

MONIQUE WITTIG

translated by DAVID LE VAY

When it rains the women stay in the summer-house. They hear the water beating on the tiles and streaming down the slopes of the roof. Fringes of rain surrounding the summer-house, the water that runs down at its angles flows more strongly, it is as if springs hollow out the pebbles at the places where it reaches the ground. At last someone says it is like the sound of micturition, that she cannot wait any longer, and squats down. Then some of them form a circle around her to watch the labia expel urine.

The women frighten each other by hiding behind the trees. One or other of them asks for grace. Then they chase each other in the darkness, ill-wishing the one who is caught. Or else they search gropingly, scenting the one whose perfume is to be honoured. Amomum aniseed betel cinnamon cebub mint liquorice musk ginger clove nutmeg pepper saffron sage vanilla

receive homage in turn. Then the wearers of these perfumes are chased in the dark as in blindman's-buff. Cries laughter sounds of falling are heard.

In dull weather the women may shed hot tears, saying that in the sunshine the roofs of the houses and the walls are of quite another colour. Mist spreads over the water over the fields about the houses. It penetrates through closed windows. Someone arrives to visit the house. She cannot see it. The huge paintings in vivid colours disappear to the ground demanding to be entertained. They tell her in great detail the story of the woman who, speaking of her vulva, used to say that thanks to that compass she could navigate from sunrise to sunset.

Some of the women swim letting themselves drift toward the last splashes of sunlight on the sea. At the most luminous spot when, dazzled, they try to move away, they say that they are assailed by an unbearable stench. Later they are seized with vomiting. Then they begin to moan as they strain their arms, swimming as fast as they can. At a certain point they collide with the

floating decaying carcase of an ass, at times the swell of the sea reveals sticky shapeless gleaming lumps of indescribable colour. They say that they shouted with all their might, shedding many tears, complaining that no sea-breeze got up to drive away the smell, supporting under the arms and groins of them who has fainted, while the vomit accumulates around them on the surface of the water.

If anyone walks on the hillside she can hardly remain upright. Though the hedges white colchicum and violets or pink-capped mushrooms can be seen. The grass is not tall. Heifers stand in it, in great number. The houses have been shuttered since the autumn rains began. There are no little girls playing in the gardens. There are no flowers in the flower-beds. A few toys lie about, a painted wooden hoop a red and blue olisbos a white balloon a lead rifle.

The women visit the market to obtain provisions. They pass by the stalls of fruit vegetables bottles of pink blue red green glass. There are piles of orange oranges ochre pineapples mandarins walnuts green and pink mangos blue nectarines

green and pink peaches orange-yellow apricots. There are melons water-melons paw paws avocados green almonds medlars. There are cucumbers aubergines cabbages asparagus white cassava red pimentos gourds. Wasps coming and going settle on the bare arms of the young women selling them.

The huntresses have dark maroon hats, and dogs. Hearing the rifle-shots, Dominique Aron says that the bird is still flying, the hare still running, the boar the deer the fox the wart-hog still afoot. It is possible to keep a watch on the surroundings. If some troop advances up the road raising a cloud of dust the women watch its approach shouting to those within for the windows to be closed and the rifles kept behind the windows. Anne Damien plays, Sister Anne do you see anything coming, I see only the grass growing green and the dusty road.

At evening a horse harnessed to a cart goes by. The cart carries a heap of cut beetroots or potatoes or grass for fodder. Long before and long after it passes the sound of the hooves striking the tarred road can be heard. The horse on its way is not being driven by anyone.

THAT WHICH IDENTIFIES THEM LIKE  
THE EYE OF THE CYCLOPS,  
THEIR SINGLE FORENAME  
OSEA BALKIS SARA NICEA  
IOLA CORA SABINA DANIELA  
GALSWINTHA EDNA JOSEPHA

Somewhere there is a siren. Her green body is covered with scales. Her face is bare. The undersides of her arms are a rosy colour. Sometimes she begins to sing. The women say that of her song nothing is to be heard but a continuous O. That is why this song evokes for them, like everything that recalls the O, the zero or the circle, the vulval ring.

By the lakeside there is an echo. As they stand there with an open book the chosen passages are re-uttered from the other side by a voice that becomes distant and repeats itself. Lucie Maure cries to the double echo the phrase of Phénarète, I say that that which is is. I say that which is not also is. When she repeats the phrase several times the double, then triple, voice endlessly superimposes that which is and that which

is not. The shadows brooding over the lake shift and begin to shiver because of the vibrations of the voice.

The women are seen to have in their hands small books which they say are feminaries. These are either multiple copies of the same original or else there are several kinds. In one of them someone has written an inscription which they whisper in each other's ears and which provokes them to full-throated laughter. When it is leafed through the feminary presents numerous blank pages in which they write from time to time. Essentially, it consists of pages with words printed in a varying number of capital letters. There may be only one or the pages may be full of them. Usually they are isolated at the centre of the page, well spaced black on a white background or else white on a black background.

After the sun has risen they anoint their bodies with oil of sandalwood curcuma gardenia. They steady one foot on a tree-trunk. Their hands rub each leg in turn, the skin glistening. Some of them are lying down. Others massage them with their fingertips. The bare bodies gleam in the strong

morning light. One of their flanks is iridescent with a golden lustre. The rising sun does likewise when it sends its rays slanting across the erect rounded tree-trunks. The arcs of the circles so touched reflect a little of the light, their outlines are blurred.

There are peat-bogs above the hills. The mud they are made of has the colour of henna. They seethe, there are surface explosions, bubbles. A stick stirred around within them is caught by viscous soft bodies. It is not possible to fish these out. As soon as any pressure is exerted on them they slip away, they escape. The women say that at times the bursting of the bubbles is accompanied by groans murmurs. The sun dries up the bogs. The vapour that ascends then has a nauseating odour.

The gipsy women have a mummified corpse which they bring out when it is not raining, because of the smell of the body which is not quite dry. They expose it to the sun in its box. The dead woman is clothed in a long tunic of green velvet, covered with white embroidery and gilded ornaments. They have hung little bells on her neck,

on her sleeves. They have put medallions in her hair. When they take hold of the box to bring it out of the dead woman begins to tinkle everywhere. Every now and then someone goes out on to the three steps that lead up to the caravan to look at the clouds. When the sky is obscured two of them set about shutting the lid of the box and carrying it inside.

FLORA    ZITA    SAVA    CORNELIA  
 DRAUPADI    JULIENNE    ETMEL  
 CHLOË    DESDEMONA    RAPHAELA  
 IRIS    VERA    ARSINOË    LISA  
 BRENDA    ORPHISE    HERODIAS  
 BERENICE    SIGRID    ANDOVERA

The little girls search in the bushes and trees for the nests of goldfinches chaffinches linnets. They find some green canaries which they cover with kisses, which they hug to their breasts. They run singing, they bound over the rocks. A hundred thousand of them return to their houses to cherish their birds. In their haste they clasped them too tightly to themselves. They ran. They bent down to pick up pebbles which they cast far away over the hedges. They took no heed of their



chirping. They climbed straight up to their rooms. They removed the birds from their garments, they found them lifeless, heads drooping. Then they all tried to revive them by pressing them to their mouths, letting their warm breath fall on them, lifting the limp heads, touching their beaks with a finger. They remained inert. Then a hundred thousand little girls bewailed the death of their green canaries in the hundred thousand rooms of the hundred thousand houses.

Whatever the time appointed to begin the work, they must hurry to get finished before sunset. The bottoms of the ladders are visible placed on the ground, the tops are hidden in the jumble of fruit and foliage. The baskets at the foot of the trees are filled at time to overflowing. There are belles de Choisy English cherries morellos marascs Montmorency cherries bigaudelles white-hearts. They are black white red translucent. Wasps hornets are busy around the baskets. Their buzzing can be heard in whatever part of the meadow one happens to be. The women climb into the trees, they descend arms laden with fruit. Some have baskets hooked to their belt. Some stand still at different heights on the rungs.

Others move about among the branches. One sees them jump to the ground and get rid of their burden. The slanting rays of the sun glance over the leaves making them glitter. The sky is orange-coloured.

The women say that they expose their genitals so that the sun may be reflected therein as in a mirror. They say that they retain its brilliance. They say that the pubic hair is like a spider's web that capture the rays. They are seen running with great strides. They are all illuminated at their centre, starting from the pubes the hooded clitorides the folded double labia. The glare they shed when they stand still and turn to face one make the eye turn elsewhere unable to stand the sight.