

My Dim Aviary

Gillian Cummings



Black
Lawrence
Press

Contents

Note	xi
Rêve	i
I.	
Rouge	5
Argent	6
Voyeur	7
Toilette	8
Parfum	9
Dentellière	10
Asperges	11
Amie	12
Halo	13
Raisins	14
Odalisque	15
Haschisch	16
II.	
Dormant	19
Enfant	20
Gâteaux	21
Altiste	22
Dessin	23
Archet	24
Lettre	25
Cadeau	26
Liaison	27

III.

Disparues	31
Broderie	32
Poupée	33
Cauchemar	34
Burlesque	35
Abeille	36
Musée	37
Haschisch	38
Interdit	39
Opium	40

IV.

Peau	43
Paon	44
Guerre	45
Hiver	46
Dessin	47
Poulain	48
Chaton	49
Chemin de Fer	50
Cauchemar	51
Oiseau	52
Malade	53
Nocturne	57
Notes	59
Acknowledgments	61

For Rich

My Dim Aviary

In smiling, one feels oneself growing small wings. Smiling and fluttering are related...

There arises, quite fleetingly, in a moment of introversion, something like an inclination [words illegible] to stylize oneself, to stylize one's body...

—Walter Benjamin, translated by Howard Eiland and others

Note

Who was she? Sometimes referred to now as Miss Fernande, she is thought to have lived in Paris in the early 1900s, modeling for the photographer Jean Agérou, who produced erotic postcards of her image, and possibly—there is a mysterious jail record—working as a prostitute. Some identify her as Fernande Barrey, the wife of Montparnasse artist Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita. Others say she was Fernande Olivier, mistress of Picasso. Neither of these assumptions can be proven. Fernande remains a mystery. And so, for a while, I inhabited her—



Rêve

If you'd be the first darkness, le néant not nothing but pregnant with the little shearwater, the pintail, gannet and grebe. Closed, like this, closed into uttermost opening, opaline blue inside scratchy, black mussel shells. The color of repentance is ashes, but what the color of praise? Answer and I'll give you wind riffling books in a kiosk, roots of heather seeking clouds underground. If you'd be host on my tongue or hosanna, not haste all heat-thickened, spurs or burs burning in the hoarse voice of thicket or bush. If you'd sing. If you'd sing, tuned to turn tears where thorns thumb a ladder up the bare, broken stalk of rose. My swollen hips: wet them once with wonderment, twice with your dry face of salt. Wet them, I mean, only with love, that difficult dream, that dread revelation. Shimmer to river me heavenward. Whisper me softly through sleep. And if a man walk with sea in his shoes and spill them over my pillow of white down, tell him the age of oceans is spelled by a swan taking flight inside the incandescence of streetlamps. And if a man be not wooed by my closed bedroom eyes, give him bread for his barter of lashes and weep. But if a man come with sad eyes like the Christ's, let him know grapes do grow from thorns and figs from thistles drop sweet—

I.

Rouge

What color would God clothe me but red? A crimson cap to keep my head from rain, a carnelian cape to wrap my body in swishy silks of blood-spurt, girl-heat. Who taught me the trail through forest, where to find wood violets limp upon slender stems, how to twine them in wreaths gentler than these hands' caress? It's true: I wanted a warm place, a sight familiar as the bone-home of moon's bed in a cloud-slumbered sky. Truer, still: a stone sang in my stomach—to eat and be eaten. A bite of cherry tart. What animal would God liken me unto, but a wayward sheep, wandering the way of the wolf's spittled growl. And if I found death small as a moss-grown flower, and if the color of my corpse was red as that of my clothes, I would still whisper back to the voice that clambered over me, thick with heat, fur and teeth, this is the way of all loneliness—for only luck comes easy as night birds, to scavenge the unburied heart—



Argent

I awoke to rain. Then the sun's coin slid through a hole in the clouds' pocket—and out rayed the dazzle, more and more, fistfuls and fistfuls of money I took as the leaves take the light. When I came to Paris, this much was urgent: earn your living or starve. All the boys in my village wanted to bed me, so—let my body be my bread, as Jesus' body, baked, breaks to be food of our Communion. What union? Baskets of onions and shallots in the street markets. Chanterelles and mousserons. Saucissons dangling from strings—to look at them—almost obscene, one after another, plumped with pork and salt. I close my eyes when I spread my legs and imagine an old butter churn. The handle thrusting down, but below it: myself a cream thickening, smooth as the sight of a seamless cloudbank, cool and blank. There's a place the soul goes when the body is a field lost to burning. A field of chamomile. Thousands of tiny suns blazing back the one sun's gaze. Scent of honey and hay. Each plush gold pillow a nub to rub. To have become a common whore. *Qu'est-ce que j'adore, l'éclat de l'or ou le ternissement de l'argent?* Which am I, shine or tarnish? Summer simmering in an autumn pot, these flowers I take as tea early mornings, because at night I can't sleep—and because I can't sleep—

Voyeur

Your body, a horse with distemper, scatters the swallows swerving over a field of mallow, low, low. Gallop to God-speed-you, your nerves race fire, fire blooms poppy-fierce in your face, fire claims the lonely field, also your body, or maybe your soul. Speed! Speed! Nerves catch like sun in calendula, wild tansy, those delicate, determined yellows shaking in wind. Do you want me? How bad? Seems to me, the horse of your body wants to eat all the apples turning to mulch on the orchard floor. Or I name the wrong animal. Is your cock an eager rooster without a harem of hens, a clutch of eggs in the catch—without a house save your dream—without, without—have you knocked on the barn door to hear only the sleep of cows, or stood itching in a patch of nettles, bare to your core from the sore song in your groin? *Le cheval, n'est-ce pas?* Canter, cantilever, nothing to support you now. A small voice cries no, cries help. Do you want me? Crave is hot, a red star, a giant mouth full of froth, full of rocks: hot, red, round, cinnamon candies to smudge a smear of paint on the tongue—crunched, to crack teeth. You with no face, not even a name, breathing me into the pores of your skin, bleeding me out of your bones. *O, la chanson dedans, dedans le pauvre!* The sad horse can't constrain its musics, but would, but would try—

Toilette

The world is made of water, that much I can tell. When I look in the mirror, the black lacquer hand mirror I hold, I don't see my face, its nonchalance, its disdain. I see water. Rain on the sidewalk of Passage de Flandre. When it rains, I wonder, can you remember what you have never known? Something sad and clean and pure, like the picture of our city God sees when God sleeps. The cobblestones shine a greyer grey and click with the drops falling as my heels click-clack on the tile floor. I hear what I see: shine of silver sheeting air, a thrumming so quiet the shouts of shopkeepers are a silence. Quand il pleut. Quand quelqu'un pleure. When it cries, the grey sky, les larmes are like the Magdalene's alarm when Jesus revealed his risen body, comme les charmes d'une fille de joie, grown penitent and scared. You can be sad and clean and pure, if you go far enough inside yourself you are against yourself, or under yourself, like the Métro, the train cars tunneling life under life. I owe the water. I owe l'eau something of my soul, the part no one can buy, the better part. To strangers, I'm a body in ribbon-trimmed black stockings, a dress of lace I let fall so my breasts show, a face that gives just enough of lust behind disdain. A face of water. A face of rain. Restez seule, good soul. Keep to what hides you, next to nothing, shimmering, a pour of the pure through air, something of rest and cure and sorrow—

Parfum

So you can guess what I smell like, so you can have more than a glimpse of the girl who won't, though she undresses, unfold herself from the flat paperboard of the card: just so, Jean, the photographer who found me on a street corner in a mess of crumpled crinoline, places on the table as prop a bottle of perfume with an oval atomizer. So you can guess: lilac or rose, gardenia or jasmine. You will guess jasmine, if only for the flower's nocturne, how petals unlock their fragrance when dusk diminishes the light and lays me supine upon your bed-mind under stars. Jasmine, weaving through trellises, wandering the hedges in parks, a name that once meant gift from God. As though, if God could send us something for prayer's answer: this suppleness burnt white, an aroma of milk baths, of plush. The secret feline sting of la chatte. And so that you can pet me, stroke the dark curly hair framing my face: just so, Jean leaves a hairbrush, also on the table. Pour votre imagination. For what you would have of la jolie fille. Your pretty filet. Vous pensez que je suis mignonne, non? If I am not my own, where on this earth will the heavens find me? If I am not here, in this salle de bain, when the moment passes into mist and lifts skyward, where will I linger, pressed to essence like oil?—

Dentellière

Don't tell: draped in mist, I never guessed one day I'd be famous for dressing in less. And what mother would say if she knew, if her eyes hadn't blued from blindness. Year after year she made lace in the style of Alençon. Cap backs and lappets to tidy a lady's hair, a layette for a christening, fine shawls and bridal veils. Her needle looped gossamer into blooms and birds. A saint would float in a tree. A spider at her web, we'd say, and wait for her lace to fall from the pillow it was pinned to, ethereal, constellated, *comme une toile des étoiles*. To wear mother's lace was to wade in a wash of milk, to bathe in smoothness. To wear her lace: skin caressed by feathers and the breathing bird a swan swimming in pools of swoon. One time it happened, I stole the veil meant for a wealthy patron's wedding. Took it to the woods outside town, the leaves silver with dusk, stuttering in wind, a protestation that ends before it begins. Naked, I wrapped the veil around me. Bride of Christ. *Épouse du Christ*. Dirty Bride. The devil would take me now—

Asperges

Do you see? If you don't force it, it will come, rising as tender shoots of asparagus rose from their crown of roots in spring, each stiff shaft bearing a purpled tip. Do you see? Mornings, Papa would clip them from their haze of fern, and I, a good girl, never thought twice about growth that spiked through earth—I was a good girl, helped my father rinse spears with ice, pack them in crates for market. Out in groves where plants pried themselves shyly forth in shade, my sister and I listened to warblers trill, got dizzy from their gazouillis, conjured nests from trees that shook with song. At night when he'd take us, first me and then her, upon his lap, we thought nothing except—God's rod and His staff; His seed breeding from the soil each green thing; the asparagus swelling with the season. A good girl. Eating them steamed, with hollandaise. And when I became a bad girl, woe betide me if I looked back on the vagrant vegetable—

Amie

Clotilde found me in the hayloft, sticking straws under my nails. She saw where I'd scratched a broken cross on my wrist where veins sketch a blue delta. And she shrieked, the cuts smeared with blood. *Qu'est-ce que tu fais? T'es folle, Fernande!* What could I say? I thought, Here. Dig in. Plough the furrow with a heart. Put your mark on me. But she took a kerchief, spit on it and wiped me clean. *Ça veut dire quoi?* My answer froze to filaments of frost, which came to kill the crops early that year. And when she saw the silence in me settling like drifts of white, she kissed the words I swallowed as snow. First, little bisous all over my cheeks, flakes or flecks of wet. Little bisous until one full baiser on my mouth. I saw a field of stars blinking blue and pink around me, stars such as my mother never stitched, a galaxy of guilt and want. And the place between my legs shivered in one huge surge of wave, the way the wheat bends in a coursing curve of gold when the wind gusts once, fast, against it. *T'es folle, Fernande,* she said again. And only the horses spoke back to her, with whinnies and tail swishes muffled from below. Only the horses—

Halo

A crown of daisies covers my hair, a wreath of wilting daisies wraps me. Petals crooked, warped like thorns. I look up. My chin, lifted. My mouth closed firm as if I keep a secret shared with God. As if, no matter what, He will say of my body, flesh of His flesh. You can see my breasts in this photo, the aureoles of my nipples. You can see two beauty marks on my face, one above my lip, one high on my cheek, made from black eye pencil. I think that here I'm the Magdalene. But Jesus has said my seven demons can stay mine. Mine to be smudged with like a stranger's words: cocotte, connasse, gourgandine, grue, poule, poufiasse, putain. Mine the way les marronniers dans le Jardin du Luxembourg drop their chestnuts with a crack, and the soft shell splits to let the hard kernel out, shiny and ready to be squirreled into ground. God the Father splits me like this, for my soul sometimes can't find my body. And Jean splits me from my image, the girl with chestnut brown hair from the girl all sepia shades—

Raisins

Jean didn't want to show me with a glass of wine. He thought the grapes themselves more sensual. Provocative. Thick clusters of fruit ripening on gnarled ropes of vine, a September sky ghosting the morning's hills with fog, Sauvignon. Chenin Blanc. Muscadelle. Semillon. An aroma of melon, cinnamon, acacia—or linden blended with lemon and honey. We guessed: which tang on the tongue would tempt you? So he said, You want those grapes like you want a man with money and a big cock, your *raison d'être*. And I thought: the Eucharist. I want these grapes the way the disciples wanted to swallow Christ's soul. Whole and round and ripe. The grapes' terroir, my terror. The seeds sunken inside, Jesus' judgment on the hard bite of my temper, opposite of these too tender teeth. So I draped the grapes over my open mouth, as if all the world could be eaten—

Odalisque

My Pasha, I picture you in yellow silk, like a woman's, your robe untied, undone—the sash slack at your waist, the sea of yellow parting and the red fish, the sprightly red fish alone in its body of water, leaping for luck, rising out of its element, its tides and brine—to be caught, as I am caught by the camera. I can only pose if I picture you this way, vulnerable, as a fish is vulnerable to the hook, as a sea is vulnerable to the storms God sends, darkening and quickening the waves. What surges in you? What crests and foams and churns? *M'avez-vous choisi?* The way the light chooses me, raying from a high window, all artifice of paint. I sit on a patterned pillow, crafted of coarse wool. It chafes, but I sit still for you. Draped beneath me, a Persian carpet unscrolls in arabesques—the shapes remind me of the leaves this time of year, each singular in its burning, yellow or red, living its last gasp more perfectly in a parallel realm, where elm and maple sear the air with color, yet remain whole outside time. In heaven, all remains unbroken like this vase that curves as my hips curve into my waist, as your unbroken gaze stays steady upon me, following the lilt in the lift of my arm, bangled with serpentine coils that would turn tongue and hiss, *Temptress, Temptress*, if copper could voice its vice. Big fish, little fish, you take the bait, *Monsieur*, but I'm the one with gills, killed by the click of the aperture—

Haschisch

And it's the wind—an afternoon no one wanted me, I climbed the stepped streets from Pigalle up Montmartre and sat down on a cold stone ledge. My décolleté dress turned drafty: I clung to my thin, fringed shawl the way a child wraps in wool, trying to hide from the dark inside the day. The sun pushed hard, but it couldn't do a thing against the wind—it's the wind that comes to mind when Jean says, Sleep the sleep of ivresse, the rush of trance, the drug in your veins like the shadow of a stranger wooing you without form. When he poses me, hand over head in a spell of faint, my body soft-sprawled on the carpet beside the hookah—it's the wind that comes back: how a flock of pigeons swarmed then scattered then swarmed together again, shifting one to one to one on the wind's pivot, blown through sky, a cloud of flap and glide, a storm of gesture. How the birds winged the same spirals as the leaves, the leaves that beneath them funneled in a whirl to match their flying, the crisped, curled leaves of October's dying. And it was the leaves that said, I am no more, I am no more, even as they shifted with a crinkle sort of sound. The leaves that were and weren't. The doves quickly gone from sight—the same doves in the Kingdom of Heaven? If the drug rushes, this is the rush of it. Jean behind his camera, me in your eye. We are here now, here now, here now—and gone—