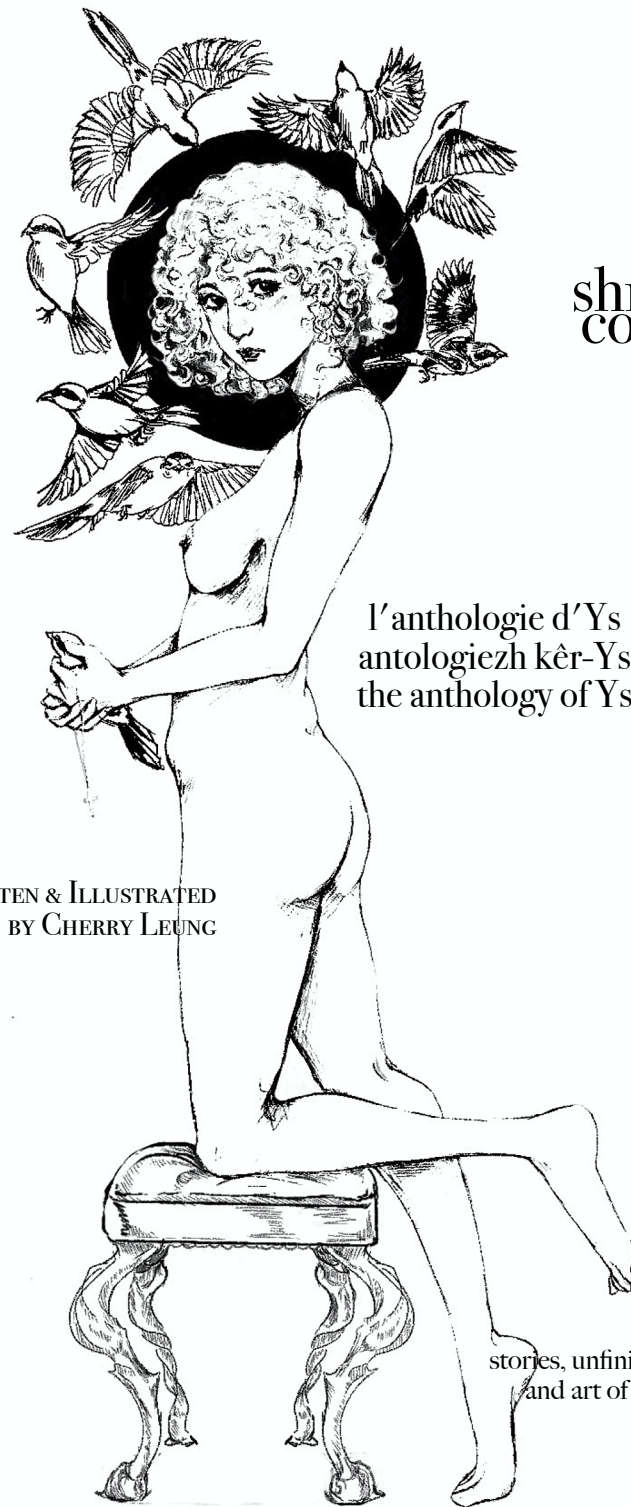


*"...celui qui maîtrise la scène est celui qui maîtrise le monde,
Birdy, ne pas oublier..."*

CREATED AS A HALFWAY PROJECT FOR MY THESIS TBD FALL 2026

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shrike:
companion

l'anthologie d'Ys
antologiezh kêr-Ys
the anthology of Ys

WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED
BY CHERRY LEUNG

stories, unfinished chapters, poems,
and art of Ys and its entertainers

PROMETHEUS FORCES CONVERSATION

*Amidst rubble of the Theater. Two people hold scripts.
Spotlight on MARIA.*

MARIA: I am angry at you, and not for the reasons you might think. I scorn the way you look at me, all persuasive, because you believe—wrongly—serving me pliancy might grant you mine in return, in a manner of a trade. As though love is given because you love! Let me tell you plain, girl, you've some nerve to believe yourself even capable of a divine desire. That you are so divided from the rest. Well, you let me have my tempers, and then you might begin to know me. But no. You just want a mother...

[*She loses her line.*] I can't. I'm a dancer, not an actor.

IMPRESARIO: No. No, very good. I liked it very much. You had it. You need only to remember your lines. Can you do that for me? Remember?

MARIA has brilliant teeth.

MARIA, *smiling*: I don't kno-o-o-o-ow. I don't know.

IMPRESARIO: How about this? Last monologue of the scene. Top of the tirade.

For a moment it is only them and the rubble. MARIA quiet, preparing. As long as it takes.

MARIA *breathes akin to a death rattle.*

This sham will crumble, you know. I've warned you once. The walls are closing in. You're not prepared. You haven't half the guts to keep a lie.

Sotto voce.

Wake up, sweet love. Did you enjoy that?
Wake up, fool.
Come eat my liver.
You're not a man. You're not even a boy.

Footsteps echo fast through the clearing. A massive warmth embraces us.

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That was all. He'd exhausted his pulpit. Abel escorted me out of the office; we were silent the whole way. At long last I felt something like respect or evidence of thought arise from his cold face, but it weighed heavy as iron. I wondered if we had become comrades in evil. I wondered if he'd heard any of it, if his loyalties had swayed, if he loathed his sister, if he loathed the world. What a tall order conveyed on the high nose of tight-lipped youth. Today, he followed me out the doors, and considered me for a long, long while. I felt there was something he wanted to give me, but he did not.

"I'd advise you to avoid Lavigne from now on. I think you already will."

His familiar silhouette disappeared back into the tower.

I. Prologue to Kêr-Ys

"NOTES FROM A PILGRIM'S TRAVELS"

THE GATES OF Ys loomed like the clashing Symplegades that so troubled the Argonauts. Seeing the lighthouse pierce the fog we yielded, arriving at dawn's low tides. Our ship locked into the entrance belts; we braced in wonder. The bronze gates parted in welcome; a series of iron sluices followed, lifting like guillotines to bade in the water. We surged forth, carried by these ancient mechanisms into the path of the canal...

From the tall tumble of the giant dikes the salt wind rolls, rolls, pushing ever inland. Far below the crashing tides lay the Great Beneath-polders, say the Dutch-flush in the deep verdant hue of the ancients, so that a peer downward grants one the thrill of staring down a plunging hellsvalley.

Our little Cornish pilgrim boat followed those great sloping hills down to a lush, clipped nature. A thick forest of oak and pine recede to a villa that was once a duchy, now a public garden for wildflowers and berry thickets transplanted from the moors and marshes of the north. A branch of the canal runs through near, its telltale rush in deafening tandem with the roar of the outside sea.

The outskirts of the duchy were marked clearly by saltcedar thickets, overgrown from encouragement, their rosy buds hemming the mossy undergrowth in curious proximity. How could creatures of such envious thirst live alongside the lush slopes of Ys? Any agriculturist worth his salt knows: the little angel sponges up salt deposits and metals for the first turn of the land, but eventually bleeds iron and salt back into the land, whence the land is left bald and worse than infertile. The architects of yore devised it, so should have their ways to deter the poison, but the walls of Ys are lined with tracts of saltcedar desert. Dahut the First, it is written, enjoyed her view of the pink blossoms by the cold white seas. Well has a millennia since passed, but perhaps her mythic love was enough to defend the weeds. The argument lies not with me.

I'd come for the yew, as did many others on their pilgrimage. It stands as the first blush of Ys, the mark of the

southeast, where Ys returned to Bretagne and the rest of civilization. Legend has it that the founder of Ys, Gradlon the Pious, had wrecked his ship in a storm upon the rocky cliffs of old Ys—when Ys was but dots in the bay—and looked up to see the lone yew looming over him, sheltering his wreckage from the rain.

The roots struggle deep into the earth, the body straggling with sinew. We graze fingertips against its bark in prayer; its twisted branches tremble in response. It is paired with a plaque in the Ysian: “here lies half of Gradlon the Man—the rest returneth to water.” A slow vision came before me ... I was a king stood alone at the cliffs... an old man watching the sea. Then I was ashes in an urn, spilling over cliffside, the wind blowing my dust against the crevices of the brick, before high tide caught me again. Sinking, unable to drown, then incorporate with the water... Now I am many-limbed, hearty and hale, a titan whose brambles bask in the sun.

Full noon I sat with old Gradlon, scratching these notes into my pad. The wind was playfully intolerant of this, fetching my pencil out of my hand. When I gave chase my neighbor’s little hound began barking, and I sheepishly returned to my place in the shade. Very well. As King Gradlon would have it.

I made my final wish for Father’s health, then my usual crowing about entering the University. A pair of thrushes sang us goodbye, we twittered back, and our boats bumped onward to the Chapelle Sainte-Lunaire—then, humorously, a winery behind him, which so claims to issue the blood of Christ to its neighbor—then, at last, the massive Iliz-veur Sant-Gwenole, a marvel of blue spires melting into the sky.

The olive orchard surrounded us at the cathedral’s entrance. A pair of fair maids, for some reason dressed as old Venetians, worked the orchards. One tied white lace unto the nimble limbs of a tree, a bowl in her other arm. Gazing upon their green gowns I remembered—tonight must be the festival for the turn of spring, and I verily ought not wander.

A familiar scene stretched over us, and I realized the tall bronze doors to the cathedral bear twin engravings to the brine-washed dike gates. How they shine now in the sun! As I stared dazedly for a while, I recalled none such scenes from neither my history of saints nor my learnings: the octet panels told some tale of Ys. Both the first and last show the wisping curls of the cold ocean. Then a veiled Madonna with her gaze drawn down, but her neck so embellished with the harsh edge of jewellery that her identity ought to be something else. I recognized the rugged

desk. “You shoot and—hm. Tell me—do you concern yourself with the fate of my apprentice, little Abel le Quéré?”

Show as little of your flesh to the sphinx as possible. I said nothing. He clicked his tongue; spoke between teeth.

“Here’s your issue: I fancy myself a trade. I always do; you already know this. How’s this: you leave now and I send Abel off with five hundred pounds and his life. I quite like the boy. Not bad, yes? You blow off my fingers; my men will hear you and come to seize him, seize you, ‘see how you like it,’ all that. I can even sue you in *le cour de cassation* for ownership over the Ys Opera, if you are, as you say, its ‘heir’ now. It’s a nice trade, is it not? And Maria rots. Very bad end. What to do?”

“I could as well burn down your building and manor, set dynamite to your mines and your summer home in Monticello. If Monsieur le Quéré and I are as familiar as you say, how are you sure I can’t and won’t?”

“Good. Let us come to blows! We all know each other too intimately, and I’m glad that should soon end.”

He reclined with glass in hand, waiting. My wrist ached with pistol weight; his peripheral gaze marked my trigger finger. He wet his lips, about to release a cry of mock pain that’d sic his hounds on me. I was sure then he would not feel pain, he would not care to be wounded, and he rather relished in my violent impulses. Neither of us moved until he smiled.

“Little fool. Lucky that I call your bluff, or those trifles you call threats would die with you. Listen here. I’ve done you a great kindness enough, stripping myself nude of all my secrets. I owe no more reasonable debts to you.”

I scanned his face for something to reveal anything—that he’s afraid of her, of Maria running free. Instead I found his scouring eye searching me in return. He read my intents—I had no more. I shoved my gun back into its holster.

“Gentleman to gentleman. Why so stubborn? You know Maria’s character well. You know she did not choose her ruin.” And, I thought, *if he set her free, he could repent.*

His last puff took oblivion sure into his lungs, and he sighed, blowing all of it in my face. That familiar flicker of delight entered his expression whenever he tested my resistance. “Truthfully, now that Calan is dead and Giu is just as damned, I’ve washed my hands of it all. The state, or that Actors’ Orphanage charity, will sponsor her. I’m a free man. Frankly, my sweet beau, so are you. Give thanks to God.”

dorms. Well, we all make mistakes.”

I glanced up at him. I had once been polite, but now I deigned to make harsh contact with him, to view him in full. How his eyes dart—and focus on his pipe. He took a draw of the dark snuff again, and, eyes fluttering open, returned my attention in full. I did not back down.

“I know what your eyes accuse. You say, ‘you killed her, you bastard, it was you.’ Suppose you were right. Suppose I’d ever touched her. It wouldn’t change a thing.”

“It might,” I said, with half a mind to scare him with a gun. But here sat a man resigned to take a shot with straight satisfaction. And it wouldn’t do now.

“Give over your key,” I demanded. “To Maria’s room.”

“They don’t freely give that out to clients, little fool.”

“Write a letter to the asylum then, stating that you wish to transfer her back into your care.”

He laughed. “Did you not plan to break her out regardless of my will?”

“It is my will. I have inherited the Impresario. You can choose to relent or get shoved by.”

“You inherit Maria Giufrida!” he guffawed. “What a fine present for you, little pauper.”

“If you ever had an ounce of care for Maria, enough to have bought her out of the Ballet, then know it goes to die in an asylum. Maria was Giufrida’s ward well before you bought her off our hands; so was I. I remain his heir, and I’ve a right to her guardianship.”

Now he considered me fully. His eyes scanned down. “Look at you. The greatest pervert of us all,” he sneered. His tongue traveled the length of the word: “Girl-boy.”

I cock the gun on his pipe-hand. His brow raises, and he rests back against his seat, but in a manner that pretends it is not retreat. My quick breath betrays me. “Good,” he laughs. “Now you’ve sprung, also.”

“I don’t kid. You either lose nothing, or you lose a hand to continue playing with our lives. Give my sister back to me. To the opera. A burden is lifted off your company. And we untangle ourselves from your hair.”

He leaned forward again, fingers drumming against his

king at the watery cliffs, a chimerical device draining, working the land, stalls upon the canals, then a horned knight with a woodsman’s axe. How odd, I thought. The next panel was a copy of the last panel. My eyes strained. They had one difference between them. In the epilogue, there, atop the great waves, stood an odd figure. No—it was a creature flailing upon its hind legs. A horse whipping in the wind, mid-whinny, nostrils flaring to fill even quicker with the ocean. My mouth felt dry, and I looked up at the great spires of the Iliz-veur. How it loomed, granting us shade from the sun.

Something rattled me of its violence. I turned to see if anyone else felt similarly. But I’d lingered too long; our tour guide had already directed us to a plate installed beside the nearby holy well. Here I roughly translate the words: “blessed be the shipwrecked, the reclaimers, the conquerors of nature.” Etched in the center, our tour guide announced, was a portrait of Sant-Gwenole. Yet how strange was his beauty, crowned with a wash of hair tumbling like waves; how modern the resulting picture. A golden lock reached toward me.

The gates opened, and again the tour continued into the golden hall. I gave a final glance at the veiled Madonna in the great octet, and at Sant-Gwenole’s fragile face trampled under my neighbor’s feet. I was startled, but no one said a thing.

- jeudí le 11 avril 1902

II. The Troupe, or Soul

THE MANIFESTO

BIRDY'S DIARY. MERCREDI I JANVIER 1919

THEY HAVE LET SLIP an urchin through the gates of Paradise. her soaked pocketbook stores aught save a stack of books and 5-sou short of a loaf.

the sky weeps a requiem for its daughter tonight. the child's footsteps follow in tandem, rapid thunder on puddled pavement.

pit pat, pit pat, pit pat.

the postcard trembles in her vibrating hands; it gleams by street lamp in the midnight rain. THE TROUPE L'HUITRE, NOW IN TOWN! it announces, soaked to a ripple, so dearly read.

The girl's eyes are lit aflame.

her face is freshly cast iron; bones glistening with tears solely of the sky. here she stands at the troupe's golden door: only hesitance beguiles.

all is still in a stormy night.

a madwoman's late conviction rests on her tongue,
with grace unrivaled, the maiden sings:

"and O', What a Noble Mind is Here o'erthrown!"

Calan, she was a stock character, another ten-and-something girl grappling for danseuse étoile. Fine—my lot for conducting business with a glorified brothel. I've reaped now, and what fine vengeance was his." His sarcastic tongue much wasted, he whetted his words with cool drink.

I was silent.

"I told her to rid of it: that set her off like a wild thing. It killed her. Her spirit failed her first, then it crippled her legs, then her mind. Poor creature. If I were a hint more idiotic or more Christian, I would have sacrificed my bachelor years in vain for her sake. But Papa would have left none of his fortune for I or her. Neither of us would have been happy. Alas, alas."

"You left her to rot; you ensured her unhappiness."

"What could I have done, one man working no miracles? I left her to the experts—it was a great kindness. I've installed her in an institution, and remained patronising her. You can laugh—I've been wrung out tenfold."

A great dread crept low into my spine. "Maria lives?"

"Yes, and lays and waddles and prattles, and your father's her keeper. Do you not know?" A look of understanding flashed across his brow. "So he does not tell you. Very well. You were also a child when all it had happened, and they even named you villain for a period. Ha! What a fine boy you made in every aspect, that those tabloids had mistaken a girl-boy for a father. Fine idiots they make, the lot of them!"

An odd calm overcame me. I could feel my lungs sit encased in their ribs. How languidly he blinked compared to I. How languidly he explained the history of our ruin in perfect clarity. Hatred and bile rose, but recoiled from his looming truth. I was reduced to three perfect words.

"Where is Maria?"

"The quicksilver rotted her senses. She now sits in eternal glory at Tristan Island's premiere asylum. Now there's credit," and he pointed his pipe accusedly, "I could have washed my hands of her, but I did not."

I waited for his monologue to continue, for some explanation. It did not come.

"You made her miscarry."

"A multitude of ways she could have gone about the task. She'd gone for the famous Ballerina Pill they passed around the

IV. Confessions

"WE ALL KNOW EACH OTHER TOO INTIMATELY, AND
I'M GLAD THAT SHOULD SOON END."

OR, LAVIGNE BARES ALL

[]'s journal contained several entries dated from the year. A slash towards Lavigne's name—the man had rescinded his donations. I squinted. It was the date Maria and I had a huge row.

[Maria continued dancing, even as the her dream melted into a trap, even as Lavigne's reinforcements had retreated, and she had no shoes left.
The year was 1925.]

[In the aftermath, Birdy comes to confront Mssr. Lavigne, oil tycoon, under guise of discussing investments. They are alone.]

"I rescinded my months of donations. There wasn't a point to it—I'd sooner invest in a shoebox cabaret than in a—" here he sneers—"waning opera house. And we'd have skipped town to America as soon as we married. Old Calan told me"—Lavigne coupled his words with a drag of pipe—"you'll regret it, it's a matter of reputation. I told him I didn't care, I'll have my wife. Maria couldn't let go—she promised me, however, 'just one more season; she'll make her mark on stage, and leave the limelight scorching hot. She will enter society accomplished,' she insisted, 'as my equal.'

"Well—I discovered her other motives quickly. It becomes hard to hide, does it not, on such a lithe woman? She would not tell me, no, for shame. Common wench! No, I would not have a bastard under my roof. No. I had half a mind to return her to the ballet school, let them mock and do with that heathen as they would, seeing what low standards of morality they disperse amongst their students. In a blind rage, I petitioned for exactly this. Know how M. Calan responded? Laughed his low, rumbling, ogre's laugh. A sated, burping wolf. 'Cheapskate,' he called me, then another 'C' word unsuitable to your dainty ears. Ha. 'You reap, Charlatan, you reap!'

"What he had done with her was on account of my rescinded favors. Tampering with one's own wares, spitting in a guest's drink—all the same. What was Maria to them? I treated her as my treasure, my equal in competence and ambition; for

MAMIE'S POISON, 1914

Among the worst of fables Mamie used to tell were the ones where she professed a hobby of witchcraft. Our ancients, said Mamie, invented a vicious *gu*: a chimera poison compounded by a vicious war between five poisonous creatures imprisoned in a pot. The surviving champion was the *gu*. Morbid inspiration struck her one morning from watching a scorpion inch its claws toward her bed. After cupping an empty wine jar over it, she hid the pot halfway between the wood and her home in the mountain bend. All day she set about collecting specimens into her pot—wart-backed toads, thick-legged centipedes, spiders wet from the dew—then tied old rags over the lip for a makeshift lid. Palm pressed against the jar for movement, she felt for hard shells beating against ceramic, and reveled in holding a candle to the pot: the lick of heat incited frustrations. At long last, a telltale tired wriggle signaled the sole victor.

Alas, when she untied the rags, the winning scorpion jumped from the jar and into the candle, roasting itself into ash. Birdy laughed with a roaring temper, but Mamie regarded her with seriousness.

"Only because I feared the snake!" she interrupted. "I could not bear to capture one. I was a wee girl, it too swift and strong; if I failed, it'd eat me whole. Now I know—I should never have shown it mercy."

Now Birdy thought that Mamie had pictured herself as the scorpion, and pictured her little grandmother killing herself rather than trading blows with a snake. Cleverly the girl matched the image of a snake with what the old nudist tugged out to add to the Thames. She thought, stupidly—I am different—now being the receiver of great wisdoms, the next generation, the fixer of errors. The answer, of course, was that she herself was some sort of chimera; Mamie had given birth to Maman, then her competent self, and now she was the *gu* champion. The perfect candidate to clip the heads off men.

Birdy spent a wide-eyed night thinking it over herself. The next day she returned, carrying in her head a perfect strategy for Mamie's perfect metaphor. "I understand now," she declared. "You have to temper your spirit. Say I were the scorpion myself. I wait for the others to fight, preserving my energy in a cool corner. The spider is crushable but too swift; I await his passing. I befriend the toad at a comfortable distance. The centipede's length is its weakness—however many legs he has is however many he stands to lose. The snake is tyrannically large, so it must absorb many blows already. I save my venom. Then, I attack when it already thinks itself king. I usurp. This way, I wouldn't fight until I preferred death to winning."

Mamie considered her odd offspring, her baby's cheek, the barely lush furrow of her determined brow. She flickered the soft forehead of the *gu* girl to an *ow*. "If you *were* a scorpion, dear," she said, "crawl far, far away from the woman with the jar."

THE ACTORS' CHARITY ORPHANAGE, 1919

The eccentric Giufrida was against us calling him Father because it toed the line of blasphemus, so we took to calling him Impresario.

Two and twenty girls at a time filled the room. We were better suited for the chorus line but a choir we had instead, with a few extreme singers peppered throughout—that is, the divas and terribles.

"She has a voice, but her heart's not in it."

"She hasn't got a voice, listen to that." Both waited for the soloist's streaking note to finish. "Something awful! Like a cock that's swallowed a crow!"

"You'd best *stop* it before they hear."

The Actors' Orphanage were star-studded of late. Tours were granted to donors; children of donors, even, were sent to be schooled here for semesters at a time, of actors and show-folk too busy to take care of their progeny but trusted well the sisters and schoolteachers to raise us to their level of intellect. Though half of us were remnants of the Great War, it could not be said that we were all orphans.

At times I craned my head to the goings-on, but most of the time I was bitter and shy. I'd no interest in odes to Ys or singing to soldiers or the crooners that seemed to pass through the halls like pox. "I love you-u-u," they sang in sterile unison. If I must sing I would not do it in the auditorium—not with all these hens—but softly, bubbling under the river, or when too cold, haunting an empty washroom.

Today was special, I know: through the whispers in the pipes I heard about a sort of covert audition. There was, here, an up-and-coming international theatre troupe, and this Giufrida figure was second only to God at this point, and only second because the nuns declared there be floggings for any nonsense during prayer and lessons. I felt smothered on both ends by the hellish wrestle between excitement that did not concern me and the punishments that did.

Nonetheless, at the donors' behest, all classes but one half-hour sample course were canceled to present the school's great talents and education, to which the girls du jour took to raising their hems and rouging themselves without consequence, because the only thing more unseemly than immodesty was its punishments. As much as I groaned about the entire event, I, too, peeked through the doors.

A man of middle age sat far from the front, his brows drawn in a frown but seeming capable of a twinkle. He was not the sole judge: accompanying him were a woman and two older girls, who, by uncouth way of twisting and toppling their legs together, revealed themselves as cats of the same litter.

"Could you arrange for an audition and be done?" The woman

EVEN MEN OF STONE

THE SOFT NET of the dream trembled with the flitter of her unfocused gaze, she, lying outward, like a carved lamb spread for a feast of thousands. Settled on his shoulders, as though finding an oasis in the midst of voyeurs. Piercing through his own eyes needle-point, watching in careful turn as he watched her.

His palms clutched at his sides. She drank of it, a mildness returning to her smile. She lifted herself off the marble slab, floated off the table, and ambled behind the curtain.

Come forth, she spoke, merging with the velvet.

MANON

I am uneasy.
I am not old, but I have lived a long, long time.
I am gnashing at my cage, if you'd make me stay.
I am rabid and stained.
I can still feel my fist guiding flesh open.
I am pliant, even when rigid, and soft, even when I seem
not.
I am not kind.
I am always there.
I am a prized child—and in that I have been so loved.
I am free when the bolts of movement command my soul.
I am not aiming for the ground.
I am feeling my hair hit the ground, and when that
happens, I will be reborn.
I am a hollow body.
I am a goddess crafting herself—a doctor surgically opening
herself.
I am hearing a voice say: open wide.
I am not violent.
I am giving birth to myself.
I am looking at you from across the water.
I am reading, and reading you like a page.
I am seeing you in my dreams, and laughing at the
overlaps of your twisted expressions.
I am letting you in, into calmer waters.
I am possessed by demons, or I am myself.
I am the bones and withered head of Magdala.
I am, when I see her, Saint Theresa in ecstasy.
I am asking you who I should be by giving you a role.
I am standing at Fifth Street—waiting for you by our
lamppost.
I am holding my hesitant breath and an unlit cigarette that
shakes.
I am smothered in fur bodies and waiting for a God who
peeks at me by dawn.
I know my berth in the wide, grey world.
I am running wild in these rain-worn streets—I know them
so well.

gripped her forehead. Her golden coiffure and deep voice petrified me—she sounded like the Sister who whipped us for passing notes. I blinked again, and the man was gone. The door I'd stood behind moved. I yelped, unbearably squeezed. He appeared looming before me, gasping too, and the hall filled with noise from his profuse apologies.

"My God! I've clipped your wings, little bird!"

How mortifying to have been caught eavesdropping! Were I smarter, older, I might've socked him and fled or requested an audience, but my lips were locked up and the key tossed, and so were my legs.

"Were you coming in?" I shook my mute lowered head. "Are you hurt?" I shook it again. I felt I'd much confused him in my profound stupor, so he gave up and staggered off to his own ends, and I was again alone. My beating heart settled in a minute. I returned to my post.

The girls assembled into rows. Another song had now begun: it was that odd 'chanson de Craonne' some of the older girls had taught a handful of the younger choir girls the whole week, having them swear total secrecy under the guise of a surprise gift for M. Giufrida's visit. Now they'd gone and performed it, one duckling conducting the rest:

*Goodbye to life! Goodbye to love!
Those with the dough are returning
'Tis a good end, we've had our good days
and for their coin we are dying*

*But 'tis the end, because the grunts
are now going on strike!
Your turn, fat cats, to climb the plateau
And pay for war with your skins—*

Sister Piper rushed onstage and seized the conducting choirgirl's arm. The girl bashed and screeched, wresting from her grip once but was caught again. Amidst cries of "Liberty! Liberty!" she urged the choir to "Keep singing! You wretched—keep—!"

But the younger children, afraid and confused, did not, and only watched, appalled, as she was torn backstage. The visitors rose to their feet. Two nuns went to ambush their escape, placating the elder, whereas from backstage came a scream of "insolent—!". The woman protested with lively gesturing, white leather gloves flapping angrily in her breast pocket. With some verbal wrestling, they stilled again, and, to my shock, the abused girl was allowed to return to the choir. Or rather, they said, "on the Madame's insistence".

A rumour later spread that the instigator's brother, her sole caretaker until his draft into the trenches, was killed by Germans at Craonne. Within three weeks the novelty wore off, rumours fell into a lull, and then her person disappeared. Then came the next issue: Giufrida had taken her in, and now she had joined his ranks.

FATHER, 1921

[for theatre means both war and showbiz, Birdy.]

"Here." He threw over a tattered bundle. "You're twelve today, nay? Put these on." The girl-child glanced down at herself then up at him, eyes wide as saucers. "No, no no, you don't have to—pull them over your clothes—or I'll leave the room." And the door shut. The room stilled, save for a titter of larksong streaking in through the cracked windows.

Disrobing, she stared into the dusty mirror. Soon her body will swell, breasts and all, and she'll need bandages to pinch flat her chest. She sneezed. She will not be glad to do it. To grow up. She hardly envies Madame Giufrida: *her* figure, the way it convulses in laughter, the way clients' eyes flit down upon first meetings. *Be not hateful, girl.*

Piece by piece she uncovered: the trousers. The new blouse, a flouncy item, but with cuffs of purpose. Buttons of silk. A cravat, which puffed at her neck, and she supposed he would help her with later. A coat of dark velvet and high collar. To her best ability she figured the order of donning, then stared at the door until he'd the good sense to knock.

"Oh! My little dandy!" He laughed heartily, whence her nervous expression darkened into a frown. "Oh, my little Byron! What a gift!"

She kept her brows furrowed until he would join her in silence. Instead, he sat down, suddenly pensive. She'd hardly the time to get nervous when the eccentric asked: "Would you say a few lines?"

"What lines?" Her little heart pulsed. Could this be her audition? Had she grown enough, at last, to play the pretty mad damsel?

"Speak Hamlet," he said, "but not to-be-or-not-to-be. God have mercy: something else." Then a twinkle in his eye: "I know you've got him memorised."

"You be Ophelia then," retorted the little girl-boy.

"God hopes not!" He laughed. "More like Polonius. Brevity is the soul of nothing. Hold on." He squinted at the cravat she'd hastily stuffed into her shirt, and, ever meticulous, retied it. She liked watching him focus. His eyebrows furrowed, with crows' feet as their neighbors. His hands, too, looked thin. The child felt a twinge of sadness.

"Alright," said the little page, who has recently learnt to bargain. "I want to hear your Ghost, which, I think, is a fair exchange."

The big man released a big groan. "Must I?"

Hamlet frowned with force. "Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak. I'll go no further."

Giufrida laughed. "Mark me," he replied, and pointed a director's finger to a spot an arms' length across. She stepped in the spotlight obediently, still frowning in character. Now the sunset splayed at the back of Hamlet's little head (sparing Giufrida's eyes, thank god). He was pleased. His portrait was complete.

Songyan and Fairuze, sparrow dirge and turquoise, two strangers from the far stretches of an ancient earth.

From Chang'an comes Yan sailing, fleeing the march, curling the length of the Yellow River into the black sea. She has left all she'd known in a whirlwind in search of great fun—and discovers it in tavern songstresses, in being robbed blind by desert pirates. A canal does run somehow through the Gobi—it does not discourage them from boarding and ransacking her ship.

To Fairuze of the west shore, daughter of a Tyrian merchant, who followed her mother east to her homeland in the Fars. How soft the silk that oft hangs from her arms, the steel twinkling each appendage! But how much more she loves arithmetic, literature, and chatter! She should naturally inherit their trade, but her father forbids. Fine, she says, and steals a little boat full of cloth bolts to make a trifle in the east.

Weeks and weeks pass. They meet in the middle of the desert, coasting Samarkand. Yan spots Fairuze walking a league away after her own caravan has been raided by bandits—well and farewell, pointless canal—and, after a few days of wandering into sand dunes, believes she has seen the mirage of a goddess...

favor of her little reactions to perceived grandeur.

“But it’s such a beautiful item! No, it’d be robbery!”

“Well, my father’s the Marquess,” I said, wryly. The quip felt right, then it came out foolish. As though Manon were not also noble—in our canon—and is immersion not King? And here was the silk scarf of Manon’s mother around my neck. I felt it had snugly snuffed out my pride.

Manon made her musings quietly. “How about this,” she said at last. “Be guiltless when sharing. A new rule for us.”

“How good and Tenth Commandment of this pretend session.”

“Of course.” Her deer-like eyes seemed anxious. “Do you agree, then?”

“Yes, and no lying if you do feel guilt. Which I don’t, about the cameo anyhow. Have the miniature, Manon. We are friends.” All this I said with the heavier object still on my shoulders.

“Alright. We are friends, so I borrow.” With that compromise she reassumed her position, loosening her brow. “Brood less about the scarf, too. It deserves to be danced around with. Desires it, too.”

Then came forth the image of Manon’s mother dancing, teaching a babe how to stomp on her feet, hands circling hands, reaching to earth, to kiss the sky. The laughter she had inherited, the childishness. Did her mother have a chest of curios too? Did she bring it over from Lebanon? I wondered where she was now. I couldn’t help reaching up to graze the scarf—as though it were her skin. Were her fingers calloused from labour, or did she keep them soft?

Manon relaxed onto the heels of her hands, and again closed her eyes. A partition of cold air had been erected between us. Fie that. Tossing away my myriad distractions, I followed suit in screwing my eyes shut. Thread lapping thread, we began to weave our tallest tale.

Who are we tonight?

III. The Opera, or Heart

THE VISITING IMPRESSIONIST, 1923

BY CHANCE WE, as striplings, had blown into the isle some men have sought all their lives. In those days, too, a painter would come through the seacliff ports, waiting for the lowtide gates to open. He, too, looked on in splendor at the sprawling threads of aqueducts, the clusters of fog-blue Breton architectures below, each one like a little ocean, and tasted the salt on his breath, before his boat landed him feverish in front of the staggering Palais d'Ys.

Though we saw daily the house of gold he was the true novelty: his careful attentions to us, his strange capital accent, his palettes and boxes of paints! Not a bourgeois Parisian, he proclaimed to be, but rather a bohemian who had saved every cent to take the job in Ys. Sure, sure, us girls said back, whilst tugging at his jacket hems, laughing to ourselves. We were perhaps poor representatives for Ys: not truly was our city full of paupers, but this building, with each prospective debutante searching for a sponsor, certainly was.

“Stupid girls,” Maria would sneer under her breath. “He’s got the same salary as all of us!” True that was: the opera paid his commission for advertisements, which amount came from the success of each show. We ate from the same pot. But we would not pride ourselves on eating from a different pot, with the exception of Maria. But she, too, had her period of liking the painter.

She learned his name: I did not. In the period she did she had spent more time at the studio than ever before, stretching in the after-hours, practicing variations she had never before been taught, and borrowing costumes from our pile—only the best, and at the painter’s behest. He certainly liked her, too, if not her then her patience; he had, in a bundle of sketches, sculpted each plane of her face with delicate specificity, her fragile jaw, her goose neck, each striking thread of her mane. Out of his own pay, charcoal, pastel, and at last, a painting that still hangs in my room, a portrait of Maria sitting, her flushed face betraying exhaustion. That was the only time I would know of Maria to be at rest. Every other picture was blurred, as though she were in flight.

He did not pique her interest from the soul, and she said so

plainly. But every early morning I'd hear a clatter from the desks of our suite, and if I peeked through thin slits of eyes, it was Maria sculpting her own face to perfection through an array of powders. Two hours she continued on. She had become a swift expert—could have taken any job at the opera, I always thought, but she had to be a ballerina. And so it was.

I had felt a little miffed, as she used to give me lessons in the evenings and so on, and so practice by way of making me her apprentice. Now she had her midnight rendezvous, and I my wandering thoughts. She caught my gaze lingering upon her back one night, and I could not look away fast enough.

"Are you jealous, Birdy?"

I felt ruined. I was taken in an ugly mood, and only by hiding its reason could I salvage my pride. "No-o-o."

She beckoned me then to sit on her bed, declaring that she'd rather be late to her appointment to spend some sisterly time with me. She pulled her chair to sit across from me; I politely sat with my right hand in my left. With slight thrilling movements she painted me, sometimes raising my chin towards the light, sometimes a feathery brush I resisted to shrivel from. Too quickly it was all over. She briefly delighted in her work. I had asked if I could accompany her to see the painter. Her face went a little grave.

"Oh, no," she said, "you are far too young—and he does not paint but dancers, to be sure."

I was relieved to learn that he returned to Paris in two more months, but dreaded Maria's oncoming depression from his departure. But she took it in stride, and more than ever threw herself into practice at the studio. He was replaced by another painter, a realist, and then those artists by the newspapers, which sufficiently advertised the scandal, and then there was quiet.

The only remainders of him in Ys were the printed advertisements for the ballet preserved in Father's archive, and the painting of Maria I had kept from the fire. The rest of his sketches of her, in movement, were surely gone.

and noble. The marquess' daughter, the crane."

"Must we both be so noble?" As I finished she hung a scarf from my shoulders. The thin cloth brushed my skin, smooth and pleasant. I took a peek at the deep indigo—certainly not mine. I blinked, unable to place it.

"It's my mother's," she whispered, reverent. Where she glanced I reddened.

"It suits you much better," I insisted, feeling like a pale, defeathered peacock, but dared not handle it to return it to her. My nails should rip it, or ruin the tender gift otherwise.

"No, no. It's a Silk Road trade now. Now you give me something in return." She screwed her eyes shut.

I was terribly afraid to rip the scarf, so I gathered it in my arms and rose on my toes. I searched my trays for something loud and bold. How to create Manon? There was one outstanding textile in my chest—a violet toga I'd stolen from *Julius Caesar* in 1922. I brightened, then frowned. What does a toga have to do with a Tyrian princess? I laid the cloth flat, puzzled. Then I spotted a cameo among my treasures.

"Be still now." I draped the wool over her shoulders, and pinned the set together over her heart. Through the whole ordeal my hands shook. Holding my breath I sat back on my heels, and now she peered at herself.

"What is this trinket!" She pointed at her chest in awe. "Who is she?"

"A little miniature of Diana. Look, there's her bow, and that there's her hound."

At each respective detail she drew another gasp. "And how priceless is this?"

I felt embarrassed again. "Somewhat."

"Oh, I dare not sell it." I frowned at the suggestion. She smiled wryly. "I kid."

I felt less attachment to that thing than her now. "If you desire it, keep it," I found myself saying, "but don't ever sell it. It would not be worth it."

"Keep it?" Her jaw fell slack. "I dare not!"

"It's a, a costume piece anyhow, it's not real," I lied, helplessly. I had frankly no attachment to the cameo beyond the superficial—on Manon it caught my attention less than usual, in

Go bæc to[,] that primitive thing!

On the floor of our dim room, Manon and I devised the rich idea to play two girls who'd grown up along the silk road. She pictured herself growing up on the shores of ancient Tyre. I could see her gown billowing past her ankles, her fingers rubbing a vivid purple snail dye between her fingers—something of the sort. She laughed and shook her head.

“You picture me as a snail farmer.”

“No,” I insisted, “a royal, all wrapped in Tyrian purple, and gold wherever you please.”

She did not react, or resisted it. “And who are you?”

I tried conjuring something middling: neither too shabby nor too powerful. “A marquess’ daughter?”

“A marquess—ha!” She held her stomach and rolled about her mattress. “What a generous idea of the Impresario!”

I resisted her. Ruthlessly we dispensed with our knowledge of history: the Roman Empire was a bust in this world, better ignored; Lebanon was Manon’s own invention; I was a pirate from Chang’an, though the city was landlocked. Damn it all, I was used to the seas of Ys, and would not have otherwise. If no map would have it, then hire a new cartographer! Manon laughed, but my seriousness seemed to sober her.

“Close your eyes,” she ordered, “and meditate. What do you wear?”

A flush of colour flooded my mind’s eye. Something unlike my usual grey: turquoise, cinnabar red, swathes of silk hanging from my arms, brocade wrapping around my foot. A rare painted scene in a porcelain pot with a fae from China. I shrank. “What a marquess’ daughter might wear,” I said at last.

“Oh, don’t be shy,” she said, amused. “Shall I grab something from your closet to put you in character?”

“I guess.” What a strange thread of thought! My soul shriveled from it entirely!

Manon crawled away, and I kept my eyes closed. The air about us cooled. “I know. You ought to wear something dignified

If it were up to me, then each Sunday should truly be a holiday as God intended. How awful that our trips into town must be so secret! But we fare quite well, I guess, even under these conditions. Back home Mother should say: “those lucky Ys girls. Damn them, those so-called liberated...” but had her own brand of jealousy to her wit, which is such poison to my modest reputation that I dare not fully mimic it.

The old patronage has ended recently in Paris, we heard. Now the abonnement, or at least their most desperate and wealthy, are flocking like bonny geese toward Ys instead. But if Ys will follow suit then half our salaries should be cut. But, goes that old prophecy, when Paris falls, Ys will rise. It’s not quite patriotic of me, but I’ve had my trials at home, and would like to see Paris sink with my old woman. Fare thee well!

Well, to celebrate a new round of potential suitors anyhow, we all five set off to town gathered together in as fine fashions as we could muster. A mink fur coat! How different the real deal was from the awful costumes we wore for *Camille*, dazzling though they might be (far, far from the stage). Only it was not mine, but Rozell, who, you may remember as the sole daughter (for now) of our dramaturge Madame Lelaurie, had “borrowed” it from her mother so that we might all take a turn feeling rich tonight.

Only Rozell has quite a fearful temper, despite wanting to be well-liked, such that her efforts were mostly wasted on us. Except for Sally, least aware among us, whom we relinquished the coat to for most of the way. Well, if any of us were caught by the maitres for thieving, better it be her. A duller wit would withstand the pain of a whipping twice better than an intelligent creature. I don’t know where it is said, so don’t quote me.

As usual, we first met Giorgia behind the chapel at quarter past ten; my tall roommate Beatrice came a bit later. We snuck out of the girls’ dormitory dressed as Sisters, that we might blend in easier. To date, I’ve no idea how Giorgia acquired the costumes—we’ve not had nuns in any play so far—I’m only told that Giorgia grew up in some Catholic orphanage and ran away to Ys and so sewed the holy things herself from memory. The image of her hoisting bolts of black fabric to her room and wrestling them into huge habits tickles me. Very ignoble noble of her, and I have portioned out appropriate dollops of gratitude

for her in my heart.

The eleven o' clock tram landed straightaway across from the Opera. We piled in, five nuns with rosaries about our necks, and the conductor peeled his gaze away from us religiously. How handsome, the extra level of respect afforded us, all the while heading to the speakeasy on fourth.

After a few stops passed without anyone else entering in, however, I caught the driver staring in the rearview mirror. His eyes flitted back and forth a few times before he decided to ask anything. "Where to at this time of night, Sisters?"

We looked at each other. "Bluebird Dam," answered Beatrice, our natural delegate, voice deepened and cool.

"Really."

"We are headed for an exorcism. The urgent wire came in promptly at bedtime. It cannot be helped." Beatrice's eyes were masterfully stoic, steady on the mirror. "The devil's been awful rowdy lately." She crossed herself.

"Poor Mrs. Lelaurie, sleepwalking and robbing the wine cabinet and wandering into petting parties," quipped Sally, body all round with the mink beneath her habit. "You know, married women, they wake up in these Godforsaken places an' don't even know what they're doing, and it's awful for the lot."

"Awful," Beatrice crowed, no matter what Sally said.

I nearly cracked. Rozell was half red. The tram driver looked at the road, blinking a lot. "How awful," confirmed he. "Will you all be alright?"

"We shall try," Beatrice replied. "We only worry we're not too late to save a soul."

"Bluebird Dam, you said? I'll try to hurry." He spoke doubtfully, like one who knew better than any of us that the devil frequents Bluebird Dam well often. I wondered if he guessed we were truly there to purge the evils.

The tram was now rushing down a steep slope, and Rozell's hood about flew off her head. Her eyes widened at me for help, so I tucked the fabric into her forehead again and again. At this point, my pretty frock began to itch under some seam Giorgia had forgotten to smooth out. At last he stopped in front of some cobbler's porch, and the five of us about flew out.

"God bless you your service, Sisters." We replied in turn, staggering like a bunch of schoolchildren: "may God bless you."

released a paltry blaze, but the actors' hands warmed, and the fragile flame danced.

"What a beautiful love story!"

I turned beside me. Manon guffawed at each absurd point, covering her mouth to muffle her disturbance. In her brow was a twinkle of nostalgia, as though she might have lived such a life. I imagined recreating such a scene in our poorly insulated dormitories. Perhaps if we hated our rehearsals enough. *Come, come, feed our scripts to the fire.*

A laugh burst out unstifled, which was so sudden it sounded like a sneeze. Ah. Whatever.

Later, we'd sat down and she opened her little pouch to reveal a tin of peanuts. "Not quite allowed, is it?"

"No, it's not." My stomach proceeded to rumble in tandem with a loud trumpet, and Manon's eyes flickered down with such immediacy I became still as wood. Then, catching wind of our mutual shock, she let out a large laugh, and set the tin in my hands. I took it dumb as a puppet.

"Here," she singsong'd, "now it's your fault."

Before I could declare my rejections she popped open the lid, and the air filled with peanuts. Her dainty pincer curated several legumes and discreetly popped them into her mouth, like a snake in swiftness. "Blasphemous," I muttered.

"More like joyously percussive," she spoke with an intermittent crunch, and that old twinkle in her eye. That says you're gonna do it, you'll fall for it.

"Certainly," I responded, resigning myself to curl into my velvety seat. The violins stopped their brief symphony, the horns sobered, and so did Manon. Over us the lights fell to darkness, save one, illuminating M. Tanet as he rose to the conductor's post. The audience startled to pre-emptive cheers—Manon eagerly joined in, clapping her dry palms, already utterly enchanted by Tanet's wand alone. Then another novelty: the curtain of golden blue began rustling, and with a flourish the sea of silk parted.

Manon loudly drew in her breath.

Bells glinted with the gleaming reveal. A home pillowed by snow outside, the worn tablecloth, rugged shelves, a breadless basket, all painted in golden light, surrounding roofs painted sea-blue in the Ysian fashion—how the house looked like a house among waves! A strange urge tugged my cheek upward. They have done it, these fellows mine!

I looked over: the lid was still in her lap, her hands hovering over, pincer shape to keep oily fingers apart from clean ones. I was suddenly aware she had lent me her handkerchief. As I raised my hand to my pocket, so began an odd exchange between four very cold roommates.

"Shall we burn my painting?"

"No, no, canvas stinks! Here, feed my play to the fire." In triumph he produced a packet. "A genius work shall burn, but two geniuses shall live!"

"Act one: come, act one." The packet that was act one

I met his eyes, which lingered upon me for a second so long that I felt an evil force emanate from him and plunge into my soul. Luckily, he drove off without protest, and the four of us stood there like idiots with our rosaries.

"What now?" Rozell said.

"Oh, take the damn thing off, won't you?" And Beatrice shucked off her habit, revealing her knees and the sparkling black rhinestones on her slippers. Sally stripped in turn, ever the diligent duckling, revealing the mass of fur now tangled underneath. We each freed ourselves from our frocks, even Giorgia, who had lingered in hers with a longing. I suspect she actually quite liked being a Sister, and would have chosen the nunnery if the music of the ballet pleased her any less. All the costumes went in Beatrice's large purse, and Giorgia signed the cross over it. We trundled on.

Intermittently Sally uttered a complaint about her shoe clipping her big toe, about the long walk, about whether or not the dam does exist technically. For all we know, after all, the entirety of Ys is fake and building a dam for a canal that should've been perfectly deep was idiotic. And "How I dislike velvet—'tis fur that cuts the skin!"

This time Rozell shushed her, and I thought she was about to reclaim her coat in anger. But her eyes had quickly pinned upon the distance: a thick mass of young ne'er-do-well boys appeared before us.

All of us readied ourselves. Me, I think I'm quite the catch, but among a crowd of these girls...it's all about discernment.

In any case we entered Bluebird Damnation, diary, and you know most of the rest. I refuse to write anymore, because if any of you read this, including you, Madame Calan, well, I refuse any ~~purgerly purjery perjury~~ self-incrimination on account of this innocent little work of fiction.

The Miss Brigitte Giufrida

MY BEAUTIFUL ROOMMATE

Maria inundated by snow,
her brows all twisted in anger, Maria
kicking a bunch of fluff into the air
and a flurry overtakes it, the wind
blowing it back in her face.
her clenched fists red in the white air.
her boots making a squeak.
her boots smallest by the door.
her dancing on the ice.
she doesn't slip.
it's so magnificent—she's a fairy. she
has learned how to do right
she has got it.

MARIA, NÉE MADDALENA

I AM PERFECTLY LUCID.

I AM MORE GRACEFUL THAN A SWAN; MY PROMISES THICKER THAN
BLOOD.

I HOLD PEOPLE BETWEEN ALL MY FINGERTIPS—SERVANTS, FRIENDS,
LOVERS, FATHER.

I UNDERSTOOD IT ALL COMPLETELY.

I AM JUST STARTING MY PLAN.

I AM LYING IN WAIT FOR A LONG, LONG TIME.

I AM KIND ENOUGH.

I AM SHEDDING MY FEATHERS.

I AM SHEDDING MY SKIN.

I AM EATING MY COCOON, SO TO FILL MY STOMACH WITH SILK.

I AM SHEDDING MY MUSCLE, SINEW, BONE, CORPSE.

I AM MORE GRACEFUL THAN A CENTIPEDE; MY INTENT THICKER THAN
BLOOD.

I AM A SWORD LYING IN WAIT, AND YOU LOT ARE MY FORGE.

I AM NOT A FORGE.

I AM BOUND TO THE PROMISES OF MY SHOES.

I AM WRAPPING YOU AROUND MY FINGER.

I HAVE NEVER BEEN HELPLESS.

I AM ONLY A GHOST BECAUSE YOU FEAR ME.

MANON'S NIGHT AT THE OPERA

"The width of this place! Like a palace built for titans!"

Tonight both she and I were respectable ladies of society—I could not risk my usual garb around familiar eyes whilst waving around tickets to my name—but Manon made the better noblewoman by far.

She had chosen one of the flashier frocks among the pick of costumes, as is her right to the liberal frills that ladies only still wear in galas, and therefore the wiser choice. What would have been a two-man job I took all upon my stubborn self, tying cords that would soon fall with a Sisyphean constancy, until my own blouse had soon become slick with sweat, and I was fretted over instead. Hers was nearer to the potency of red wine, mine was to brown and beige, and I had forbade me from my typical jacket, so hoped to hide behind Manon instead.

Now, my silk-gloved arm laced in hers, she assumed the air of someone more familiar with the place than I, and led us toward the usher by herself. He had taken one look at her perilous costume, her unguarded excitement, then raised a brow: "Mademoiselle, you shall find the backstage *that* a-way."



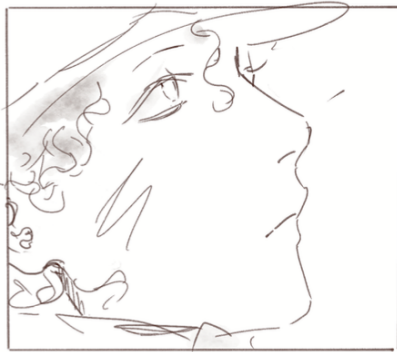
Now she was quite speechless, and her ticket flapped uselessly between her fingers. "Why—thank you verily much." Her smile froze, and only until we passed the usher did she turn to me: "Look at that—he thought we were *subscribers!*"

"Darling, he thought we were part of the show."

She shot me a sympathetic glance of displeasure. "You do well to crush dreams, Birdy—the consequence of a heavy heart."

"The ticket is pink."

Only then did she glance down at what she'd been holding onto for the past hour. "Ah, so it is."



III. The Libertine World

SOUTHBOUND FLIGHT TO FAIRER FOUNTAINS

The Observer endured another five fruitless minutes by the hot licks of candlelit wind, then turned his nose against the air to break out of the theatre. He muttered the whole way: *pedestrian piece, pedestrian piece, pedestrian piece...*

The setting sun scolded his impatience. Eyes squinting, aided by hasty applications of carmine and kohl, the boy winded away, numbed in thought. Away from the garish elite district, where golden cigars and lithe pipes faced each other in thick chatter. Suede hats and pelts of any specimen trimmed the wide streets, parting only for the red-nosed lamplighter with the greasy bottoms.

Merchants of cheap chinoiserie and Persian rugs staggered along the cobblestone canal, waiting to lock eyes with any intrigued holidaymaker. One smiled at him in expectation, but he charged bullishly through the rigid crowd.

A shrill whinny jolted him—the unwitting Observer did not see the road—and made eye contact with a violently halted horse, then its sputtering driver.

“Hurry ‘long!”

He swallowed his latent indignation. Another second and he’d have become roadside carcass, but he cared very little.

He was in a primitive mood, in which he itched to assert himself to recover from the blow both bad art and bad driver dealt him: twenty francs, he wasted, to support a production so ‘purely pornographic, positively pedantic, pastiche, unpoetic, with poorly practiced players to boot!’ This line he kept repeating to himself, with occasional revision, thinking himself clever.

On a day he’d designated for relaxation, a charitably adventurous mood had possessed him. He’d gone out on a limb to dress up nicely and watch, alone, a new production of visiting Lescaut at a smaller theatre. What liberties would be taken at the “Fat Crow Revue” he could not anticipate. It advertised itself as “a new ballet,” a progenitor of a “libertine movement,” so he’d fantasised, romantically, how far his twenty-franc fare could take artists’ liberation. What a dream was slaughtered by an hour of its heroine ravished by old dogs, her notes bending and cracking, all witnessed from a seat smack in the middle of other hungry hounds,

all raucous and chortling, their peanut breaths mingling in the air.

What had he wanted? What had he expected? Some Bible to the New Woman's sexual health; some newfound revelations in art and happiness? No—perhaps he felt sorry for that theatre, somewhat off the beaten path of the Straed an Opera, and fancied, for a romantic moment, to feel like a rich patron walking into the poor house. Alas.

By his arrival downriver at Bluebird Dam—or, as true Ysians called it, “the Southbend,” the moon above seemed to hang itself for shame.

Cloying musk drowned the senses. The air, sweeter here than the sterile upriver pomp, tingled with delight. By now, even if he did not mean to stumble upon this district, it was clear he'd made it. Argon lights lit his body aglow. He lingered at the corner a moment, playing at hesitation.

“Painted boy,” cooed a voice from above.

The Observer craned his neck to the sky. He felt, for a distant second, like a dog awaiting command. Here was a damsel grinning from a two-story concrete tower, arms flapping out the window. At least there was no pretense here.

“Sorry,” he shouted back, his voice cracking. The damsel raised a brow. He supposed he should not actually respond.

No matter—he shifted over to *L'Huitre* or The Oyster, his old haunt, a place that marks its territory in Southbend with its sweet croners and a long line of gentlemen by the water. He cut to the front. Soft saxophone drifted out its entrance; the scowling guard hardly glanced at him. “Back of the line,” he said.

The Observer deepened his voice. “I'm a friend of Paul's.”

The bouncer, a twenty-stone strongman, scrutinized him further. His leather gloves, his tweed hat, newsboy proper. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen,” he blundered.

“An' don't you look it.”

“Forgive me,” he began, in a rehearsed phrase for the

occasion. “I've led a childhood of malnourishment.” But now cold discernment traveled along his soft jaw, the flatness of his brow bone, down to his eyes, darting askance. His luck dwindled.

“You one of 'em—orientals?”

“A Nordic,” he lied quickly, and, against his will his fingers began to chill and quake. “But an Ysian, truly, born and raised.”

Before the Observer could denounce himself further, dear Paul came to his rescue, patting the bouncer firm on the arm. The curtain lifted. They descended the stairs.

The Oyster was warm and cavernous, as murky as wine were red, held, in its center, a pearlescent little stage. It mimicked the Opera, where a miniature pit held the miniature band, because no one was really there to see them, and thick velvet curtained the mini-theatre. It inspired nostalgia, in some funny and perhaps perverse way, for already the Observer's heart began to calm. Then Paul presented him with a stool and a too-polite smile. Up sprang the despicable thought that he was being treated like a princess, not even a lordling.

“You're early to your appointment,” was Paul's confirming smart.

Now that his disbelief from earlier events had a moment to settle, he glared down the haughty Paul behind the bar. “Didn't know I needed one, nor that I would be turned away on account of my origin.”

“No one told you to answer him.”

“Ah. Haven't thought of it.”

“I don't condone it, mind you. He's out of line to stir the pot. Never good to ask so many questions.”

“Right,” said he, trying to evoke agreement.

“Yes. And besides, it's hardly any fulfilling business he's bound to find here. All of Ys's the east Londoner bunch, especially downriver. Your Riesling again?”

The hunchback received the poured glass of sweet wine, unasked, unanswered—the right way. No good could be done arguing with Paul. He's tried before—and Paul was impenetrable, a true-born Breton, hard as nails from the cold ocean and Catholic self-belief. Paul's gifts were that he didn't beg for thanks, and that he knew when to cull a conversation going nowhere. He was right. Shutting up was a virtue.

