

The History of Violets (1965)
Marosa di Giorgio
trans. Jeannine Marie Pitas

XI

The gladiolus is a spear, its edge loaded with carnations, a knife of carnations. It jumps through the window, kneels on the table; it's vagrant flame, burning up our papers, our dresses. Mother swears that a dead man has risen; she mentions her father and mother and starts to cry.

The pink gladiolus opened up in our house.
But scare it, tell it to go.
That crazy lily is going to kill us.

XV

The mushrooms are born in silence; some of them are born in silence, others with a brief shriek, a soft thunder. Some are white, others pink; that one is gray and looks like a dove, the statue of a dove; still others are gold or purple. Each one bears—and this is what's awful—the initials of the corpse it comes from. I do not dare to eat them; that most tender meat is our relative.

But, come afternoon the mushroom buyer arrives and starts picking. My mother gives him permission. He chooses like an eagle. This one white as sugar, a pink one, a gray one. My mother does not realize that she is selling her race.

XVIII

At that hour, the tiny underground creatures were starting their work (those ones that wear heavy coats and work to the rhythm of drums: toc-toc). At that hour the moon had reached the summit of its brilliance, and all the doves scattered over the moon. But from a distance those birds looked like butterflies, great, sparkling flies. The doves flew over the moon, pecking at it, caressing it.

All of this became clearer as I watched the scene from the black forest of orange trees. And my grandparents sitting there, frozen, thier cloaks a pale pink, thier ill-fated braids.

They always held some too-brilliant thing in their hands; they showed it; they hid it. Is it a fallen dove? I stepped closer, looking, asking—Or is it a little hare from among the irises? But they always gave me the strangest reply.—It is a saint, they said.

—It is San Carlos, San Cristóbal, Santa Isabel.

I cannot put my memories in order.
The moon wrecks them every time.

XIX

Beyond the land, through the air, in the full moon's light, like a lily's stem, it loads its side incessantly with hyacinths, narcissi, white lilies. The wolves draw back at the sight of it; the lambs get down on their knees, crazy with love and fear. It moves on, goes off like an errant candela-bra, a bonfire; it goes towards the house, passes the cabinets, the hearth; with only a glance it burns the apples, illuminates them, wraps them in candied paper; it flings colored stones into the rice; it make the bread and pears glow. It drives itself into the table like a November yucca branch; it hunts a star, it stuffs itself with candles, pine nuts, little bottles. It breaks into the bedroom, spins over my dream, over my wide-open eyes; it floats in the air like a three-tiered crown of pearls, a lamp. It is a fish, a coral branch outside the water, each piece of coral as swollen as a bud or a lip. It flies back toward the moon; it scares the horses and owls, who break into flight and instantly stop. It calls to me. To me, sleepless, and we go off beyond the hills, away from the night workers who tried to mow it down like a hydrangea.

XXIII

The gladioli are made of marble, of pure silver, of some ghostly fabric, organdy; they are the bones of Most Holy Maria; they are still walking through this world.

For a long time these spectral stems have followed me. At night they come in through the window; if I am sleeping, they enter my dream; if I am awake, I find them standing at the foot of my bed.

The gladioli are like the angels, like the dead. Who can free me from that tenuous stem, from the gaze of that blind man?

XXXV

I remember the white, folded cabbages—white roses of the earth, of the gardens—cabbages of marble, of most delicate porcelain; cabbages holding their children inside.

And the tall blue chard.

And the tomato, a kidney of rubies.

And the onions wrapped in silky paper, rolling paper, like bombs of sugar, salt, alcohol.

And the gnome asparagus, turrets of the kingdom of gnomes.

I remember the potatoes, and the tulips we always planted along them.

And the snakes with their long, orange wings.

And the tobacco of fireflies, who smoked without ceasing.

I remember eternity.

200 Years of Total Conversion (2024)

From Sonic Acts Ecoes 6

Sasha Litvintseva and Beny Wagner

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the French physiologist Claude Bernard dedicated much of his life's work to establishing a scientific basis for the problem of digestion. What happens, he asked, when one organism eats another? Applying the scientific method, which is to say, by severing the part from the whole, Bernard experimented with observing mutton as it passed through a dog's digesting body. Did the dog's own flesh become more like the lamb it had ingested, or, rather, did the lamb turn into the dog?

Bernard proved that the dog, and by extension the human, breaks down the substance it eats into chemical components, and from these components builds new molecules. The chemicals, in Bernard's model, lose all connection to their origin, for example the mutton, and become anonymous indistinct building blocks for the eater to build its own body. A dog eating mutton doesn't store mutton fat, he explained, it stores dog fat. Upending the belief that we are what we eat, Bernard's model of the world stipulates that what you eat becomes you.

This model of digestion had profound philosophical and ethical implications. For Bernard, the absolute metabolic annihilation of one organism by the other was the very condition of the eater's freedom. The nineteenth century hierarchy of living things formalised the linear food chain, where an organism's freedom was commensurate with their position in the hierarchy and their ability to successfully dissolve the organisms below them into the stuff of their own bodies. Historian of science Hannah Landecker calls this the model of total conversion, whereby the eater turns the environment into itself, gaining greater degrees of freedom through greater degrees of independence from the environment.

Bernard's vision of digestion continues to haunt us in the form of common sense. This common sense, in turn, is haunted by a model of empire in which those at the top of the food chain can endlessly incorporate the spoils of environments near and far without any fear of changing the stability of their position at the top. Bernard's vision of freedom sides