

Baudelaire

A Further Forty-One Poems

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To A Creole Lady

In a perfumed land caressed by the sun
I found, beneath the trees' crimson canopy,
palms from which languor pours on one's
eyes, the veiled charms of a Creole lady.

Her hue pale, but warm, a dark-haired enchantress,
she shows in her neck's poise the noblest of manners:
slender and tall, she strides by like a huntress,
tranquil her smile, her eyes full of assurance.

If you travelled, my Lady, to the land of true glory,
the banks of the Seine, or green Loire, a Beauty
worthy of gracing the manors of olden days,

you'd inspire, among arbours' shadowy secrets,
a thousand sonnets in the hearts of the poets,
whom, more than your blacks, your vast eyes would
enslave.

The Litanies of Satan

O you, the most knowing, and loveliest of Angels,
a god fate betrayed, deprived of praises,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

O, Prince of exile to whom wrong has been done,
who, vanquished, always recovers more strongly,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

You who know everything, king of the underworld,
the familiar healer of human distress,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

You who teach even lepers, accursed pariahs,
through love itself the taste for Paradise,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

O you who on Death, your ancient true lover,
engendered Hope – that lunatic charmer!

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

You who grant the condemned that calm, proud look

that damns a whole people crowding the scaffold,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

You who know in what corners of envious countries
a jealous God hid those stones that are precious,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

You whose clear eye knows the deep caches
where, buried, the race of metals slumbers,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

You whose huge hands hide the precipice,
from the sleepwalker on the sky-scraper's cliff,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

You who make magically supple the bones
of the drunkard, out late, who's trampled by horses,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

You who taught us to mix saltpetre with sulphur
to console the frail human being who suffers,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

You who set your mark, o subtle accomplice,
on the forehead of Croesus, the vile and pitiless,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

You who set in the hearts and eyes of young girls
the cult of the wound, adoration of rags,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

The exile's staff, the light of invention,
confessor to those to be hanged, to conspirators,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

Father, adopting those whom God the Father
drove in dark anger from the earthly paradise,

O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

Note: Croesus was the king of Lydia (c560-546BC), famed for his wealth. He was defeated and captured by Cyrus of Persia at the taking of Sardis, and rescued by his conqueror from the pyre. (Herodotus 1.86)

Letter to Sainte-Beuve

On the old oak benches, more shiny and polished
than links of a chain that were, each day, burnished
rubbed by our human flesh, we, still un-bearded,
trailed our ennui, hunched, round-shouldered,
under the four-square heaven of solitude,
where a child drinks study's tart ten-year brew.
It was in those days, outstanding and memorable,
when the teachers, forced to loosen our classical
fetters, yet all still hostile to your rhyming,
succumbed to the pressure of our mad duelling,
and allowed a triumphant, mutinous, pupil
to make Triboulet howl in Latin, at will.
Which of us in those days of pale adolescence
didn't share the weary torpor of confinement,
- eyes lost in the dreary blue of a summer sky
or the snowfall's whiteness, we were dazzled by,
ears pricked, eager, waiting – a pack of hounds
drinking some book's far echo, a riot's sound?

Most of all in summer, that melted the leads,
the walls, high, blackened, filled with dread,
with the scorching heat, or when autumn haze
lit the sky with its one monotonous blaze
and made the screeching falcons fall asleep,
white pigeons' terrors, in their slender keep:
the season of reverie when the Muse clings
through the endless day to some bell that rings:
when Melancholy at noon when all is drowsing
at the corridor's end, chin in hand, dragging –
eyes bluer and darker than Diderot's Nun,
that sad, obscene tale known to everyone,
– her feet weighed down by premature ennui,
her brow from night's moist languor un-free.
– and unhealthy evenings, then, feverish nights,
that make young girls love their bodies outright,
and, sterile pleasure, gaze in their mirrors to see
the ripening fruits of their own nubility: –
Italian evenings of thoughtless lethargy,
when knowledge of false delights is revealed
when sombre Venus, on her high black balcony,
out of cool censers, waves of musk sets free.

In this war of enervating circumstances,
matured by your sonnets, prepared by your stanzas,
one evening, having sensed the soul of your art,
I transported Amaury's story into my heart.
Every mystical void is but two steps away
from doubt. – The potion, drop by drop, day by day,
filtering through me, I, drawn to the abyss since I
was fifteen, who swiftly deciphered René's sigh,
I parched by some strange thirst for the unknown,
within the smallest of arteries, made its home.
I absorbed it all, the perfumes, the miasmas,
the long-vanished memories' sweetest whispers,
the drawn-out tangle of phrases, their symbols,
the rosaries murmuring in mystical madrigals,
– a voluptuous book, if ever one was brewed.

Now, whether I'm deep in some leafy refuge,
or in the sun of a second hemispheres' days,
the eternal swell swaying the ocean waves,
the view of endless horizons always re-born,
draw my heart to the dream divine, once more,
be it in heavy languor of burning summer,
or shivering idleness of early December,
beneath tobacco-smoke clouds, hiding the ceiling,
through the book's subtle mystery, always leafing,
a book so dear to those numb souls whose destiny
has, one and all, stamped them, with that same
malady,
in front of the mirror, I've perfected the cruelty
of the art that, at birth, some demon granted me,
— art of that pain that creates true voluptuousness, —
scratching the wound, to draw blood from my distress.

Poet, is it an insult, or a well-turned compliment?
For regarding you I'm like a lover, to all intent,
faced with a ghost whose gestures are caresses,
with hand, eye of unknown charms, who blesses,
in order to drain one's strength. – All loved beings
are cups of venom one drinks with eyes unseeing,
and the heart that's once transfixed, seduced by pain,
finds death, while still blessing the arrow, every day.

Notes: Baudelaire in 1844 sent this poem to Saint-Beuve, whose novel *Volupté* has Amaury as its hero. Triboulet (c1479-1536), was the court jester of Louis XII, and Francois 1st, who inspired a scene in Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Diderot was the author of *La Religieuse*, Chateaubriand of *René*.

Elevation

High over the ponds, high over the vales,
the mountains, clouds, woods and meres,
beyond the sun, beyond the ethereal veils,
beyond the confines of the starry spheres,

you ride, my spirit, ride with agility,
swooning with joy, at the wave, strong swimmer
and take your ineffable masculine pleasure,
cutting through that endless immensity.

Fly far away from this deathly miasma:
go, purify yourself in the upper air,
and drink like a pure and divine liquor,
what fills limpid space, that lucid fire.

Behind him the boredoms, the vast distress,
that imposes its weight on fog-bound beings,
happy the man, who on vigorous wings
mounts towards fields, serene and luminous!

He whose thoughts, like larks, go soaring,
flying freely towards dawn air, -
who glides above life: grasps, easily, there,
the language of flowers and silent Things!

The Snake That Dances

How I love to watch, dear indolence,
like a bright shimmer,
of fabric, the skin of your elegant
body glimmer!

Over the bitter-tasting perfume,
the depths of your hair,
odorous, restless spume,
blue, and brown, waves, there,

like a vessel that stirs, awake
when dawn winds rise,
my dreaming soul sets sail
for those distant skies.

Your eyes where nothing's revealed
either acrid or sweet,
are two cold jewels where steel
and gold both meet.

Seeing your rhythmic advance,
your fine abandon,
one might speak of a snake that danced
at the end of the branch it's on.

Under its burden of languidness,
your head's child-like slant,

rocks with weak listlessness
like a young elephant's,

and your body heels and stretches
like some trim vessel
that rocking from side to side, plunges
its yards in the swell.

As when the groaning glacier's thaw
fills the flowing stream,
so when your mouth's juices pour
to the tip of your teeth,

I fancy I'm drinking overpowering, bitter,
Bohemian wine,
that over my heart will scatter
its stars, a liquid sky!

‘Je t’adore à l’égal de la voûte nocturne’

I adore you, the nocturnal vault’s likeness,
o vast taciturnity, o vase of sadness:
I love you, my beauty, the more you flee,
grace of my nights, the more you seem,
to multiply distances, ah ironically,
that bar my arms from the blue immensity.

I advance to the attack, climb to the assault
like a swarm of worms attacking a corpse,
and I cherish, o creature cruel, and implacable,
your coldness that makes you, for me, more beautiful!

A Rotting Carcase

My soul, do you remember the object we saw
on what was a fine summer's day:
at the path's far corner, a shameful corpse
on the gravel-bed, darkly lay,

legs in the air, like a lecherous woman,
burning and oozing with poisons,
revealing, with nonchalance, cynicism,
the belly ripe with its exhalations.

The sun shone down on that rot and mould,
as if to grill it completely,
and render to Nature a hundredfold
what she'd once joined so sweetly:

and the sky gazed at that noble carcass,
like a flower, now blossoming.
The stench was so great, that there, on the grass,
you almost considered fainting.

The flies buzzed away on its putrid belly,
from which black battalions slid,
larvae, that flowed in thickening liquid
the length of those seething shreds.

All of the thing rose and fell like a wave,
surging and glittering:

you'd have said the corpse, swollen with vague
breath, multiplied, was living.

And that 'world' gave off a strange music,
like the wind, or the flowing river,
or the grain, tossed and turned with a rhythmic
motion, by the winnower.

Its shape was vanishing, no more than a dream,
a slowly-formed rough sketch
on forgotten canvas, the artist's gleam
of memory alone perfects.

From behind the rocks a restless bitch
glared with an angry eye,
judging the right moment to snatch
some morsel she'd passed by.

- And yet you too will resemble that ordure,
that terrible corruption,
star of my eyes, sun of my nature,
my angel, and my passion!

Yes! Such you'll become, o queen of grace,
after the final sacraments,
when you go under the flowering grass
to rot among the skeletons.

O my beauty! Tell the worms, then, as

with kisses they eat you away,
how I preserved the form, divine essence
of my loves in their decay !

The Head of Hair

O fleece, billowing down to the shoulders!
O curls! O perfume charged with languor!
Ecstasy! To populate love's dark alcove,
With memories sleeping tonight in your hair,
I'd wave it, like a handkerchief, in the air!

Languid Asia and burning Africa,
absent worlds, far-off, almost dead,
live in your forest-depths of aromas!
As music floats other spirits away,
mine, my love, sails your fragrance instead.

I'll go where, full of sap, trees and men,
Swoon endlessly in that ardent climate:
Thick tresses, be my tide! You contain,
O sea of ebony, the dazzling dream,
of masts, flames, sails, and oarsmen:

an echoing port where my soul's a drinker
of sound, colour, scent in rolling waves:
where vessels, gliding through silk and amber,
open wide their arms to clasp the splendour
of a pure sky quivering with eternal day.

I'll plunge my head, in love with drunkenness,
in this dark ocean which encloses the other:
and my subtle spirit the breakers caress

will know how to find you, fertile indolence!
Infinite lullaby, full of the balm of leisure!

Hair of blue, that hangs like a shadowy tent,
you bring me the round, immense sky's azure:
in your plaited tresses' feathery descent
I grow fervently drunk with the mingled scent
of coconut-oil, of musk, and coal-tar.

Now! Always! My hand in your heavy mane sowing
jewels, the sapphire, the pearl, and the ruby,
so that you'll not remain deaf to my longing!
Oasis of dream, the gourd where I'm drinking,
of you, long draughts of the wine of memory?

The Flawed Bell

It's bitter, yet sweet, on wintry nights,
near to the fire that crackles and fumes,
listening while, far-off, slow memories rise
to echoing chimes that ring through the gloom.

Lucky indeed, the loud-tongued bell
still hale and hearty despite its age,
repeating its pious call, true and well,
like an old trooper in the sentry's cage!

My soul is flawed: when, at boredom's sigh,
it would fill the chill night air with its cry,
it often happens that its voice, enfeebled,

thickens like a wounded man's death-rattle
by a lake of blood, vast heaps of the dying,
who ends, without moving, despite his trying.

The Owls

Among the black yews, their shelter,
the owls are ranged in a row,
like alien deities, the glow,
of their red eyes pierces. They ponder.

They perch there without moving,
till that melancholy moment
when quenching the falling sun,
the shadows are growing.

Their stance teaches the wise
to fear, in this world of ours,
all tumult, and all movement:

Mankind drunk on brief shadows
always incurs a punishment
for his longing to stir, and go.

Wandering Gypsies

The prophetic tribe with burning eyes
yesterday took to the highway, carrying
children slung on their backs, or offering
proud hunger the breast's ever-ripe prize.

The men go on foot, with shining weapons,
by the carts where their folk huddle together,
sweeping the heavens, eyes grown heavier
with mournful regret for absent visions.

The cricket, deep in his sandy retreat,
redoubles his call, on seeing their passing feet:
Cybele, who loves them, re-leafs the glades,

makes the rocks gush, the desert bloom,
before these voyagers, thrown wide to whom
is the intimate kingdom of future shades.

Note: Cybele was the Phrygian great goddess,
personifying the earth in its savage state,
worshipped in caves and on mountaintops.

Bad Luck

To roll the rock you fought
takes your courage, Sisyphus!
No matter what effort from us,
Art is long, and Time is short.

Far from the grave of celebrity,
my heart, like a muffled drum,
taps out its funereal thrum
towards some lonely cemetery.

- Many a long-buried gem
sleeps in shadowy oblivion
far from pickaxes and drills:

in profound solitude set,
many a flower, with regret,
its sweet perfume spills.

Music

Music, like an ocean, often carries me away!
Through the ether far,
or under a canopy of mist, I set sail
for my pale star.

Breasting the waves, my lungs swollen
like a ship's canvas,
night veils from me the long rollers,
I ride their backs:

I sense all a suffering vessel's passions
vibrating within me:
while fair winds or the storm's convulsions

on the immense deep
cradle me. Or else flat calm, vast mirror there
of my despair!

Evening Twilight

Here's the criminal's friend, delightful evening:
come like an accomplice, with a wolf's loping:
slowly the sky's vast vault hides each feature,
and restless man becomes a savage creature.

Evening, sweet evening, desired by him who can say
without his arms proving him a liar: 'Today
we've worked!' – It refreshes, this evening hour,
those spirits that savage miseries devour,
the dedicated scholar with heavy head,
the bowed workman stumbling home to bed.
Yet now unhealthy demons rise again
clumsily, in the air, like busy men,
beat against sheds and arches in their flight.
And among the wind-tormented gas-lights
Prostitution switches on through the streets
opening her passageways like an ant-heap:
weaving her secret tunnels everywhere,
like an enemy planning a coup, she's there
burrowing into the wombs of the city's mires,
like a worm stealing from Man what it desires.
Here, there, you catch the kitchens' whistles,
the orchestras' droning, the theatres' yells,
low dives where gambling's all the pleasure,
filling with whores, and crooks, their partners,
and the thieves who show no respite or mercy,
will soon be setting to work, as they tenderly,

they too, toil at forcing safes and doorways,
to live, clothe their girls, for a few more days.

Collect yourself, my soul, at this grave hour,
and close your ears to the rising howl.
It's now that the pains of the sick increase!
Dark Night clasps them by the throat: they reach
their journey's end, the common pit's abandon:
the hospital fills with their sighs. – Many a one,
will never return to their warm soup by the fire,
by the hearth, at evening, next to their heart's desire.

And besides the majority have never known
never having lived, the gentleness of home!

Morning Twilight

Reveille was sounding on barrack-squares,
and the wind of dawn blew on lighted stairs.

It was the hour when a swarm of evil visions
torments swarthy adolescents, when pillows hum:
when, a bloodshot eye, throbbing and quivering,
the lamp makes a reddened stain on the morning:
when the soul, by dull sour body, bowed down,
enacts the struggle between lamp and dawn.
Like a tearful face that the breeze wipes dry,
the air's filled with the *frisson* of things that fly,
and man is tired of writing, woman with loving.

The chimneys, here and there, began smoking.
The women of pleasure, with their bleary eyes,
and gaping mouths, were sleeping stupefied:
poor old women, with chilled and meagre breasts,
blew the embers, then fingers, roused from rest.
It was the hour, when frozen, with money scarcer,
the pains of women in childbirth grew fiercer:
and like a sob cut short by a surge of blood
a cock-crow far away broke through the fog:
a sea of mist bathed the buildings, dying men,
in the depths of the workhouse, groaned again
emitting their death-rattles in ragged breaths.
Debauchees, tired by their efforts, headed for rest.

Shivering dawn in a robe of pink and green
made her way slowly along the deserted Seine,
and sombre Paris, eyes rubbed and watering,
groped for its tools, an old man, labouring.

The Invitation to the Voyage (Prose Poem)

There's a magnificent land, a land of Cockaigne, they say, that I've dreamed of visiting with a dear mistress. A unique land, drowned in our Northern mists, that you might call the Orient of the West, the China of Europe, so freely is warm and capricious Fantasy expressed there, so patiently and thoroughly has she adorned it with learned and luxuriant plants.

A true land of Cockaigne, where all is lovely, rich, tranquil, honest: where luxury delights in reflecting itself as order: where life is full and sweet to breathe: from which disorder, turbulence, the unforeseen are banished: where happiness is married to silence: where the cooking itself is poetic, both rich and exciting: where everything resembles you, my sweet angel.

Do you know that fevered malady that seizes us in our cold misery, that nostalgia for an unknown land, that anguish of curiosity? There's a country you resemble, where everything is lovely, tranquil and honest, where Fantasy has built and adorned a western China, where life is sweet to breathe, where happiness is married to silence. There we must go and live, there we must go to die!

Yes, there we must go to breathe, dream, prolong the hours with an infinity of sensations. Some

musician has composed *The Invitation to the Waltz*: who shall compose *The Invitation to the Voyage*, one can offer to the beloved, the sister of their choice?

Yes, it would be good to be alive in that atmosphere, - there where the hours that pass more slowly contain more thought, where the clocks chime happiness with a deeper, more significant solemnity.

On shining wall-panels, on walls lined with gilded leather, of sombre richness, blissful paintings live discreetly, calm and deep as the souls of the artists who created them. The sunsets that colour the dining-room, the salon, so richly, are softened by fine fabrics, or those high latticed windows divided in sections by leading. The furniture, vast, curious, bizarre, is armed with locks and secrets like refined souls. The mirrors, metals, fabrics, plate and ceramics play a mute, mysterious symphony for the eyes: and from every object, every corner, the gaps in the drawers, the folds of fabric, a unique perfume escapes: the call of Sumatra, that is like the soul of the apartment.

A true land of Cockaigne, I tell you, where all is rich, clean and bright like a clear conscience, like a splendid battery of kitchenware, like magnificent jewellery, like a multi-coloured gem! The treasures of the world enrich it, as in the home of some hard-working man, who's deserved well of the whole world. A unique land, superior to others, as art is to Nature, re-shaped here by dream, corrected, adorned, remade.

Let them search and search again, tirelessly extending the frontiers of their happiness, those alchemists of the gardener's art! Let them offer sixty, a hundred thousand florins reward to whoever realises their ambitious projects! I though, have found my *black tulip*, my *blue dahlia*!

Incomparable bloom, tulip re-found, allegorical dahlia, it is there, is it not, to that beautiful land so calm and full of dreams, that you must go to live and flower? Would you not be surrounded by your own analogue, could you not mirror yourself, to speak as the mystics do, in your own *correspondence*?

Dreams! Always dreams! And the more aspiring and fastidious the soul, the more its dreams exceed the possible. Every man has within him his dose of natural opium, endlessly secreted and renewed, and how many hours do we count, from birth to death, that are filled with positive pleasure, by successful deliberate action? Shall we ever truly live, ever enter this picture my mind has painted, this picture that resembles you?

Those treasures, items of furniture, that luxury, order, those perfumes, miraculous flowers, are you. They are you also, those great rivers and tranquil canals. Those huge ships they carry charged with riches, from which rise monotonous sailors chants, those are my thoughts that sleep or glide over your breast. You conduct them gently towards that sea, the Infinite, while reflecting the depths of the sky in your sweet soul's clarity: - and when, wearied by the swell, gorged with Oriental wares, they re-enter their home port, they are my thoughts still, enriched, returning from the Infinite to you.

The Irreparable

Can we stifle the old, long-lived Remorse,
that lives, writhes, heaves,
feeds on us, like a worm on a corpse,
like oak-gall on the oak-trees?
Can we stifle the old, long-lived Remorse?

In what potion, in what wine, in what brew,
shall we drown this old enemy.
greedy, destructive as a prostitute,
ant-like always filled with tenacity?
In what potion? – In what wine? – In what brew?

Tell us, lovely witch, oh, tell us, if you know,
tell the spirit filled with anguish
as if dying crushed by the wounded, oh,
crumpled beneath the horses,
tell us, lovely witch, oh, tell us, if you know,

tell the one in agony the wolf's already scented
whom the raven now surveys,
tell the shattered soldier! Say, if he's intended
to despair of cross and grave:
poor soul in agony the wolf's already scented!

Can we illuminate a black and muddied sky?
can we pierce the shadowy evening,
denser than pitch, with neither day or night,

star-less, with no funereal lightning?
Can we illuminate a black and muddied sky?

The Hope that shone in the Tavern window
is quenched, is dead forever!
How to find without sunlight, without moon-glow,
for the foul road's martyrs, ah, shelter!
The Devil's quenched all in the Tavern window!

Adorable witch, do you love the damned?
Say, do you know the unforgivable?
Do you understand Remorse, its poisoned hand,
for which our heart serves as target?
Adorable witch, do you love the damned?

The Irreparable, with its accursed tooth bites
at our soul, this pitiful monument,
and often gnaws away like a termite,
below the foundations of the battlement.
The Irreparable, with its accursed tooth, bites!

- Sometimes on the boards of a cheap stage
lit up by the sonorous orchestra,
I've seen a fairy kindling miraculous day,
in the infernal sky above her:
sometimes on the boards of a cheap stage,

a being, who is nothing but light, gold, gauze,
flooring the enormous Satan:
but my heart, that no ecstasy ever saw,
is a stage where ever and again
one awaits in vain the Being with wings of gauze!

The Poison

Wine can clothe the most sordid hole
in miraculous luxury,
and let many a fabulous portico float free
in the gold of its red glow,
like a setting sun in the sky's cloudy sea.

Opium expands things without boundaries,
extends the limitless,
makes time profounder, deepens voluptuousness,
fills the soul beyond its capacities,
with the pleasures of gloom and of darkness.

None of that equals the poison that flows
from your eyes, your eyes of green,
lakes where, mirrored, my trembling soul is seen...
my dreams come flocking, a host,
to quench their thirst in the bitter stream.

None of that equals the dreadful marvel though
of your saliva's venom,
that plunges my soul, remorseless, into oblivion,
and causing vertigo,
rolls it swooning towards the shores of doom!

The Cat

I

A fine cat prowls about in my brain,
as if in his own apartment,
he's charming, gentle, confident,
when he mews you have to strain

to hear the discreet and tender tone:
whether it soothes or scolds its sound
is always rich, always profound.
It's his secret charm, and his alone.

This voice which purls and filters
to the darkest depths of my being
swells in me like verse multiplying
and delights me like a magic philtre.

It comprehends all ecstasy,
calms my cruellest suffering:
and has no need of words to sing
the longest sentences to me.

No, there's no bow that gliding
over my heart's pure instrument,
could make its most sensitive string
deliver more noble tidings,

than your voice, which as
in an angel, cat of mystery,
seraphic, extraordinary,
is as subtle as it's harmonious!

II

From its light-brownish fur, such
a sweet perfume gathers,
I was scented by it after
stroking it once, one touch.

It's the room's familiar spirit:
it judges, presides, inspires,
all things within its empire:
a god perhaps, a faery is it?

When my eyes are obediently
drawn to this cat I love,
like a magnet, and I look
into myself profoundly,

I see with pure amazement
the fire of his pale pupils,
bright lamps, living opals,
fixed on me, in contemplation.

Monologue

You are a lovely autumn sky, rose-clear!
But sadness is flowing in me like the sea,
And leaves on my sullen lip, as it disappears,
of its bitter slime the painful memory.

- Your hand glides over my numb breast in vain:
what it seeks, dear friend, is a place made raw
by woman's ferocious fang and claw, refrain:
seek this heart, the wild beasts tear, no more.

My heart is a palace defiled by the rabble,
they drink, and murder, and clutch each other's hair!
- About your naked throat a perfume hovers!...

O Beauty, harsh scourge of souls, this is your care!
With your eyes of fire, dazzling as at our feasts,
Burn these scraps to ashes, spared by the beasts!

Autumn Song

I

Soon we'll plunge into the bitter shadows:
Goodbye bright sunlit summers, all too short!
Already I can hear the gloomy blows:
the wood reverberates in some paved court.

Winter once more will enter in my being: anger,
shuddering, horror, hate, forced labour's shock,
like the sun in its deep hell, northern, polar,
my heart no more than a red, frozen block.

Trembling, I hear every log that falls:
building a scaffold makes no duller echoes.
My spirit's like a shattered tower, its walls
split by the battering ram's slow tireless blows.

Rocked by monotonous thuds, I feel it's done,
a coffin's being nailed in haste somewhere.
For whom? – Yesterday summer, now autumn!
The mysterious noise rings of departure there.

II

I love the greenish light of your almond eyes,
gentle beauty, but all's bitter to me today,
and nothing, your love, the boudoir, your fire,
matches the sun, for me, glittering on the waves.

Yet tender heart, love me still! Be like a mother
however ungrateful, however unworthy I am:
be the short-lived sweetness, sister or lover,
of a glorious autumn or the setting sun.

Short task! The grave waits: it is greedy!
Ah, let me rest my forehead on your knees,
regretting summer, white and torrid, let me
enjoy the late season's gentle yellow rays!

Autumn Sonnet

Your eyes, clear as crystal, ask me: 'Strange lover,
what do I mean to you?' - Hush, and be charming!
My heart, irritated by all but the one thing,
the primitive creature's absolute candour,

is unwilling to show its infernal secret to you,
cradler whose hand invites to deep slumber,
and its black inscription written in fire,
I hate passion, the spirit sickens me too!

Let us love gently. Love in hiding, discreet,
in shadowy ambush, bends his fatal bow.
The weapons of his ancient arsenal I know:

Crime, horror, madness! – My pale marguerite!
are you not, as I am, an autumn sun though,
O my so white, my so cold Marguerite?

To She Who Is Too Light-hearted

Your head, your gesture, your air,
are lovely, like a lovely landscape:
laughter's alive, in your face,
a fresh breeze in a clear atmosphere.

The dour passer-by you brush past there,
is dazzled by health in flight,
flashing like a brilliant light
from your arms and shoulders.

The resounding colours
with which you sprinkle your dress,
inspire the spirits of poets
with thoughts of dancing flowers.

Those wild clothes are the emblem
of your brightly-hued mind:
madcap by whom I'm terrified,
I hate you, and love you, the same!

Sometimes in a lovely garden
where I trailed my listlessness,
I've felt the sunlight sear my breast
like some ironic weapon:

and Spring's green presence
brought such humiliation

I've levied retribution on
a flower, for Nature's insolence.

So through some night, when the hour
of sensual pleasure sounds,
I'd like to slink, mute coward, bound
for your body's treasure,

to bruise your sorry breast,
to punish your joyful flesh,
form in your startled side, a fresh
wound's yawning depth,

and – breath-taking rapture! –
through those lips, new and full
more vivid and more beautiful
infuse my venom, my sister!

Reversibility

Angel of joyfulness, do you know anguish,
shame, remorse, sobbing, despondency,
those dreadful nights of vague anxiety,
when, like crumpled paper, the heart's crushed?
Angel of joyfulness, do you know anguish,

Angel of goodness, do you know hatred,
fists clenched in the darkness, tears of gall,
when vengeance taps out its infernal call,
and takes control of thoughts in the head?
Angel of goodness, do you know hatred?

Angel of health, do you know the fevers,
that, the length of the dingy workhouse wall,
like exiles, dragging their feet along, all
moving their lips, seek absent summers?
Angel of health, do you know the fevers?

Angel of beauty, do you know those furrows,
and fears of old-age, and the hideous torture
of reading devotion's intimate horror,
in eyes where for years our greedy eyes burrowed?
Angel of beauty, do you know those furrows?

Angel of happiness, of joy's bright flares,
King David would have found life, near the tomb,
in your enchanted body's perfume:

but, angel, all I ask of you is your prayers,
Angel of happiness, of joy's bright flares!

Note: The servants of King David, sought for a young virgin to warm him in his old age, because he could get no heat. See The First Book of Kings 1-4.

Confession

Once, once only, sweet and lovable woman,
you leant your smooth arm on mine
(that memory has never faded a moment
from the shadowy depths of my mind):

it was late: the full moon spread its light
like a freshly minted disc,
and like a river, the solemnity of night
flowed over sleeping Paris.

Along the houses, under carriage gates,
cats crept past furtively,
ears pricked, or else like familiar shades,
accompanied us slowly.

Suddenly, in our easy intimacy,
that flower of the pale light,
from you, rich, sonorous instrument, eternally
quivering gaily, bright,

from you, clear and joyous as a fanfare
in the glittering dawn
a strange, plaintive sigh escaped
a faltering tone

as from some stunted child, detestable, sullen, foul,
whose family in shame

hide it for years, to conceal it from the world
in the cellar's dark cave.

My poor angel, that harsh voice of yours cried:
'That nothing on earth is certain,
and however carefully it's disguised,
human selfishness rips the curtain:

it's a hard life being a lovely woman,
it's the banal occupation
of a cold, crazed dancer who summons
the mechanical smile's occasion:

it's stupid to build on the mortal heart:
everything shatters, love and beauty,
till Oblivion hurls them into its cart,
and returns them to Eternity!'

I've often recalled that enchanted silence,
its moon, and its languor: all
of that dreadful whispered confidence
in the heart's confessional.

Harmony of Evening

Now those days arrive when, stem throbbing,
each flower sheds its fragrance like a censer:
sounds and scents twine in the evening air:
languorous dizziness, Melancholy dancing!

Each flower sheds its fragrance like a censer:
the violin quivers, a heart that's suffering:
languorous dizziness, Melancholy dancing!
the sky is lovely, sad like a huge altar.

The violin quivers, a heart that's suffering:
a heart, hating the vast black void, so tender!
the sky is lovely, sad like a huge altar:
the sun is drowned, in its own blood congealing.

A heart, hating the vast black void, so tender:
each trace of the luminous past it's gathering!
The sun is drowned, in its own blood congealing...
A vessel of the host, your memory shines there.

To the Reader

Stupidity and error, avarice and vice,
possess our spirits, batten on our flesh,
we feed that fond remorse, our guest,
like ragged beggars nourishing their lice.

Our sins are mulish, our repentance vain:
we make certain our confessions pay,
we'll happily retrace the muddied way,
thinking vile tears will wash away the stain.

Satan Trismegistes rocks the bewitched
Mind, endlessly, on evil's pillow, till,
all the precious metal of our will's
vaporised by that knowing alchemist.

The Devil pulls the strings that make us move!
We take delight in such disgusting things:
one step nearer Hell each new day brings
us, void of horror, to the stinking gloom.

We clutch at furtive pleasure as we pass,
like the debauchee whose lips are pressed
to some antique whore's battered breast,
squeezing the rotten orange that we grasp.

Packed, and seething like a million worms,

a host of Demons riot in our brains,
and when we breathe, invisibly, Death drains
into our lungs, stream full of silent groans.

If poison, arson, knives, base desire,
haven't yet embroidered deft designs
on the dull canvas of our pitiful lives
it's only, alas, because our souls lack fire.

Among the jackals, bitches, panthers,
monkeys, scorpions, serpents, vultures,
that screech, howl, grunt, and crawl, ogres,
in the vile menagerie of our errors,

there's one of uglier, nastier, fouler birth!
Without one wild gesture, one savage yell,
it would willingly send this world to hell,
and in one great yawn swallow up the earth:

it's Boredom! –in its eye's an involuntary tear,
dreaming of scaffolds, as it smokes its *hookah*,
You know it, Reader, that fastidious monster,
hypocrite, Reader, – my brother, – and my peer!

Note: Trismegistes. Baudelaire here fuses the persons of Satan and Hermes Trismegistes (or Trismegistus). The works of Hermes Trismegistes (The Thrice Great), known as the *Corpus Hermeticum* were believed during the Renaissance to be Egyptian but were later attributed to Hellenistic writers of the second century A.D, writing in the style of Plotinus. The *Corpus Hermeticum* takes the form of dialogues between

Trismegistus, Thoth, and several other Egyptian deities, including Isis. Little in the text is original. Much of the Hermetic world view is grounded in the philosophy of Plato. Hermetics saw the universe in terms of light and dark, good and evil, spirit and matter. Like their Gnostic contemporaries, practitioners preached mind-body dualism and salvation through the possession of true and divine knowledge.

The Enemy

My youth was only a threatening storm,
pierced here and there by glowing heat:
my garden scarcely let a ripe fruit form,
the thunderous rain's destruction is complete.

Now I've reached the autumn of ideas,
I must needs labour with rake and spade,
to reclaim afresh the inundated meres,
where pits were scooped as deep as graves.

Who knows whether the flowers I dream
will find in soil, washed by the salt-stream,
the mystic manna that will give them vigour?

– O Sadness! Sadness! Time eats at our lives,
the unseen Enemy drinks, that gnaws our
heart, our wasted blood, digs in, and thrives!

Mist and Rain

Late autumns, winters, spring-times steeped in mud,
anaesthetizing seasons! You I praise, and love
for so enveloping my heart and brain
in vaporous shrouds, in sepulchres of rain.

In this vast landscape where chill south winds play,
where long nights hoarsen the shrill weather-vane,
it opens wide its raven's wings, my soul,
freer than in times of mild renewal.

Nothing's sweeter to my heart, full of sorrows,
on which the hoar-frost fell in some past time,
O pallid seasons, queens of our clime,

than the changeless look of your pale shadows,
- except, two by two, to lay our grief to rest
in some moonless night, on a perilous bed.

The Game

Old courtesans in washed-out armchairs,
pale, eyebrows blacked, eyes 'tender', 'fatal',
simpering still, and from their skinny ears
loosing their waterfalls of stone and metal:

Round the green baize, faces without lips,
lips without blood, jaws without the rest,
clawed fingers that the hellish fever grips,
fumbling an empty pocket, heaving breast:

below soiled ceilings, rows of pallid lights,
and huge candelabras shed their glimmer,
across the brooding brows of famous poets:
here it's their blood and sweat they squander:

this the dark tableau of nocturnal dream
my clairvoyant eye once watched unfold.
In an angle of that silent lair, I leaned
hard on my elbows, envious, mute, and cold,

yes, envying that crew's tenacious passion,
the graveyard gaiety of those old whores,
all bravely trafficking to my face, this one
her looks, that one his family honour,

heart scared of envying many a character
fervently rushing at the wide abyss,

drunk on their own blood, who'd still prefer
torment to death, and hell to nothingness!

The Seven Old Men

À Victor Hugo

Ant-like city, city full of dreams,
where the passer-by, at dawn, meets the spectre!
Mysteries everywhere are the sap that streams
through the narrow veins of this giant ogre.

One morning, when, on the dreary street,
the buildings all seemed heightened, cold
a swollen river's banks carved out to greet,
(their stage-set mirroring an actor's soul),

the dirty yellow fog that flooded space,
arguing with my already weary soul,
steeling my nerves like a hero, I paced
suburbs shaken by the carts' drum-roll.

Suddenly, an old man in rags, their yellow
mirroring the colour of the rain-filled sky,
whose looks alone prompted alms to flow,
except for the evil glittering of his eye,

appeared. You'd have thought his eyeballs
steeped in gall: his gaze intensified the cold,
and his long beard, as rigid as a sword,
was jutting out like Judas's of old.

He was not bent but broken, his spine
made a sharp right angle with his legs,
so that the stick, perfecting his line,
gave him the awkward shape and step

of three-legged usurer, or sick quadruped.
Wading through snow and mud he went
as if, under his feet, he crushed the dead,
hostile to the world, not just indifferent.

Then his double: beard, eyes, rags, stick, back,
no trait distinguished his centenarian twin:
they marched in step, two ghosts of the Baroque,
sprung from one hell, towards some unknown end.

Was I the butt of some infamous game,
some evil chance, aimed at humiliation?
Since minute by minute, I counted seven,
of that sinister old man's multiplication!

Whoever smiles at my anxiety,
and balks at shivering, the un-fraternal,
consider then, despite their senility,
those seven vile monsters looked eternal!

Could I have lived to see an eighth: yet one
more ironic, fatal, inexorable replication,
loathsome Phoenix, his own father and son?
- I turned my back on that hell-bent procession.

Exasperated, a drunk that sees things doubled,
I stumbled home, slammed the door, terrified,
sick, depressed, mind feverish and troubled,
wounded by mystery, the absurd, outside!

In vain my reason tried to take command,
its efforts useless in the tempest's roar,
my soul, a mastless barge, danced, and danced,
over some monstrous sea without a shore!

The Digging Skeleton

I

In the anatomical plates
displayed on the dusty quays
where many a dry book sleeps
mummified, as in ancient days,

drawings to which the gravity
and skill of some past artist,
despite the gloomy subject
have communicated beauty,

you'll see, and it renders those
gruesome mysteries more complete,
flayed men, and skeletons posed,
farm-hands, digging the soil at their feet.

II

Peasants, dour and resigned,
convicts pressed from the grave,
what's the strange harvest, say,
for which you hack the ground,

bending your backbones there,
flexing each fleshless sinew,
what farmer's barn must you
labour to fill with such care?

Do you seek to show – by that pure,
and terrible, emblem of too hard
a fate! – that even in the bone-yard
the promised sleep's far from sure:

that even the Void's a traitor:
that even Death tells us lies,
that in some land new to our eyes,
we must, perhaps, alas, forever,

and ever, and ever, eternally,
wield there the heavy spade,
scrape the dull earth, its blade
beneath our naked, bleeding feet?

Parisian Dream

À Constantine Guys

I

The vague and distant image
of this landscape, so terrifying,
on which no mortal's gazed
thrilled me again this morning.

Sleep is full of miracles!
By a singular caprice
from that unfolding spectacle
I'd banned all shapeless leaf,

a painter proud of my artistry
I savoured in my picture
the enchanting monotony
of metal, marble, water.

Babel of stairs and arcades,
it was an infinite palace
full of pools and cascades,
falling gold, burnt, or lustreless:

and heavy cataracts there
like curtains of crystal,

dazzling, hung in air
from walls of metal.

Not trees, but colonnades
circled the sleeping pools
where colossal naiads gazed
at themselves, as women do.

Between banks of rose and green,
the blue water stretched,
for millions of leagues
to the universe's edge:

there were un-heard of stones,
and magic waves: there were,
dazzled by everything shown,
enormous quivering mirrors!

Impassive and taciturn,
Ganges, in the firmament,
poured treasures from the urn
into abysses of diamond.

Architect of this spell,
I made a tame ocean swell
entirely at my will,
through a jewelled tunnel:

and all, seemed glossy, clear
iridescent: even the shades
of black, liquid glory there
in light's crystallised rays.

Not a single star, no trace
of a sun even, low in the sky,
to illuminate this wondrous place
that shone with intrinsic fire!

And over these shifting wonders
hovered (oh dreadful novelty!
All for the eye, none for the ear!)
the silence of eternity.

II

Opening eyes filled with flame
I saw the horrors of my hovel,
and felt the barbs of shameful
care, re-entering my soul:

brutally with gloomy blows
the clock struck mid-day,
and the sky poured shadows
on a world, benumbed and grey.

The Inquisitive Man's Dream

Á Nadar

Do you know, as I do, delicious sadness
and make others say of you: 'Strange man!'
- I was dying. In my soul, singular illness,
desire and horror were mingled as one:

anguish and living hope, no factious bile.
The more the fatal sand ran out, the more
acute, delicious my torment: my heart entire
was tearing itself away from the world I saw.

I was like a child eager for the spectacle,
hating the curtain as one hates an obstacle...
at last the truth was chillingly revealed:

I'd died without surprise, dreadful morning
enveloped me. – Was this all there was to see?
The curtain had risen, and I was still waiting.

Sympathetic Horror

‘From that sky livid, bizarre
as your tortured destiny,
what thoughts fill your empty heart,
Freethinker, answer me.’

- Insatiable and avid
for vague and obscure skies,
I’ll not groan like Ovid,
banned from Rome and paradise.

Skies, shores split and seamed,
my pride’s mirrored in you:
your clouds in mourning, too,

are the hearses of my dreams,
Hell’s reflected in your light,
where my heart takes delight.

The Alchemy of Sadness

One man lights you with his ardour
one decks you in mourning, Nature!
What says to the first: 'A Sepulchre!'
To the other cries: 'Life and splendour!'

Unknown Hermes, who assists,
yet intimidates me as well,
you make me Midas' equal,
the saddest of alchemists:

You help me change gold to iron,
paradise to hell's kingdom:
in the shrouded atmosphere

I find a dear corpse, and on
the celestial shores, it's there,
I build a mighty sepulchre.

Notes: Hermes was the mercurial Greek messenger god, spirit of alchemy, and as Hermes Trismegistes a source of wisdom. Midas was offered a gift by the god Bacchus, and asked to turn everything to gold. Bacchus reversed the dreadful results, at Midas' request.

Draft Epilogue for the Second Edition of Les
Fleurs du mal

Tranquil as a sage and gentle as one who's
cursed....I said:

I love you, oh my beauty, my charmer...
many a time...

your debauches without thirst, your soul-less loves,
your longing for the infinite
which proclaims itself everywhere, even in evil,

your bombs, knives, victory marches, public feasts,
your melancholy suburbs,
your furnished rooms,
your gardens full of sighs and intrigue,
your churches vomiting prayer as music,
your childish despairs, mad hags' games,
your discouragements:

and your fireworks, eruptions of joy,
that make the dumb and gloomy sky smile.
Your venerable vice dressed in silk,
and laughable virtue, with sad gaze,
gentle, delighting in the luxury it shows.

Your saved principles and flouted laws,
your proud monuments on which mists catch,
your metal domes the sun inflames,
your theatrical queens with seductive voices,

your tocsins, cannon, deafening orchestra,
your magic cobbles heaped as barricades,

your petty orators' swollen rhetoric,
preaching love, while your sewers run with blood,
rushing towards Hell like the Orinoco's flood,

your angels, your fresh clowns in ancient rags.

Angels dressed in gold, purple and hyacinth,
O you, bear witness that I've discharged my task,
like a perfect alchemist like a sainted soul.

From every thing I've extracted the quintessence,
you gave me your mud and I've turned it into gold.

The Voice

I was the height of a folio, my bed just
backed on the bookcases' sombre Babel,
everything, Latin ashes, Greek dust
jumbled together: novel, science, fable.

Two voices spoke to me. One, firmly, slyly,
said: 'The Earth's a cake filled with sweetness:
I can give you (and your pleasure will be
endless!) an appetite of comparable vastness.'

The other said: 'Come! Come voyage in dream,
beyond the known, beyond the possible!'
And that one sang like the ocean breeze,
phantom, from who knows where, its wail

caressing the ear, and yet still frightening.
You I answered: 'Yes! Gentle voice!' My
wound and what, I'd call my fatality, begins
alas, from then. From behind the scenery

of vast existence, in voids without light,
I see the strangest worlds distinctly:
ecstatic victim of my second sight,
snakes follow me striking at my feet.

Since then, like the prophets, I greet
the desert and the sea with tenderness:

I laugh at funerals, I cry at feasts,
wine tastes smooth that's full of bitterness:

and, eyes on the sky, I fall into holes,
and frequently I take facts for lies.
But 'Keep your dreams!' the Voice consoles,
'Madmen have sweeter ones than the wise!'

The Warner

Every man worth the name
has a yellow snake in his soul,
seated as on a throne, saying
if he cries: 'I want to!': 'No!'

Lock eyes with the fixed gaze
of Nixies or Satyresses, says
the Tooth: 'Think of your duty!'

Make children, or plant trees,
polish verses, or marble frieze,
the Tooth says: 'Tonight, where will you be?'

Whatever he likes to consider
there's never a moment passing
a man can't hear the warning
of that insufferable Viper.

The Lid

Whatever place he goes, on land or sea,
under a sky on fire, or a polar sun,
servant of Jesus, follower of Cytherea,
shadowy beggar, or Croesus the glittering one,

city-dweller or rustic, traveller or sedentary,
whether his tiny brain works fast or slow,
everywhere man knows the terror of mystery,
and with a trembling eye looks high or low.

Above, the Sky! That burial vault that stifles,
a ceiling lit for a comic opera, blind walls,
where each actor treads a blood-drenched stage:

Freethinkers' fear, the hermit sets his hope on:
the Sky! The black lid of the giant cauldron,
under which we vast, invisible Beings rage.

The Sunset of Romanticism

How beautiful a new sun is when it rises,
flashing out its greeting, like an explosion!
- Happy, whoever hails with sweet emotion
its descent, nobler than a dream, to our eyes!

I remember! I've seen all, flower, furrow, fountain,
swoon beneath its look, like a throbbing heart...
- Let's run quickly, it's late, towards the horizon,
to catch at least one slanting ray as it departs!

But I pursue the vanishing God in vain:
irresistible Night establishes its sway,
full of shudders, black, dismal, cold:

an odour of the tomb floats in the shadow,
at the swamp's edge, feet faltering I go,
bruising damp slugs, and unexpected toads.

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