

LEOPARD AS A NEUTRAL

Never the eggshell, the buff, bisque or oatmeal ways
of saying *beige*. No nude, no cream, the women didn't feign
any ordinary modesty. I watched myself shrink and vanish
in the polish of their thigh-high boots clacking over ice.

Morning class meant leather, loud flowers, and cleavage.
Teachers packed themselves in leopard spandex into dotage.
"Well, what, you don't like our men?" was their question
that wasn't a question, made a comment by flat inflection.

Leah's letters I stashed, rusticated to second virginity,
under a mattress dented with my shape. Wasted secrecy:
No one could read them. Even my interpretation faltered
in that urgent scrawl and photos of her in moody shade.

Once I risked an inch above the knee, a glimpse of gooseflesh.
Olena Ivanovna grabbed my hem, bellowing, "Yes! Progress!"
She rolled her hips, pitching like a ship queasily buoyed,
and at the graduation party, danced with all the teenage boys.

Leah met me in Kiev, hole-pocked as if she'd spent a lifetime
on her knees. I kept up a strenuous, obliging pantomime,
my hand on her arm like a prosthetic. The unabashed signal
of a heart-shaped mirror loomed over the bed in our hotel.

At her expectant looks, I thought of the village station master
who plucked me a rose from someone else's garden, a gesture
from a book for a girl in a book, so I couldn't put it to any use.
I idled in the corolla of her pubic fuzz like a bloated louse.

She photographed me in the bath, my nipples like skin
grown on an old wound. Our days together already aged, as in
the art museum's trippy lights draining us to daguerreotypes
or the musky handful of plums I bought her, overripe.

In the ossuary's auricular dark, a claw rested on yellow silk,
a monk's, his name stitched in glittery Church Slavonic.
The women came to worship with mouths tapering scarlet
above long candles. I was not the right kind of reverent.

Into daylight, we scaled the catacombs past bones in alcoves
clustered in cobwebby skeins as taut as lace gloves.

“I want to ravage you,” Leah had said the night before
to my blurry body floating in the heart mirror. Each spire

of the cathedral bulged, as we hesitated on the threshold,
offering their full-blown curves of molten gold.

I remembered my thin voice opining, “You mean *ravish*.”
The cupolas’ afterimage stained my lids in reproach.

STAR ANISE

Down a dribble of blast furnaces and concrete, I watched
from a bus Kryvih Rih tightening like a fat-choked artery,
never opening to a center, a park. The endless avenue bore
a layer of red dust and the distinction of Europe's longest city,

though this ride felt longer. Even the gypsies didn't wander
but circled through the pastel stations, the women burdened
by their layers of dresses over PJs, while on awkward parcels
their men rolled heavily in sleep. The white travelers turned

with an instinct so swift and pained, they all looked slapped.
On the bus, one thanked me for my change, her smile hollow,
sensing my insincerity. So foreign, I must've reeked of money.
Even my eyes were coins. "Girl," she said, "they're *yellow*."

There was a woman with a Madonna icon in one hand,
her baby in the other, repeating to the depot the same plea
as buses pulled in and out of filthy half-thawed slush.
Both she and the baby looked old. No one met her eye,

save a man disembarking with a boozy lurch, sweating,
swearing, fumbling for a light. He beamed at her in welcome,
like this cul-de-sac of fruit stalls and beer fridges garnered
his own inexhaustible bounty. "Oy, pretty little woman..."

His grown son dragged behind him shiny leather shoes
with an adolescent's chilly remove and bubbling rows of acne.
The girl kept incanting lines out of routine, or self-defense.
"Bread for the kid," the drunk said, but his fistful of money

fluttered away, a pink spray on the asphalt's rough glass,
while ladies clucked behind their persimmons from Crimea.
The man slobbered apologies, his son burning with shame,
and from his knees, asked for her name—Maria.

I'd wanted a city like chambers of a house where the owners
long since died, leaving their skylight's crystal mandala to filter
starlight from a heaven pinned irrevocably in place.
He might have drawn his map up there, the unnamed painter

I used to love, for all the life in his imagined streets
named *Città ideale* because they had no people, or a handful
for decoration. White sails swelled at the end of the avenue
as the populace made for a harbor with even more marble

piled into sharper silhouettes, brawnier monuments.
Left behind to look, maybe I was the ideal city's ideal,
its visitor most susceptible to flattery, how perspective
fanned out from me and the central fountain grew more real

because I had watched it splash from the loggia's shade.
Kryvih Rih didn't bother with ego, each onlooker a cog
down the steady belt of a main drag that teased with arrival,
promising a next new vista on the other side of its smog.

"Where are you from?" the woman on the bus asked me.
When I told her, she said, "We are from India," with relish
for the elsewhere of the name like a winter market's sudden red,
its saffron and its bittersweet, fort-shaped star anise.

TWO ALEXES IN ODESSA

After the banquet of ex-pat boys, Alex pined for local ass. Beached on the Black Sea, he let his chest's furry voluptuousness char, half-listening to me, his vacation fag-hag. I wasn't much fun, dragging my crabs-flaming shanks down leafy streets almost Greek, except not, though men naked as urn wrestlers stared down the surf, flaccid cocks blue as winter plums. From a ragged needle-littered grove, one poked his head out like a doe and motioned to Alex, heady sequel to the spangly club's backroom, labyrinthine as a moist intestine. There, Alex asked a masturbating old man for a smoke. Juggling his goods, the guy passed one with a free hand. I coveted that kindness. At least a sweet, plastered Muscovite shared my blanket, liberal with his gold rings, spray tan, and cherry wine. "Are you Alanis Morissette?" Alexei screamed in my face. "I love your music!" Noon tide pawed his pelvis as he waded in spume, and I a goblin ogled his pert, 20-something ass. He thrust: "Look, I fuck the sea!"

Prone on the couch, I'd crashed last night at Alex's. His pals smirked. Quiet but like a natural, he laughed along in the market at their raunchy jokes about me. By his side, I caught enough Russian to know some languages are universal, like this caustic macho Esperanto. Trailing Alexei, I longed for a kiss without dissembling. Like kissing a unicorn, I knew, but what the hell, I'd be his beard for an hour. Vigorously his burnished limbs pounded waves out to a sandbar where he swiped a handful of clams. He smashed one open with an X-rated smirk. The heart slick and pinkish gray—"Like pussy, yes?"—he slurped it down raw. I joined him, letting its fresh zest lounge on my tongue, salt sharp as the salt of my own sex.

BLACK ORCHIDS

I was the virtuous girl with a flaming skull in her hand,
the night dragging in tatters after a rider in black armor.
The woods around Bogdanivka were named Black,
but leaves like a frumpy overcoat's satin lining had silver

along their undersides, and green glass and condom foil
adorned leafmeal in nacreous scales. I wove in the birches
with the driven cattle lolling doleful, persecuted heads,
sick of the town center and of my body lurching

past its shrewd eyes. Beneath Lenin's gold forehead,
skinny kids with fat faces, as if all suffering allergic episodes,
simpered their greeting with false goodwill: *Zdravstvuyte*.
Hello was impossible. Consonantal as pebbles, words

clattered and faltered against the back of my teeth.
Rouged women guarded the only store's doorway, smirking,
a forbidding pair of lamassu in matching wool vests.
I asked for wine, and added lamely, unnecessarily, *for cooking*.

I wore my femaleness like a thick scent. At the school,
a ten-year-old squeezed my breast and tooted like a horn.
His friend lifted my skirt. They grinned like their fathers,
but when I shouted, they wrinkled up as red as newborns.

Anchorite quiet of a clearing left me alone and unwatched
with thoughts of Leah undressing in her Brooklyn room,
the last I saw her, of pulling her down into deep poppies.
Behind the trees, I watched a knot of men tangle in them,

scrapping out of argument or play or the unbearable need
of men to be touched by each other. They delivered kicks
in work boots to the man hiding his face in the flowers,
with cheerful abandon and in time together, like Rockettes.

A drunk tailed me from those woods, once, screaming,
"Tell me your name, you bitch, you bitch," until the train rails.
Men and/or women, obscured by bulky winter-wear,
peered at us sullenly from the platform. In fairy tales,

a name is a precious commodity, not to be given wantonly,
and the skull from the witch's fencepost streams light
from its eye sockets and burns everyone to ash piles.
Except for a girl in the grass with arrowheads and ammonites,

genius of a place that was rejecting me like a wrong organ.
If I drew near her, she'd have told me serenely to go.
On the glitter-littered floor of a Kiev gay club, I let a girl
(American, not serene) paw and play me like a piganino.

She coaxed me to the street, empty under guttering lamps,
but I shrank from the touch I wanted. She pouted.
Lovely and blond, she looked comfy in her lovely,
blond security. "Jesus, what are you so worried about?"

My worry had pickled me, made me feel seasoned and clever.
When Leah came that summer to visit, I should have softened,
should have welcomed her with a lover's free abundance,
or if not a lover, at least to go unguarded as a friend.

I led her through the woods under clouds of flies for hours,
each refusing to admit we were lost with the polite inertia
that anesthetized our kisses smacking like a pair of aunties',
or that inspired sea captains, icebound in the Arctic,

to stage amateur theatricals and eat on their good china.
In mud dented with illegible, ominous prints and thistle,
we found a road at nightfall. So I wasn't the heroine after all,
but the cold-boned witch who leads her astray in a circle.

The women I love always demand that everything be said.
Better to be cold, to frustrate them with mulish privacy,
than to speak and speak, so that she might at last regard me
in her daylight disappointment, where I am naked and ugly.

In the middle of the Black Woods is a black lake
covered in black orchids, or so a small boy told me on the bus.
The lake also has two bottoms, I heard without knowing
what "two bottoms" means. As in floors of a house?

Or a false bottom, so that with infinite air, a diver could slip

past silt to another lake daylight can't touch? My double wades
in that inverted lake, in white woods beset by white crows,
and in her silvered arms is gathering white orchids.

But how could that be? In all our wandering in the wood,
Leah and I never found the black lake. Maybe there aren't
any orchids there at all, and I simply misunderstood.

VALENTINA'S BIRTHDAY

Souls in the next life are always naked,
if you go by Western art's opulent banquets
of thighs heaped up like tufts of meringue.
Not even naked, really: just nudes wearing fat
proudly like black-market furs and mated
under cherubs with slack cheeks of magistrates.
East, the soul's a creature famished and strange,
all eyes, sexless. Only the alkonosts have breasts,
tucked in clandestinely, guarded by their talons.
In her icon corner, Valentina braves them
by the TV like not quite domesticated pets.
To appease them, she drapes them in linen,
its white emerging from red lozenges and arrows
like early morning through bundles of viburnum
tasting sour and of car exhaust. In her nylons
and sequined bra bristling hooks in rows,
she stitches her red thread well past midnight
and falls asleep, needle in hand and glasses on,
to the antic thrum of pop star competitions.

She pushes together tables in her bedroom
and our neighbors fill them, packed broad bosom
to bosom like the sardines they down as a chaser.
Each delivers a speech in her birthday's honor,
the speeches growing longer, shots frequenter,
the eyes of the women wetter with fond emotion.
A lead-pale man Valentina took pains to invite
stares at his plate as if willing his own erasure,
picking at a roll and a few morsels of caviar.
This mouse passes on vodka and Valentina grins,
delivering to me a stage whisper: "He's a good one!"
He looks like a priest in a Marquis de Sade novel.
The women recite verse with the frank, medieval
bombast of sirens rustling metallic wings
on the arches of St. Sophia's, where the mother
of God tucks in her belt a red-pricked *rushnyck*.
From the apse, she gestures with cool welcome,
as if I were not ugly in her eyes, if not blessed.
Valentina tries to cut the cake but makes a mess,

mashing the frosted flowers past recognition.
“I am a drunk woman,” she sighs, and takes
to bed, tucking her stocking feet shyly under her.

ASHLEY KEYSER

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