

DIANA AT HER BATH (1980)

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trans. Steven Sarterelli

...Nec nos videamus labra Dianae...

"Indeed, Madame, there is no proof that you yourself aren't the Father of the Gods: did he not assume your sweet countenance to persuade the most faithful of your companions? Only a moment ago I saw you holding Callisto in your arms. Only a moment ago, I said—for, don't you know, we can evoke that scene at any time if not forever. But if the divine can thus exchange its fearsome forms for more agreeable ones, and thereby lead the souls of its worshipers to their destruction, would I not have just cause to suspect. . . ." These last words, barely formed, remained at the back of his throat; already the horns were sprouting from his forehead, already his nose and his jaw were growing long; talk became useless for him; his eyes reflected a joy which, however innocent it still might feel, intermingled with animal terror; and then this terror became imbued with the shame of the bathing goddess, and all that was virginal in this shame turned into an eagerness to flee, to seek refuge in the goddess's fleece; a dying man, wanting to explain himself further, to excuse himself politely, dutifully; but then the decent pose he had assumed, one foot placed slightly in front of the other on the tufts of grass, suddenly became the unseemly tribute of a beast rearing up on its hind legs, offering itself, its member enormous, menacing the deity with its offering. Did Diana herself thus hope to create cause for astonishment, with her act of metamorphosis? With one hand she had just cast water in his face, but as she was pronouncing the sentence, already she was withdrawing the other hand from the space between her thighs, and whether as of that moment she had initiated Actaeon, or having already initiated him thus admitted him to her final rite, or whether, lastly, she thus put an end to her theophany, by this very gesture she uncovered her vermilion vulva, uncovered her secret lips. Actaeon sees those hellish lips open at the very moment that the spray of water streams over his eyes, blinds him and stands up. His thought finds its fulfilment in the horns sprouting from his forehead,

and the shock of such a realisation drives him forward; his arms having become legs, his hands cloven hooves, he's not even surprised to see them resting, in the twinkling of an eye, on the divine shoulders, his whole furry belly quivering against the dazzling skin of the goddess's dripping flanks; and then suddenly the quivering is Diana's own at the moment a man dares to touch her, Diana's quivering when her hand that she knows to be as murderous as it is beautiful, grasps a lascivious beast by the snout and feels the tongue stroking her palm, the waters roiled by the stag-man's stamping feet and the movements of the goddess's long legs closing together and spreading apart, the horned creature panting, the unarmed huntress moaning—she howls through the voices of her nymphs, and laughs in her howling. He knocks her down in his neophyte animal clumsiness, she wriggles away, slips and he falls back down on her and in her: Ah! To be so close to the goal, yet so far. . . And the pall of silence thwarting his need to speak sets him on fire.

But Diana's trick is never to complete the metamorphosis entirely, to leave him still with some part of his person: Actaeon's legs, torso and head are now those of a stag, but while his right arm is no longer but a furry leg and his hand but a cloven hoof, his left arm and hand remain intact, and in this lacuna lies a hesitation on the part of the goddess, and a kind of challenge: how far will his impulse, still dominated by his vision, venture to go while a beastly ardor invades him? The goddess in her nonchalance goes so far as to leave him his hunter's tunic, which floats over his stag-man's limbs, while his hunting-horn, slung across his chest, swings back and forth, striking the thighs of the bathing goddess; in this state his front foot, formerly his right hand, sliding from the goddess's shoulder and along her back, which is turned to him in resistance, tries to lean against her hip and, winding round the flank in little starts and passing over the belly, seeks in vain to reach the pubis, while she, with eyes lowered and a smile lightly curling her tight lips, tolerates it for a moment; and, indeed, with his still intact left hand he grabs, in terror, the breast that he cannot prevent himself from caressing; she, turning right about but as though watching him from the corner of her eye, raises her arm, uncovering the armpit into which he then pokes his muzzle avidly but with a frightened eagerness, his tongue at last licking her nipple; and in the most splendid body she has yet assumed, Diana shudders . . .