

dead letter: uni magazine of the arts

Volume 1
Issue 1 *dead letter*

Article 10

1987

Mostel, The Cello Player

Amy Lockard
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/deadletter>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), [Fiction Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©1987 by the University of Northern Iowa

Recommended Citation

Lockard, Amy (1987) "Mostel, The Cello Player," *dead letter: uni magazine of the arts*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/deadletter/vol1/iss1/10>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *dead letter: uni magazine of the arts* by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

MOSTEL, THE CELLO PLAYER

Amy Lockard

Mostel Bostrovich does not just play the cello. He breathes through it. He cries with it. He makes it growl and whisper and laugh and sigh and roar and soar.

The review was taped to the corner of the dressing room mirror. "Ahh..." sighed Mostel Bostrovich to his mirror. "The critic of the *Yorktown Gazette* is a fine critic and kind to Mostel Bostrovich. But he does not say what cannot be done with the cello. Mostel Bostrovich grows old, and with Bostrovich dies the cello. The music does not last."

"Half an hour to performance!" a crier yelled, shutting Mostel's door hastily before he could turn to scowl.

Mostel opened a jar of olives. His wife walked into his dressing room. She had the reddest hair, redder than human hair should be. She talked too much and smoked too much and Mostel could not wait until she left.

"Mostel," she said. "You old badger. How did you get away without me? You must have bribed the chauffeur again." Petra Bostrovich strode across the room, her heels clicking on the tile floor. She patted Mostel's head. "You know I like to come with you to the concert hall, darling." She took the jar of olives off the dressing table and jammed her fingers into it. "Do you like the new dress I am wearing?" she asked, opening the front of her coat with her free hand. "Mostel, are you listening to me?" She popped an olive into her mouth.

"Mostel, I ask you a question. When I have my colors done, the girl says this is one of my best colors. She says I am an 'autumn.' And I hate autumn. It is so sad with everything dying. She says that has nothing to do with it, if you like it or not."

Petra continued talking as she knelt by Mostel's cello in its open case by the door. Mostel had his back to her. He was fussing with his moustache, combing it different ways with a toothbrush. Folding the dark hairs over the gray.

"I was so hoping I would be a 'summer,'" she continued. "Things in my wardrobe are for a 'summer.' Maybe I will give all my clothing to my sister. She has the coloring. Then I start all over buying a new wardrobe." Petra lit a cigarette. "Mostel, you are not listening. I mention my sister and there is not a chop remark. And I talk about spending money and you are not having fits. You are not hearing me, Mostel? Are you?"

Mostel was not listening to his wife. In his daydream, Babette was leaning against him and licking his ear. He was holding her, just as he held his cello.

Babette was the love of his life. She was bigger than his cello. She was big as a cow. She had big, brown eyes, and the

long eyelashes cows have. She had the biggest breasts Mostel Bostrovich had ever seen. Especially now that she was pregnant. She was eight months along.

But last night Babette told him the child might not be his. It could be the piano player's, she said. Thinking about it, sweat broke out on Mostel's forehead. He wiped it with his handkerchief. His wife was still talking. Let her talk. she who gave him no children. If his children resembled his wife, perhaps it was better to have none. Perhaps.

Soon she would leave. It was almost curtain time and Mostel would do what he must do. Just before the interval, when the orchestra played the last of the Dvorak, he would reach for his pistol and he would shoot the piano player in the back. It was as simple as that.

"Petra, what a pleasure," the conductor said, walking into the dressing room. He kissed her on the cheek. "You'll have to take your seat now, my dear. I must speak to my star performer a moment." He kissed her again on the cheek. Mostel paid no attention to them. He was flipping his hair back and watching the effect in the mirror. Petra walked across the room. "Play beautifully for me, my Mostel," she said and kissed Mostel on the cheek and left, her fur coat rippling.

"Well, Maestro, to what do I owe this honor?" Mostel asked, rising.

"I am worried," the Maestro confessed. "I am worried about tonight's performance. I feel something is wrong. It's not stage fright," he protested. "I know this symphony like I knew the old neighborhood. It is not that. I just have a feeling, a strange feeling." As he talked he stalked back and forth across the room. "Mostel, how long have we known each other?"

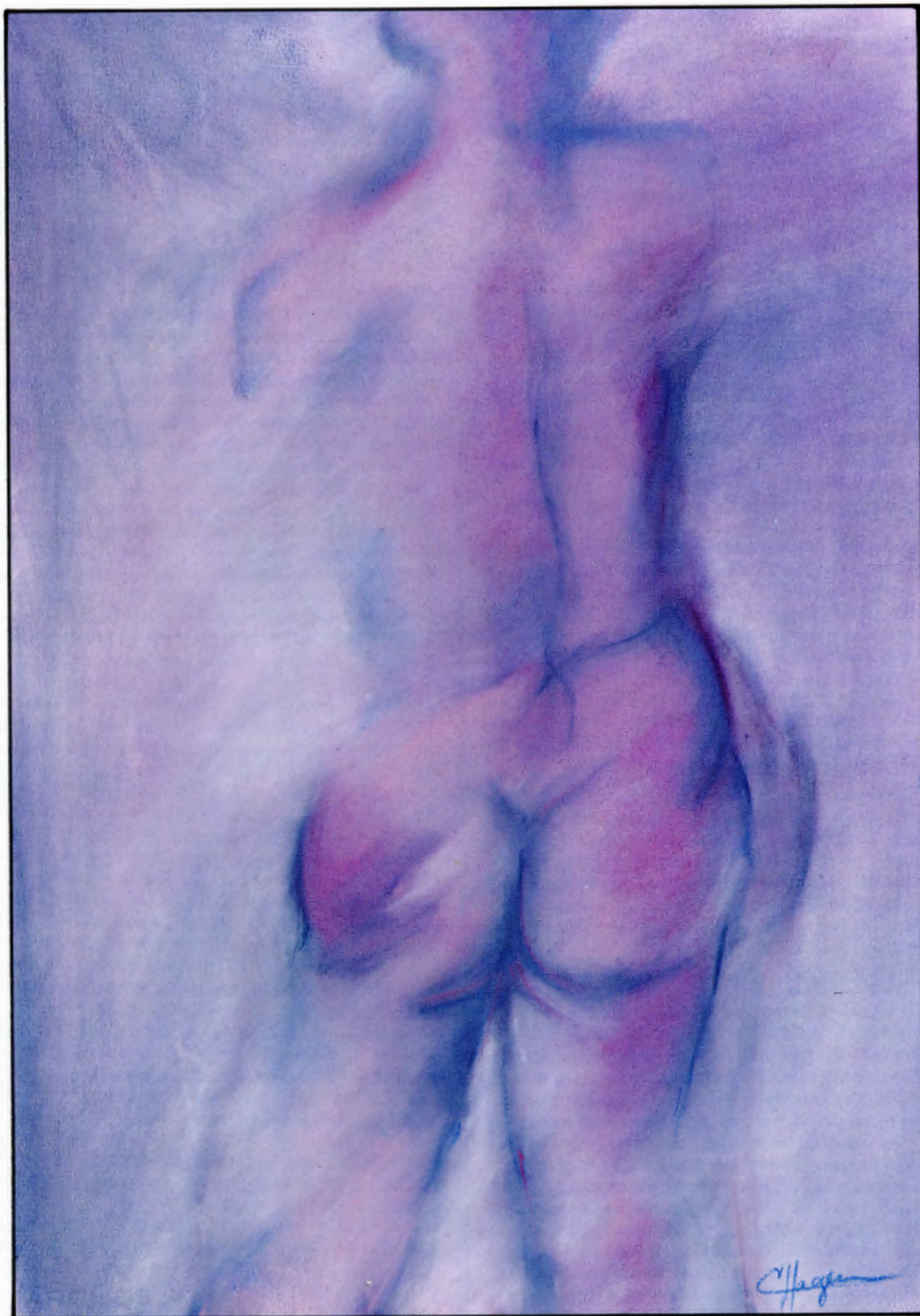
"Fifty years, I would guess," Mostel replied, combing his moustache again. "Since first school in Warsaw. How do I know how long? You are the sentimental one."

"Would you tell me, then, your oldest friend, if something was disturbing you? Because I feel something is."

"Nonsense," Mostel replied. "You are not rational."

"I am not rational? Oh, Mostel. Promise me this, then. Will you join me at Sardi's after the performance? No matter what happens, will you drink with me tonight and forget your sassy French slut?"

Mostel did not bristle at the conductor's words. Babette, his darling, a slut? It was true she did have a lust for all of life. But Babette, with child, and not knowing whose child she carried? That was another matter all together. Well, what could one say about that? She was a slut.



Carol Hagen

"Did you remember to tell the stage master I wanted the front row reserved, the entire front center?"

"Mostel, you have asked me a dozen times. I told him. But your party is still not here. We may have to fill the seats with other patrons."

"But Babette . . . She is here?"

"She's seated now. She'll be directly in front of you and your cello. So," the conductor patted Mostel on the shoulder, "what do you say? You will drink with me afterward?"

"The question is, will you drink with me? Because you may not want to. Who knows what tonight brings? Tonight you may despise me."

"Mostel, you are impossible. I am your oldest friend in the world and you talk to me in riddles. You have always such crazy schemes. You know you do not mean to carry them out," the Maestro said. "Just say you will come to Sardi's and be done with it."

"Did you know that Babette is with child?" Mostel liked to say "with child." The words rolled off his tongue.

"I had heard. Is it yours?"

Mostel turned to face the conductor. "It is mine," he said.

"We must go, Mostel. It is nearly time."

"I will follow in a moment. There is something I must tend to."

The Maestro left. Mostel picked the cello gently up from the case. The revolver shifted inside. It was hidden by shadow. He reached for it. "The child is mine," he repeated to himself, tucking the pistol under the front of his cummerbund. He pulled his jacket on, brushed the tails, picked up his cello and followed the Maestro on stage.

Mostel took his chair. Yes, there in the front row sat his Babette. Her face shone even in the dark auditorium. She always had a greasy face. He did not acknowledge her. He would ignore her to entice her further. It would be all the sweeter for her when he finally did look at her.

The violins were tuning. He hated the violins. Squeaky little fiddles, they never sounded full enough. They were not real instruments. When they tuned they made his hair fall out. That was why he was going bald. Every time he listened to them, he felt the roots loosen in his scalp. Then, in a matter of seconds, a hair follicle shoved a single hair out, then another and another. His hair seemed to fall in piles around him. The violins aged him so.

But the cello, the cello was truly an instrument. Mostel stroked the strings of his cello fondly. It was fine and big, like life should be, full of drama and grandiose gesture.

Life should not be diminutive and squeaking like the violins, like his wife. Instead, it should be large and encompassing like his cello, like his Babette. Ah, so she was a whore. She loved life, she loved men, she could not get enough.

Still, the piano player must be shot. Mostel was rather sad about it. But he needed the child. The piano player might lay claim to it. The piano player was not going to ruin this last chance at immortality. What a pompous whimp the man was. It was difficult to believe Babette had not crushed him in the act. There he sat now, at the piano, fluttering his fingers like fruitflays up and down the keyboard.

After he shot the piano player, they would take him away and make fingerprints and unflattering photographs. Mostel knew all about it from the movies. He would tell the police he had committed a crime of passion. They could not convict

him. After they released him from prison he would return to his Babette, his cello, and his child. They would be happy.

What a fuss they were making now about the first chair violin. He was out there with the Maestro, bowing and prancing as if he was personally responsible for the entire orchestra. Mostel sneaked a glance at Babette. She was looking about anxiously. She probably wondered why nobody was seated near her. This show would be just for her. He would see just her face when he pulled out his pistol and shot the piano player. She would be overcome with love at Mostel's devotion. She would feel like Helen of Troy.

The orchestra was ready. The Maestro lifted his baton and the music began.

Mostel played the *Concerto in B Minor* better than he had ever played it, working up to his featured part. His bushy eyebrows held the sweat from running into his eyes, but when he bent his head it sailed off, hitting the chair in front of him. Sweat dropped, too, on his cello and ran down. He could hear himself breathing heavily to the beat of the music. When the spotlight turned on him he was blinded. He played feverishly, brilliantly, in the brightness of the spotlight. The entire orchestra finished the piece.

He broke to the applause of the audience. They were standing. It was the interval. And he had forgotten to shoot the piano player. The greatest physical act of his life, the most dramatic gesture he would ever make, for his posterity, for his son, and he became carried away with Dvorak and forgot to shoot the piano player.

SCRAPS FOR A THESIS

When next at this cold desk I sit
When my bald eyes stare blankly at the sky
Behind which well-shaped image shall I hide

Would a well-oiled anus squeak
Is death more death because he wears a tie
Who gagged the blackbird

When the slack-jawed logman stands with thirsty tongue alack
Where then the guttural utterances
Where the crow's cacophonous caw caw

Throw these sickly thin sinful words into the flames
Step back as they grackle crackle into ashes
Ashes that even piss can't wash away

Walt Whitman childless father of us all
Did you not shake the paint from your ragged brush
And Beat Beat Drums

— Craig Vala

Mostel put his face in his hands. The rest of the orchestra was standing, most were leaving to smoke or visit friends backstage. It was his wife's social time. She liked to have people view her at the concert hall. And in the dark hallway, by the men's bathroom, his sweet Babette would be waiting in her customary place for him.

Mostel hurried to the hall. Babette was not there. The xylophone player had not seen her. He went to use the restroom and remembered, pulling down his zipper, that the pistol was there. He pulled his zipper hurriedly up and went back to the hall. Several of the symphony patrons shook his hand. He still did not see Babette anywhere.

A thought dropped from his head to his stomach. Babette had had premature labor pains and left for the hospital. Mostel's heart pounded. He tried to remember what Babette was wearing as he swerved through the crowd.

First call was sounded. People were returning to their seats. His child was about to come into the world and he would not be there.

Mostel returned to the stage and looked out at the audience. Babette could, by a miracle, just be in her seat. He peered through the middle curtain. A lady in the audience waved at him. She jabbed her neighbor, who also waved. He saw Petra returning to her seat. It was impossible to miss his wife with her flaming hair.

Babette was behind her. Oh, relief. Oh, a thousand reliefs. It looked to Mostel as if his wife turned and said something to Babette. But they did not know each other. It must have been small talk, if anything.

Mostel went back to his chair. The violins were tuning again. Maddening. The years of violin torture he had suffered with this orchestra. Mostel tried to ignore them. He stuck his hand in the cummerbund to feel the gun and to remind himself what he must do.

The second chair cellist smiled at Mostel. Mostel did not like him. He had tried to talk to him once of his love for the cello, how he felt the instrument was so grand, its notes so full. But the fellow had just nodded. He did not really listen. He did not live with the cello like Mostel did. He merely played it. Yet some people were stupid enough to think that what Mostel did and what this imbecile did were the same.

The orchestra began *Enigma Variations*. Mostel forgot about the violins and the cello player. He even forgot about Babette. He played Elgar better than he ever had. The spotlight circled him for the cello solo. He felt the spotlight shone out from him instead of upon him, the emanation of his music and his joy. This is grand, he thought. This is life.

The audience was on its feet, applauding wildly. Mostel would not look at Babette as he bowed. She had missed their meeting, so let her suffer.

The last selection was Tchaikovsky's *Overture Solennelle 1812*. This piece would be better for the assassination anyway. The Maestro had arranged for a cannon shot to dramatize the ending. Some renditions called for it. At rehearsal it was booming. It was then Mostel would shoot the piano player. It would be perfect.

Mostel followed the music carefully. He knew the piece by heart. Midway through he reached into his cummerbund and pulled the revolver out. He was not nervous. It was a matter of his life, his continued life through his son. He looked at Babette. She would so appreciate his grand gesture he was <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/deadletter/vol1/iss1/10>

about to perform. The piece was drawing to an end. The tension in the music mounted.

Mostel did not falter. How many chances does one get for immortality? He lifted the gun and aimed it over the cello at the piano player's back. The orchestra seemed to stop. He shut his eyes and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. The orchestra kept playing. Mostel looked at the gun, astonished. He opened its chamber. The bullets were gone. The Maestro kept conducting. He would not look at Mostel. Mostel could not see his wife. He looked at Babette. She looked away.

The second chair cellist sat staring at Mostel. The Maestro motioned for the cellos to join in the last stanzas, and Mostel bent forward, laying the pistol beneath his chair. Mostel embraced his cello and drew the bow across its string. A deep moan emanated from the instrument, mingling with the other sounds of the orchestra and, as the piece ended, echoing in the concert hall, dying in silence. ■

ODE to GEORGE CLINTON

Jive on, George,
exhaustion is one pleasure
I haven't grooved on in months.
Wail on. Jab another hole
in my heart.
Storm me to sleep with the jism
of your royal rap.
Render me mindful of my own
missing bodyguard
and some sweet birthday
I'll have later,
lacking my favorite lover.
He's got other engines to rev up.
So do it, George. Put my mind on
that certain hopeless man
and his chilled down,
cooled out hands,
and rap on.

— Pamela Lee

I sat at your desk today
in your chair.
looking through your books.
In Brautigan you marked
Worms as "Good!"
I read *Worms*,
more than once,
wondering what thoughts
you thought
as you sat
at this desk
in this chair.

— Sandy Reno