clears: the view. Little of the river remained, still less of the famous American expanse.

WALTER Perhaps that's the river.
YOU What?
WALTER That you can't quite see it.

For the *Board / Table* pictures Takezaki had fixed small canvases to a board, driven his van into the countryside around Marugame and painted outdoors. While working he kept turning the pictures; only at the end did he decide which way up they were.

YOU So the sky could be at the bottom.
I Temporarily.
YOU A seahorse!

Until then I'd seen William Gaucher's *Seahorse* only as a dark painting with a narrow organic form.

I Now I see it too.
YOU Because I said it.

The longer one looked, the less remained of the animal. Up close it broke apart into patches of colour, lines and the pearls applied to the surface. Gaucher has for some time been painting animals again and again; he sees, remembers, changes, sees differently. The seahorse was less an outline than something that had gradually deposited itself in the picture and could just as easily be lost again.

Then a body without a head.

WALTER He's looking at you!
YOU He has no eyes.

Gaucher's *Archaic Torso of Apollo* was warm, yellowish, pink, green in places, against a cooler ground; here too pearls sat on the canvas. They caught the real light and brought the body close to Rilke's torso, whose radiance no longer binds the gaze to eyes.

IV

In Felix Krapp-Raczek's *Dancers III* one could only distinguish the figures after a while. Heads, shoulders, legs appeared in a surface that looked rubbed and reworked, as though several movements had remained on the same piece of canvas because none had been ready to make room for the next.

YOU How many are there?
WALTER Wrong question.
I And what else is one supposed to count?

The group was clearer than the individual. In Krapp-Raczek's *Dancers* group of works, dance appears as a movement that can loosen the boundaries between people for a while. In the picture this happened without actual movement. Several bodily states lay on top of one another; the painting did not have to decide whether they shared the same moment.

YOU So they're together because you can't separate them.

I looked at the phone.
Larry Clark's photograph was small and dark. A bright arm ran through the black. Shoulder, skin, a white cloth, lights behind. The rest withdrew.

YOU Who is that?
I Don't know.
WALTER What's happening?
I Don't know.
WALTER But you see it.
I I see an arm.
WALTER And?

I knew the picture belonged to Tulsa. Was there a needle? I wasn't sure.

WALTER There isn't one.

It was the last picture in the book, the fiftieth in a series of fifty. Before that Clark had shown the drug use of his circle of friends. An ending image. But it ended nothing. The arm remained outstretched; what came after was no longer photographed. Later he said he'd wanted to show the cycle, things beginning again with the next generation. In 1971 he returned to Tulsa once more and already knew which pictures were missing from the book. The ending had been found, but not by chance.

Then my phone rang. No one moved.

WALTER Well?
YOU Answer it.
I Why?
YOU You wanted him to call.

The phone kept ringing.

WALTER Is that Jerk?
I Yes.
YOU How do you know?
I His name's there.
WALTER But you said his name isn't Jerk.
I In my phone it is.

Walter shook his head. I answered.

I Hello.
JERK Hello.

His voice was his voice. Disappointing. I'd expected something stranger.

JERK I'm sorry. I meant to –

He was silent. I thought sentences for him and believed none of them.

JERK Are you alone?

I could have said yes.

I Yes. Not quite.
JERK Who with?

Walter stood at the window. You somewhere.

JERK Lou?
I Yes.
JERK I asked who you're with.
I With you.

So sentimental. I went to the window. It was raining outside. Or it had been raining for some time and I hadn't noticed. The city lay behind the glass, blurred, unreal. Walter stepped beside me.

WALTER And?

I covered the microphone with my hand.

I What do you mean, 'and'?
WALTER Is everything all right now?
I No.

He nodded. For a moment we were all reflected in the window, Walter, you and I; not Jerk, though I could hear his voice. I put my hand to the glass. It was cold.

JERK What are you doing?

I saw our reflections, the pictures, the dark city, or the other way round. In the glass everything lay on top of everything else.

I I'm trying to find something out.
JERK What?

I thought of Althoff's picture. Of the many stories, the explanations. *You'll never understand it*. And: *How lovely it would be if you could*.

I Whether one can love someone without understanding them.

There was a pause. I looked at you. You looked back. Walter raised his eyebrows.

JERK And?
I Don't know.