

SARAH SHUN-LIEN BYNUM

*From* Madeleine is Sleeping

**hush**

Hush, mother says. Madeleine is sleeping. She is so beautiful when she sleeps, I do not want to wake her.

The small sisters and brothers creep about the bed, their gestures of silence becoming magnified and languorous, fingers floating to pursed lips, tip toes rising and descending as if weightless. Circling about her bed, their frantic activity slows; they are like tiny insects suspended in sap, kicking dreamily before they crystallize into amber. Together they inhale softly and the room fills with one endless exhalation of breath: Shhhhhhhhhhhhh.

## **madeleine dreams**

A grotesquely fat woman lives in the farthest corner of the village. Her name is Matilde. When she walks to market, she must gather up her fat just as another woman gathers up her skirts, daintily pinching it between her fingers and hooking it over her wrists. Matilde's fat moves about her gracefully, sighing and rustling with her every gesture. She walks as if enveloped by a dense storm cloud, from which the real, sylph-like Matilde is waiting to emerge, blinding as a sunbeam.

### **mme. cochon**

On market day, children linger in their doorways. They hide tight, bulging fists behind their backs and underneath their aprons. When Matilde sweeps by, trailing her luxurious rolls of fat behind her, the children shower her. They fling bits of lard, the buttery residue scraped from inside a mother's churn, the gristle from Sunday dinner's lamb. The small fistfuls have grown warm and slippery from the children's kneading, and the air is rich with a comforting, slightly rancid smell.

Madame Cochon, are you hungry? they whisper as she glides by.

Matilde thinks she hears curiosity in their voices. She smiles mildly as she continues on, dodging the dogs that have run out onto the street, snuffling at the scraps. It feels, somehow, like a parade. It feels like a celebration.

## **surprise**

Once, as Matilde made her way through the falling fat, she was startled by a peculiar, but not unpleasant throb, which originated in her left shoulder but soon travelled clockwise to the three other corners of her broad back. She wondered if the children were now hurling soup bones, and made an effort to move more swiftly, but suddenly the joyous barrage slowed to a halt. The children stood absolutely still, lips parted, yellow butter dripping onto their shoes. They stared at her with a curiosity Matilde did not recognize.

Hearing a restless fluttering behind her, she twisted about and glimpsed the frayed edges of an iridescent wing. With great caution, she flexed her meaty shoulder blades and to her delight, the wing flapped gaily in response. Matilde had, indeed, fledged two pairs of flimsy wings, the lower pair, folded sleekly about the base of her spine, serving as auxiliary to the grander ones above.

## **flight**

Leaping clumsily, all four wings flapping, her fat, like sandbags, threatening to ground her, Matilde greets the air with arms spread wide open. A puff of wind lifts the hem of her skirts, seems to tickle her feet, and Matilde demands, Up, up, up! With a groan, the wind harnesses Matilde's impressive buttocks and dangles her above the cobblestones, above the hungry dogs, above the dirty children with fat melting in their fists.

## **stirring**

Madeleine stirs in her sleep.

## **hush**

When Madeleine sleeps, Mother says, the cows give double their milk. Pansies sprout up between the floorboards. Your father loves me, but I remain slender and childless. I can hear the tumult of pears and apples falling from the trees like rain.

Smooth your sister's coverlet. Arrange her hair on the pillowcase. Be silent as saints. We do not wish to wake her.

## **madeleine dreams**

On dark mornings, when the church still lay in shadow, Saint Michel looked absent-minded, forlorn, penned in by the lead panes that outlined the sad slope of his jaw. She thought him by far the most heartbreaking of the saints, and occasionally longed to squeeze the long, waxen fingers that were pressed together so impassibly as they pointed towards heaven.

He had been a prince once, whose appetite was such that he could never quite keep his mouth closed. In defiance of medieval conventions, even his portraits attest to his hunger: his lips are always ajar, teeth wetly bared, as if about to bite into his tenants' capons or cheeses or one of their firm daughters. In his castle's feasting hall, he liked to stage elaborate tableaux vivants, resurrecting the classical friezes he had seen in his travels, himself always cast as the hero or the young god, a bevy of peasant girls enlisted as dryads, pheasants and rank trout imitating eagles and dolphins. Imagine the depravity, the priest whispers: meaty women with nipples as large and purple as plums, birds molting, dead fish suspended from the rafters, and rising in the midst of them all, the achingly glorious Michel, oblivious to the chaos surrounding him. His vanity was unmatched!

## **penitence**

And then a plague struck, a drought descended, and Michel found God.

While outside his castle walls the pestilence raged, Michel was struck by the face of the crucified Lord, preserved in a primitive icon that hung beneath the stairs. His fair face had been obliterated by tears and blood; His perfect body was desiccated and dotted with flies. Wracked by self-reproach, the prince vowed to destroy his own beauty; he surrendered himself and his lands to the monastery at Rievaulx, where he spent the rest of his days inflicting torture upon himself.

He suffered through flagellations, hair shirts, and fasting while the Abbot meticulously chronicled his decline: Prince Michel can barely leave his pallet; his flesh has fallen away; repeated flaying has reopened and infected old wounds; his sackcloth has spawned monstrous lesions about his groin. It was as Michel wished. When he finally expired, his face was contorted in anguish, his loveliness effaced by tears and blood. The Abbot washed the ravaged body and laid it upon its bier, but by morning the saint had been miraculously restored to perfection, his body whole and sound, his face flawless and somber. This is the Saint Michel depicted in the cathedral window. Even the devout find it difficult to remember the suffering he endured.

I should have loved him more, she thought, if he had remained mutilated.

## **recognition**

On a Sunday in summer, a blade of empyreal light illuminated his once melancholy face and she instantly recognized it as her own. Why, it's me, she said to herself, without wonder. I have been looking at myself all along.

And the face was no longer lengthened in sorrow, but bright and fluid with color. She stood up from her family's pew and walked towards the stained glass, her eyes locked with her own. At the altar, she pivoted on her toes and faced the congregation. Look upon me, she said.

Stepping down from the altar, she approached a stout man sitting in the front pew, the collection plate balanced on his knees, and she touched his chest, with all the tenderness in the world. His stiff Sunday vest peeled away like an orange rind, and she grazed her fingertips against the polished, orderly bones of his rib cage. Beneath, she found a curled and pulsing bud, and when she blew on it, it began to unfurl its sanguine petals, one by one. His heart unfolded before her.

She worked her way down each pew, gently touching and blowing as she went, and when she looked around she noticed, with pleasure, that the small flowers she had uncovered were of a heliotropic variety; their delicate heads nodded to her wherever she went, following her movements like those of the sun.

## **animals**

The small, pliant siblings heed Mother's bidding. Among the morning chores is the task that gives them most delight. First, you must sweep the walkway. After that, you must kiss grandmother's forehead. You must also lug empty pails to where Papa is milking. Only then are you entrusted with Mother's heirloom, a hand mirror whose face you hold out to the morning air like a butterfly net, catching the chill in midflight.

Madeleine is as still as a mummy, but when they hold the mirror beneath her nose, ghostly shapes appear on its cold surface. The children shove to see the results. A rabbit! Madeleine exhales again: an anteater! A menagerie of vaporous animals escapes from her nostrils and instantly disappears: the mirror records and erases in the same moment. Jean-Luc captures a whale. Claude, a pregnant sow. Beatrice says that she sees only cows.

Do not worry, Maman. Madeleine is still sleeping.

## **she dreams**

When M. Marais ordered a new viol, he requested that the instrument's head be fashioned after the face of his neighbor's youngest daughter, Charlotte. She sat diligently before the master craftsman as he whittled away her likeness, until M. Marais was pleased with the result and announced the portrait complete.

With the beautiful viol nestled between his thighs, he drew the bow across the strings.

It is as if you were singing, he told the girl. This is how I imagine your voice.

That is not me, Charlotte declared. That is only my face. I think I will name her Griselda.

From then on, whenever she heard the moan of the viol, Charlotte would trot next door and say hello to her face. Allo, Griselda! she would exclaim, putting M. Marais terribly out of sorts.

## **the marriage**

As soon as Charlotte was confirmed, M. Marais visited her father and asked for her hand in marriage. Although the father argued persuasively in favor of Charlotte's several older sisters, praising one's graceful figure, another's delicate needlework, another's splendid hair, the acclaimed musician would accept none other than Charlotte herself. So the father relinquished her, ruefully, for she was his favorite and he had hoped to spend his old age watching her bloom into womanhood.

## **consummation**

At the nuptial hour, the servants passed through Charlotte as if she were a shade, a ghostly emanation of her corporeal groom. For the ceremony, attended only by the master craftsman and her regretful father, she had been dressed in filmy white. She had reflected, like the moon, M. Marais's bulky and brilliant mass of figured silks, brocades, velvets, rocaille lace. Now, wandering alone through the corridors, she stopped a scullery maid and begged directions to the bridal chamber.

The oaken door sighed like the entrance to a vault.

Quick, quick! These garters are insufferable!

Through the crack, she could see a naked sliver of M. Marais, flanked by two menservants he was swatting about the head. It's me, Charlotte, she announced through the opening. How strange it sounded finally to say it.

The musician shrieked and clutched himself, girlishly modest, trying to conceal both his breasts and his groin. Go away! he exclaimed, like a woman shooing hens. Go away this instant!

Charlotte hurriedly shut the door and skittered back a few paces: she imagined that she should feel relief but instead was experiencing a peculiar sense of disappointment. Glancing down, she saw the gaping keyhole. It winked at her, wisely, like a friend. Charlotte knelt, and looked inside.

The keyhole was like a telescope, unfolding before her the lush landscape of M. Marais's body. She spied his mossy buttocks, their dark and moist ravine; his nipples peeking out from his breasts, like two rosy cherubs in a cumulus cloud. The menservants had stripped him down to an exoskeleton of garters and restraints, but the more clothes he shed, the less naked he seemed, as if his flesh, freed from its constricting network of laces and stays, could finally embrace him in all its splendor. He stroked his voluptuous stomach and then settled himself, purring, onto the enormous bed. It groaned rapturously beneath him.

Unseen, Charlotte's bright brown eye flickered in the keyhole, wet with pity and desire, guttering like a candle.

## **her wish**

Cloistered in M. Marais's estate, Charlotte grew lonely and wistful and depended more and more upon the companionship of her face, Griselda. When the violist took his afternoon nap, Charlotte would steal into his practice rooms and carefully lay the instrument down on its back. Stretching out beside it, she would slide her hands up and down the supine viol, delighting in its smooth expanses and the seven strings that hovered tautly down its spine. As she traced the fingers of her right hand up and down the viol's strings, she would, with her left hand, mirror the same movement along her own body, trailing her fingernails from her chin to her mons.

I wish, she said to Griselda, that I had strings too.

## **hirsute**

As the lonely days passed, Charlotte silently watched her body sprout resilient black hairs. At first it seemed as if only her brush of pubic hair had run amok, scaling up her stomach like a vine, but one morning, while reading an epistolary novel, she rested a bristling chin on her palm and realized that Griselda was granting her secret wish. By that evening, a dense, furry trail was already creeping up her décolletage.

M. Marais, squinting across the lengthy dinner table, was dismayed.

## **inscription**

The musician methodically withdrew the carving knife from where it burrowed in the turkey's haunches, which sputtered in protest as he pulled it out. Rising with a sigh, he trundled down the length of the dinner table and the room seemed to quiver with his seismic grace. The knife dripped fowl juices onto the tiles, leaving a trail of congealed fat as if M. Marais, like Hansel lost in the woods, might need to find his way back to his seat. Charlotte panted softly. My husband will slice me open, she told herself. And she imagined two identical wounds—the f-holes, the chiseled curves out of which the viol cries—inscribed in her own torso, curling up from her pelvic bones like a sly smile. Her network of organs and intestines would be pinkly exposed, like the wonderful wax anatomical woman she had seen last year at the fair. Charlotte's fingers began to scrabble at her laces.

She could smell M. Marais as he drew nearer—the fermenting scent of the enormously fat—and she bared her stomach, resplendent with black and horse-like hairs. But when her husband seized her, he gripped only her chin, tilting it in the air, maneuvering her head this way and that, and eyed her with the patience of a portraitist. Then the carving knife scraped down her gullet, and she watched as the shorn hair fell into her lap, plummeting in quick, sad clumps like lead-filled pigeons from the sky.

## **relic**

After dinner, the musician retired and Charlotte, as was her habit, sneaked into Griselda's chambers. The lovely viol languished by the windowsill, and Charlotte crept up on her from behind, her silver sewing scissors glinting in the starlight. When she snipped the lowest string, it protested plaintively, but as she severed one after another, the twanging grew hysterical and shrill. Forgive me, Charlotte wept, winding each newly cut string around her wrist. I only want a memento.

She shed her filmy gown and rent it into shreds, which she spun into a filament as fine and strong as gossamer. And she lowered herself, spider-like, down the estate wall, with Griselda braced against the open window to anchor her. When her feet tickled the shrubbery, she looked up once more at the shorn viol, then she fled into the night, stark naked and stubbled.

## **fruit**

Papa grows impatient with the fruit that litters his orchard. The air assumes the rich rot of a winery; he complains that breathing alone will make him drunk. In the evening the children wander home, bloated and sticky, but still they cannot eat the pears as quickly as they fall. The local birds, too, are so fat with apple that they can barely reach their roosts at night, and when darkness falls, the orchard floor bubbles as the sated birds make listless, halfhearted efforts at flight.

## **preserves**

Mother decides on tarts and preserves. She hugs a cast iron cauldron to her belly and tells her children to feed its hungry gape.

There will be apple butter for daily use. Fine pear jelly for holidays. Tartes aux pommes for neighbors who have been unusually kind.

## **stirring**

Madeleine stirs in her sleep.

## **she dreams**

Marguerite sings the hero. In Venice and in Mantua. Breasts tamed by wide strips of muslin, a dulled sword rubbing warmly against her gams, she inspires in the composer his most fearsome arias. The tortured Radamisto, spying his wife's fine white hand as it disappears beneath the currents. Sextus, hot with youth and vengeance, pleading with the shade of his murdered father. And brave blustering Tauris, defiant Tauris, the general who alone dares Theseus to battle. She sings them in Bologna and Reggio, in Milan, Parma, Naples, Florence. In London and in Versailles. She is adulated. George I and the Princess Royal stand godparents, by proxy, to the daughter who had strained, unforgiving, against the buttons of Tauris's starched uniform.

Marguerite is the primo uomo. She is the leading man.

## **impostor**

Until the arrival of an impostor whose very unnaturalness makes him all the more irresistible. Senesino, the celebrated castrato. A curious aberration. Even an abomination. Indeed, he is illegal: against the law of God. How wicked that Rome, the fulcrum of excommunication, should be the home of the castrati. The city hides them away in its bowels, together with the whores and the Protestants, but if tenacious, one will find several there. In the Conservatories they lie upstairs, by themselves, in warmer compartments than the other boys, for fear of colds. Influenzas. Inflammations. In the smallest hours of the night, the masters comb the sleeping quarters. A tender foot, which has twitched free from the bed linens, shadowkicking in dreamy repetition the demonic barn cat it remembers from home: this hot, tender foot is coveted, tucked jealously back beneath the counterpane. An acute sensitivity to boyish sniffles makes the conservatory staff anxious and high-strung. Colds might not only render the fragile voices unfit at present, but hazard the entire loss of them forever. And what a loss. These are the voices of angels.

## **surgery**

The composer discovered Senesino in the company of the Duke of Wurtemberg, whose retinue includes twenty ballet dancers, three trained monkeys, a small string orchestra, fifteen castrati, and two surgeons from Bologna. The two treat their operation with the strictest professionalism: they wield their instruments only on the condition that the young subject has been tried as to the probability of the voice. The boy muffled, the heady reek of ether, the surgeon delicately sweating and brava! The vas deferens is severed. Nothing now will touch the resonant high C; the vein is closed down, like a mine. Senesino's mother, it is rumored, keeps the dainty pair pickled in a tiny clay pot.

The boy ages into a fleshy and strangely hairless man.

## **menses**

Once dethroned, Marguerite is bitter.

A vocal absurdity, she sniffs. He is nothing but a caged nightingale!

But the composer remains unmoved. He has made his decision The dark-hued female alto, fragrant and soiled, is not the voice of a hero. But Senesino! Such purity. Such extraordinary range. Lily-white, crystalline, without stain.

The stain, Marguerite grumbles, of my menstrual blood.

## **adieu**

As she bids her farewells from the stage, Marguerite curtsies to the gelding. She reprises a couplet that a poet of great celebrity has penned for the occasion:

*But let old charmers yield to new;  
Happy soil, adieu! adieu!*

The audience murmurs at her pretty sportsmanship. They crane to examine the castrato, who is perched in the composers private box, shielding his smile with a gloved and demure hand. He whispers in the composer's ear, promising, Together we will delight them.

The composer, prompted, flatters the castrato, but he is interrupted: My timbre is flawless, yes. But it is the cruelty of my condition that will afford them such unbearable pleasures.

Marguerite, suddenly immodest, makes a rude gesture from the stage. She grabs her genitals lovingly. She flicks her hand from beneath her chin. Her wrist snaps in the air with wonderful elasticity.

## **success**

Mother is flushed with business. Her preserves fetch an admirable price. Visitors arrive from long distances, grown ravenous and dissatisfied from the stories they have heard. I will not be happy, a dying girl says, if I cannot taste those heavenly preserves. In the city, Mother is told, the rich have made a habit of spreading it on their morning rolls.

Mother is always distracted, floured, clotted with fruit meat. She bobs up from her cauldron, dabs her upper lip and asks the small children: Is Madeleine too hot?

They flank the bed and roll up their sleeves as they have seen the midwife do. Small hands press expertly against her throat, her cheeks, her eyelids. Madeleine is snowy beneath their fingertips. But is she perhaps a little warm right here, by her left temple? We had better feel once more. To be safe.

## **prince**

A handsome man appears at the door, wearing a bristling moustache. He is not craving preserves. He is asking for Madeleine.

Claude says, She is sleeping.

The handsome man answers, I have come to awaken her.

Claude asks, How are you going to do that?

I am going to kiss her mouth.

Wait a minute.

Claude shuts the door.

## **princess**

Mother's fingers twitch as she makes her calculations. Into the tub they bathe in on Saturdays, she stirs enough ingredients for one hundred tarts. Four sacks of flour, a winter's worth of lard. Begrudgingly, a fistful of salt.

Mother kneads the face. Jean-Luc, the legs. Beatrice dimples the torso. And Mimi, the youngest, shapes the two lush arms.

Her body grows golden with an egg yolk glaze.

Papa's woolen nightcap goes on last.

Suddenly, Mother remembers. She conceals the hands beneath the coverlet.

## **kiss**

She is perfect, the handsome man says. More perfect than I ever imagined.

He turns to Mother and plunges into a gallant bow: May I?

Mother says, proudly, If you would.

He shoos the brothers and sisters away from the bed and smoothes back his hair, moving with the grace and determination of a maestro. He is nearly overcome with the warmth and fragrance rising from Madeleine's body and pauses, suspended over her, savoring the moment. He imagines how he will describe it, sitting by the hearth, to their flock of children.

He descends for the kiss. It is loud and ardent.

Crouched over, he waits for the blissful response, the two unresisting lips that will succumb and then, hungrily, lunge for more. Crumbs speckle his bristling moustache. Simmering preserves fart in Mother's cauldron. The handsome man waits, stiff as a statue. He discovers that he has developed a cramp in his side.

## **gift**

The handsome man is crestfallen.

Mother sends him home with a pot of preserves. She refuses his money. It's a gift, she insists.

## **stirring**

As a reward for their bravery and cunning, Mother gives the small children delicious bits of the princess's body. They are eaten with enormous appetite.

The brothers and sisters, prickling with crumbs, are allowed to tumble, gluttoned, into Madeleine's bed. They nuzzle against her and sigh, tucked into the warm pockets of her body. Madeleine stirs in her sleep. She smiles. Mother watches her and wonders, Is she amused by what she dreams?

From *Madeleine is Sleeping*, Harcourt, 2007

---