

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/3

Helena Minton

Questions for Mr. Darwin, 1874

from Girl with Greyhound, Variations on the Life and Work of French Impressionist Painter, Berthe Morisot, 1841-1895

"I am reading Darwin...it is scarcely reading for a woman, even less for a girl..." Berthe Morisot, from a letter, 1874

The tortoise entered my dream last night
with his creeping gait...

I read gentlemen ride them like horses.
Could I paint such a creature
or climb on its mud-green back?

With colored pencil I sketch
brown sparrow on my front step,
caged blue parrot, my yellow love birds.

Could I sit beside you, Mr. Darwin, with my aquarelles,
steal from your scientist's eye,
as you draw, in black ink, your trembling finches,

a multitude of beaks, feathers, wings
across the page in a line
so subtle I can't identify the changes.

On Isabella Island, white sea birds
pant in the noon heat-I see their tongues-
and in the shallows around the boulders

coral spreads its alizarin crimson fan
like the sun rising underwater.

Could its rays touch

our Paris grays
in a world turned upside down?

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The Abandoned Book

Mallarme has told us he will
create a book to be opened
from any angle and read
like a poem we can enter
from any line, a painting we can turn
upside down, see the image as if reflected,
examined from any distance,
a volume to be called
The Lacquered Drawer,
each artist-friend assigned
a poem of his to illustrate.
His lines leave us flabbergasted,
bouiversé. Not hurt,
he is puzzled that we
can't grasp his verses' clarity.

Mine is "White Waterlily,"
depart with it; steal silently away,
rowing, little by little...
I make a study, arbres roux:
my tree trunks in the Bois de Boulogne
thin as waterlily stems
disappear in the lake
as if viewed through the surface,
my first rough try at a drypoint.
I am pleased to hear it admired

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by Monet, who knows to look at the world
as though it were a watery
mirror, never the real,
waterlily mad like all of us,
giving in to an urge for floating
pointed petals offered up.

A reader will not locate the book
on any shelf.

Only Renoir completes his work,
an etching, *Woman of Yesteryear*,
the other pages lost
adrift in history,

our dear Mallarme's idea barely under way...

He can't help it if we
set down our brushes
our pictures half-rendered.

He counts on our smiles.
"The ideal flower in a bouquet,"
he says, "is always
the one that's missing."

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“We all die with our secret.” (Berthe Morisot, in her journal) 1895

*The Harbor at Lorient, Hide and Seek,
View of Paris from the Trocadaro,
saying the names of my paintings
helps me to sleep...*

Mother, daughter, wife,
I lay down my weapon, my palette,

the secret self I've lived with
slowly drained of color
like ashes from a love note
crushed in my locket.

Give me a moment
in my favorite morning light at Bougival,
opening the shutters in the house at Le Mesnil,

what they tell me I was best at, painting
just after waking, dew on the grass, the hours stretching ahead.

Or something shade and color can't give shape to,
just out of reach, a sound beyond earshot, footsteps disappearing
down a corridor in the house on the Rue Franklin.

Whose hands on the worn piano keys
picking out a pianissimo, the notes floating
around the corner, gone?

Somewhere I wanted to go something I wanted
to do something I did or did not do
expires as I do this afternoon;

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my disappointments closing up
lose their splendid magenta
like the weeks-old amaryllis on the windowsill.

Julie, hurry, a whisper
about the day, the very day...