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The Hungry Lover

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Abstract

A silhouette slipped through the orange-blue heat of an early summer evening and melted in a bower swollen to the point of bursting with vine leaves and unripe fruit and the gossamer discarded by caterpillars. Hands put down a large tray on a dinky table spread with long streaks of sunset.

DOMINIQUE HECQ

The Hungry Lover

La langue de la vie nous fondait dans la bouche

Paul Eluard, 'Tout est sauvé'

A silhouette slipped through the orange-blue heat of an early summer evening and melted in a bower swollen to the point of bursting with vine leaves and unripe fruit and the gossamer discarded by caterpillars.

Hands put down a large tray on a dinky table spread with long streaks of sunset.

She sat down on one of the golden chairs with an erect back that reminded her of some ever absent, ever present, guest silently waiting for champagne to be poured. She sat and crossed her legs. Replete with sunlight, she glowed like an elf at dusk and waited, for waiting now seemed to be the answer to it all.

A long time ago, when she used to fancy herself as a natural dancer and painter who could re-invent the wording of the world, she had waited for eternity, seeing herself as a vigil who was a bird about to take flight or a gust of wind carrying messages of hope and oaths. Now she was a vigil beaten by the sun on a dead sea, convinced that horizons melt into mirrors or shrink to naughts, yet longing to drift along with some vessel, were the breeze about to whisper.

She heard the rolling and rasping and crunching of the gravel, the snoring and gasping of the motorcar. She saw him in her mind. He stood hidden behind the thick veil of greens and greys, eating her up with his eyes, then spitting the bones in disgust.

Gone were the days when she could have killed for love, she thought. And she checked herself. Whole and hollow, like a bubble of molten glass that will not burst.

Since she had recovered her childhood figure, she knew that her mouth always repelled him a little, with its look of dried shell gnawed off by time starved for void. Even *she* hated to look at the lip-brush in the mirror hacking at her mouth – with the lip-gloss never wholly covering the wound, and the lip-liner sucking flesh from chin to cheekbone, making her look like a famished hare. Yet seeing now more clearly in her mind the smile she had managed to sculpt in Pink Pearl Bourgeois lipstick, she felt a bit better. This surprised her, for though she knew that she was not quite past wanting, she had hoped to be

past feeling. As long as she could remember she had starved for something: freedom, love, knowledge, her *passions*, but also words as flat and drained as old flabby breasts. And so starvation had brought only starvation. Now she could see this, but it was too late. Her end would never be her beginning, nor anyone else's, for that matter, for the wounds she had inflicted on herself and on others with her *sigh-lances* were festering with unspeakable hatred – you don't *lose* a child *just like that*. The scales had tipped, subtly: the void was starving for time and time for her.

Her *Eternity*.

Molly, a godmother after her own heart, would never have starved, she thought. Molly had pluck. She married twice. There were stories of passions and potions and puzzles. When Molly found out that no child would come out of her first marriage she poisoned her husband. Then when Pina, her daughter, wept over a set of unnatural twins, Molly told her all about prickly-pears and how their furry prickles can stab the hearts of culprits unawares. The father of the twins died in his sleep shortly afterwards. He died of natural causes: a heart attack.

She looked at her sleeveless black cotton lace cardigan with gilded buttons and heart-shaped neck, her filmy yellow gazar skirt with Andalusian spots, and her jet black suede pumps. She slipped her sharp knees and smooth calves away from the shade underneath the fabric, rounded her chest in the lace and gestured her slim arms and fingers into life. She laid her nails of pearl on the Andalusian spots and looked at her thin wedding ring.

Still. Heart chilled. Memory roaming about.

Dim memories of the Northern hemisphere. Bright memories of longing to leave.

How ridiculous!

She must have hated him all along, she thought, for now she could see that she had borne the essence of her birthplace inside her throughout the story of her life. This, of course, she shared with those who talked about the burden of being born, which is not quite the same. The essence of her birthplace: the three borders fencing in the kingdom of boredom. Lack of air, lack of warmth, lack of sound. A fiefdom where all dreaming was of storms and heat and clamour. Dreaming fierce as fighting.

He will bring a bottle of champagne to celebrate the occasion, of course. Seven years of married life, away from home that was never home until all hope of making one dropped in the pit. A barren marriage. Ha! She could remember nothing of the wedding. There were photos, of course; a timely recording of fleeting instants of make-believe. These must be burned, she decided, now that all love was dead, now that there only remained the love of death. The utter fascination.

Champagne?

Not Veuve Cliquot, please.

That vow which almost took shape, that child who crumpled back to nothing before being fully fleshed out, that love which crumbled, turning a desire that never was to dead matter. Desire to be born and to be still.

Her fingers slipped on the Andalusian spots and she felt the only roundness on her body since she had been with child. And she remembered her delight in fasting – a compulsory fast meant to bring new life. But then she was not sure. For there had been the other fast – as if fasting could ever have given any life back. Or buried one perhaps and many mishaps in the same pit. Or covered the guilt and shame with the same blanket. Where had she been? For she did remember the newspaper headlines: INFANT SMOTHERED AT THE BREAST and then, of course, *The Lethal Breast*, the book he had given her. She never found the courage to read it. A pity, perhaps.

But why always *the breast*?

It is the womb which is a tomb.

This she will have to think about.

She now revelled in her weightlessness.

Pop! went the cork. And he, in the claret-orange light with a bottle of *Veuve Cliquot* in his big white hand, with its thick golden ring, filled two glasses with golden bubbles, then placed a dry kiss on her parched forehead.

Champagne flowing again, but words, no.

His eyes were hungry, it seemed, devouring the shape of her body, yet far from feasting on it. His, was a nasty kind of hunger.

Cheers!

And he uncovered his teeth, like a dog about to growl.

She thought of her first love. Or rather, the ending of her first love story.

She had just moved into a rented flat on the third floor of a seedy block of flats in *Little Firenze*, a swish area of the suburb of Carlton, near the mosque, which she re-named after the glorious view over waves of terracotta and skeins of green from the North window of her Tower of Rest. He was downstairs in the drive, changing over the starter motor of his clapped out Austin and chatting with his *mate*. She was enjoying whiffs of fresh breeze, watching them, catching bits of conversation.

When she saw them hop into his car, she knew that here was the end of more than one affair.

He wound his window down and shouted to her to get them a cut lunch ready as they were both off to the beach for a picnic. She laughed and shouted that what he needed was not a lover, but a dog.

And she shut the window on his snapping *the bitch*.

They drove off.

She packed her things and left.

The following weekend she came back and let herself in with a blue healer on the leash while he was playing tennis. She went into the bedroom and dragged her patchwork quilt from under the bed. She left the dog asleep on the quilt on the bed with a note saying *Here is a proper bitch for you*.

The mangoes were a screaming yellow and the wild rice black as death. But the rest of her *spread* had lost all appeal. The salmon was a mere shade of bronze with smudges of laminated pink, the asparagus a mess of green and dirty purple and the avocados had turned the colour of wet ash.

She felt sick.

One mouthful and she put down her knife and fork.

He stopped eating too.

They each looked into the distance. Past each other.

Her knife and fork were all glitter on the table and flickering tongues of fire on her face.

Already far away, she did not answer the question she had not heard.

She was way back in time. Back to when they first devised the house they had built together – a silly design meant to accommodate all of their needs and dreams. The topsy-turvy tower had been her idea, this is true, she had wanted a place where North and South, day and night, past and future, would collapse into one another in a space she had hoped to call home one day. And so they took the Jethro Coffin House they had visited at Nantucket and an old Flemish windmill, and merged them together. The result was a weather-board high-gabled but long rambling box for the use of *the family* with at the back a windmill tower merged into a lighthouse for her own use. There had been talks about installing glass solar panels on the house and removable sails on the cap of the mill, but nothing had ever been done about this. She had left the top of the tower unfurnished to hang her old photographs and new paintings on white-washed walls and she had turned the ground floor into a studio. But all of her paints and brushes and soldering material, all of her glass collection and all of her books and papers and half-written pieces had remained in fruit boxes along the walls of her tower for years now, together with her drawings of sails with the cloth in curled position, sword point, dagger point, and full sail position. Yes, in that order, she thought.

At this, her wedding ring seemed to loosen its grip on her middle finger.

She got up, threw her knife and fork and yellow napkin with lilac flowers on the white-washed lawn and rushed to the house.

He had got in first. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror, ready to catch her shadow. She stopped for a minute, watching this mask, his face, in the mirror, then went straight to the mahogany vanity table. She felt his gaze turning her flesh to gauze, ripping it, reaching for her bones. She got hold of a bottle and shook it; she unscrewed the top and dropped two green pills in her hand.

Hands.

But these were no longer hers.

The bottle smashed on the bathroom floor. The pills rolled and bounced on a bed of broken glass.

Glass.

Like her body: transparent and cracked. All broken inside.

She held her breath.

A jar with purple tablets shattered at her feet. SVELTESSE knocked the edge of the bath and spilled on the carpet. BIOPHILE flew into the toilet bowl. FORMYLINE crushed under his foot. Some appetite suppressant mixture was already swelling in the basin where bran tablets were melting away. Blue, yellow, red capsules: a shower of primary colours for prime labels. LUMINEUSE, CORFIT, LIGHT, CORFOU. Gone. All gone in the vandal-proof stainless steel bowl designed for prisons.

Leave me alone, she screamed. You self-righteous bastard. You. You understand nothing! You pontificating prick. You f. You. I hate you.

I love you.

Three days and nights swollen with silence rolled by. Unbearable swellings of time. Seconds. Minutes. Hours. Days. Bloated days and puffy hours and puffed up minutes and bulging seconds. All ready to burst under the sharp point of sorrow.

A blue-orange breeze blew in cool gusts through the bower. A shape all curled up under the veil of vine leaves shivered. Arms came untied, legs unlaced, and like an elf brought to life in the space of an eclipse of time, she left her shelter of faded light.

She found him in the kitchen.

He sat on a stool with his head in his hands, staring at the cover of *The Hunger Artists*. With his back arched, he looked frozen and about to break. He too, had had his fill of the insatiable lack of appetite.

A noise.

A word, perhaps.

His spine, shoulders, neck, and face relaxed. He glanced at the silhouette in the doorway.

I'll give it a go, she said, taking a few steps forward.

She stopped and looked at his face: splashes of cream and pink on grey.

She shut the door and leaned against it.

He got up, went to the dresser, paused and twisted his head around. He stepped back and took the slide-tray out from underneath the butcher's block and put it on the table. He got one knife and one fork out of the drawer, one white plate from the plate rack, then a bunch of red grapes, an avocado and a mango from the fruit bowl. He put the fruit on the tray, not even bothering to lock the castors.

Then in the manner of inexperienced lovers nervously trying to impress, he placed the tray on his fingertips and brought it back to the table while still feeling for the point of balance.

They both sat down at the table, carefully, poised as they were between their starved yet ever unnamed desires.

She waited, watching him peel and slice the mango and avocado pear, then arrange the perfectly proportioned segments of fruit in a dual arc of colours around a cluster of grapes on the now translucent white plate.

As though soothed by the colours of these late summer fruits, they started to eat, with him feeding her. First one piece of avocado, then a second, and a third one. She crossed her hands and he looked at the orange monochrome absorbed by the mango peel. He had a cube of the fruit, taking his time, as if looking for the answer to some riddle in the rich and tasty flesh. He took a second cube of mango with the tip of his fingers and offered it to her. She chewed it slowly, trying to recapture the complexity of some forgotten flavour. He fed her another piece, and yet another, then a grape, opening his mouth in imitation every time she closed her lips on a cube of orange, on a bubble of dark purple.

There's something missing, she said.

Not your wings again?

No, that's for later. What we need now,

I mean, is to feast on words.