

Stigmata  
Escaping texts

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## 11 Shared at dawn

*Translated by Keith Cohen*

We search in vain for quiescence. My cat and I.

The house is full of remnants, it imprisons us in its memory of sorrows – they are on the entryway carpet, on the floors, in the corners of the living room, in the kitchen right up to the sink; they stop there, then they start off again toward the balcony, and there, stuck for eternity, between the eleventh and twelfth banister: minuscule, powerful claws caught in the little squares of lattice-work. In vain we return there. Everything is there still, the strong smell like an unforgettable name, phantom vision; it's as if I saw you, I see it again, we see it. The whole house is now a mausoleum. Thea has found resignation but not quiescence. Resignation is an exhaustion of the heart. By dint of rubbing her heart against the banisters, she finally reaches the exhaustion of hope. Then, in the pitiable comfort of fatigue, she collapses on her bed of paper, possessed by the sorrowful specter, her body flattened, her paws opened wide and unfurled like wings.

It all started at dawn. It was gray and bitter at six o'clock. I saw it as I was leaning against the morning window: a large black dead leaf caught in the lattice-work of the balcony, upright, its round head inert, its beak sunken in, its body obliterated – on second look I felt the force of this black inertia to be heavier, bulkier than that of a leaf, and then I saw: caught there by the network's fine invisible pincers was a sort of bird stuck upright in the spaces. Oh no, I wished I hadn't seen it. And now what should I do? Now I was trapped in the vision of that immobile thing in my lattice-work. Horrified. A dark, maddening dialogue started between me looking at the thing and its threatening strangeness. For it had thrown me instantaneously into a state of irresolution. What unimaginable accident might have precipitated this presence which, as it

was dying, wouldn't let go of the lattice-work, as if, dying, it had refused with its last movement to fall into the void? And it had gotten its body stuck, with a kind of buoyancy, in between heaven and earth and death and demolition. Where did this apparition fall from? What might have crushed it? Another bird? A lightning bolt? And it stopped, for no reason, in the midst of its fall. For my torment. On my balcony. For now I had this big, heavy, somber thing, the size of my hand, caught in my breast like a ghoulish broach. And I thought of Thea. The problem was as follows: I had to get rid of the dead body before the cat had the chance of catching sight of it. Otherwise, the cat would naturally want to make its acquaintance and then . . . ; but as the bird was clinging to the outside of the lattice-work, Thea would want to pass over it, and that must not happen. From behind the window I couldn't possibly imagine myself making the thing go away – its claws would be hardened, and I was going to have to struggle with death. My hands turned dry and cold up to the shoulder – I said no.

So I thought, I'm going to ask my daughter who's sleeping, but no use, for I know that it's the mother who is supposed to struggle with death. And I couldn't, I can't. So I tried to make myself think. But my hands weren't willing. There was this mystery of horrified refusal in the skin of my fingers, *I am not capable* of touching the dead body, what's impossible is the touch, the tangibility of death. There I was holding the impossible in my hands, the impossible caught by invisible little black claws. So I thought, I'm going to ask my mother, at nine o'clock I'll phone her up and, as I know, she'll say show me, and she'll do it, the mid-wife, without the slightest apprehension or phobia. But afterwards, I'll be ashamed – forever – before death, and that will be serious right up to the end, I will have lost something necessary to life, and will I still be able to assert that I'm your mother?

I also thought of my love, since he would be coming that afternoon, but I didn't dare distress him with this, for I believe my love suffers from the same phantasmal afflictions as I do, even though he's a man and I'm a woman, before death our hands grow dry the same way. And also I wouldn't want to scare him with my fear. Meanwhile an hour has gone by, and here's Thea posted on the table in sphinx posture not knowing if I know the answer to the riddle, and I can no longer get off the hook. Now I've got to answer. There's no backing away.

So I think of gloves, the rubber gloves that are in the bathroom, I'll go get them, I hunt, but they've disappeared because I didn't need them. But then I think of my leather gloves.

Now was the moment to bring my daughter in on this. Instead of waking my daughter with the luminous smile as every morning for so

many years – I couldn't help myself – I blurted out the phrase quickly like something that was burning me; I said: I have a problem; she let out a little cry of alarm. And I told her it's a dead bird. It was in this way that I placed on my daughter, whom I love like myself, a little burden of affliction. Now you're the one who's suffering. But I can re-group and go into battle.

Concerning the dead body, I have the feeling of being violently attacked. Everything is aiming at me: stability, solidity, the creature must have spent the night lying in wait for me, nothing could make it let go, not even a storm, and death gives it a monstrous force, stands up to us, knowing no time, no fatigue. What it inflicts on me is the strangeness of the other side. Faced with a dead creature, there's nothing we can do, right? Which is stronger? Then I think of a stick, what a relief. I'm going to go get the bamboo stick. It won't be me, it'll be this wooden thing that will push up against that ferocious little black breast and press harder and harder until the thing snaps and falls. I go into the living room, gloves in place, the stick pointing out, and now, without trembling, I open wide the French doors and move forward, going resolutely in front of my daughter who is trembling on my behalf.

That's when the cat pounced. And what do I see? The creature is not on the other side of the lattice-work, it's on this side. Clinging, stiff, bulky – the stick is useless against it. I'll take it with the gloves then. But Thea turns it into her own serious business. Oh I can't separate those two without getting cruel. The cat sucks in her breath, mildly astonished. Me too, I can't figure out why the presence of this specter seems even more uncanny inside than out. And then.

Things start happening fast, at Thea's pace. She takes the thing in her mouth, the wings open out – she does all this effortlessly – and she brings it over and puts it down on the carpet. Death is now inside the house. It lies on its stomach, wings slightly opened, head scarcely discernible, eyes lifeless, the size of peppercorns. Uncertainty, astonishment, mourning fill Thea. Three times she walks around the body. She's not sure. Is it dead or alive, the thing doesn't answer. Then Thea moans softly. So I'll never get to meet you alive? Ah, my friend, another missed encounter, she rubs up gently against my knees and we both carry out a gentle, uncertain mourning, for now that the creature is lying down and no longer a fright up against the banisters, it elicits sorrow and compassion. We both add a dash of pity. Though the mistrustful Thea delivers a sharp blow to the body. To make sure. The bird is dead. Its two wings lift and fall back down. It's worse. If there is still a breath, some remnant, a memory, reflex. Thea: uncertain. The experiment starts over. No response. I go to get some newspapers. Because we're not going

to spend any time with a corpse in here. It's bad for the living. But I don't want to rattle Thea, I let her suck in her breath and turn around, moaning tenderly. She mourns the one she never knew. It's a moment of communion.

It's not good to remain living for long with a dead body. Now is the moment when we must close up the grave book. Now is the time for burial. We are going to bury it in the garbage pail, says my silent thought, and there is a hint of vengeance in its violence. I delicately spread a piece of newspaper over the little body, for once it *was* alive. Wait, says the cat, one more good-bye. And she lifts the newspaper without violence. Now is the moment for the bird to pass over into nothingness. Say I. But I don't dare go ahead of the cat. For I recognize the rights animals have among themselves.

When at last I think that it's my duty to put an end to the story, with a rapid gesture I seize the thing. At that moment the thing springs away from death. And it rises a few inches, then lifting off flies around the room. I'm left not knowing what to expect. Thea takes off. It's a miracle. Now she is given the unexpected chance to fight. What's going to happen? Is she going to kill the bird in the living room, in the kitchen, in the bathroom, draw blood on my bed and wipe it on the carpet, on the tiles? Fortunately my daughter, my better half, is my witness, for otherwise the devil would have made off with me. But she is there, bent over, the same wind blowing the same panic across our faces.

What's in your heart? Submission to horror: we were dragged from our beds early so we could be party to a little assassination. Your horror gives me the force I'd be lacking if I were alone.

An instinct coming over me makes me throw myself at the bird, quickly I grab the wings as I would a chicken, I don't want something to die in my house, where am I going to throw it, I run to the window, instinct guiding me, we're on the balcony, instinct, the wings, the dead creature darts forward in a burst of flight and makes it all at once to the other side of the city. It's not what I wanted.

In the house it's a tragedy; Thea my dear one my love runs all over Egypt land picking up traces, all the little fragmentary odors and events, goes back over a hundred times where she's been, where the creature was, gathers together everything, but the essential is missing – the main event, the magic morsel without which life will never return to the disseminated god, the bird is missing, she cries, she digs her claws into her fine face, she digs into my guilty heart, in vain she tries every sort of animal magic, letting out shrill entreaties in the corner of the kitchen, beseeching the carpet, running sobbing to the banisters, raising the eyes of a supplicant to the deserted lattice-work, hoping beyond hope,

scanning from end to end the guileless sky; the entire world has stolen her love away, and no one is giving it back to her. Ah, in vain she cries, and I too utter a great cry in secret. My daughter my sister my love, what sorrow the sorrow I caused you causes me!

And why all that?

Instinct! That cursed human instinct, that nastiness, that phobia, ah what wicked cowardice is lurking in my bones, and now I understand why Moses didn't receive anything from God up there. That human prohibition was in his bones. Thou shalt not kill in my home. That fear of defilement. No, it has nothing to do with morality. It was in my bones and before I knew it, I threw that thing that was moving into the air, because I didn't want any blood on my bed. What impurity, my god who will ever forgive me?

Knocked out, exhausted, shunned by that self-respect that forms the abandoned prop of our soul, my daughter and I lean heavily on the breakfast table and do not eat.

The cat's sorrow is that of a mother who can't find her baby in the house any more, it drives us crazy, all the orphan mothers spring from our flesh raising cries to a derisive heaven; it's that of a lover whose heart has been stolen while he's asleep, and there's no desire to live, no desire to die, because it's got to be found.

Fortunately, we are together, thinking together, we'd like to eat the little morning buns but our body filled with tragic emptiness cannot eat a bite of food, fortunately we're all three together. It's my fault. I had it in my bones. And so do you.

That day never ends. Gentle and sick with hoping, Thea gets up every hour and sadly goes to make the rounds of Egypt, for it is great and courageous not to give up on the miracle one has given up on. Hopelessly she runs around fields and gardens and without a word she lies back down in the form of a bird on her dried-out bed.

And I weep.

Oh my god, what have I done!? I've betrayed my counterpart, my betrothed, my little bride with the boundless heart; oh my god if that bird comes back I will give it to her, I swear – yes it's better that I swear, surer that way, yes, if it came back, I too would play with its lukewarm little body, I'd give it sharp little blows with my paw and I'd slit its throat cheerfully.

Besides, didn't it deceive us? Being alive playing dead.

Thea waits on the balcony, sitting in front of the lattice-work, her face stamped with the patience of our race, we who were born to await homecomings, even if we know: it's not the dead who do not return, it's the living.

She comes to get me so I will open the French doors of her church for her. I open, I who do not believe, I open for her who believes, for I bow down before faith.

She goes toward the lattice. What has come one time just might come a second time. All the faith that's not in me is in her. Holy little mistress of humility.

Penitent, I follow Thea on to the balcony, my head bowed: another human sin.

It's evening.

Now I am very tired, many tears have flowed under the bridge of time. I would like to write down that terrible thing that came to pass among us this morning, a shipwreck in my head, lumps of paving stone rattling around in my head, but I see that almost everything that we went through has been carried away by time. What came to pass has gone away, I've forgotten it all.

Thursday, May 23, 1996

## 12 Stigmata, or Job the dog

*Translated by Eric Prenowitz*

It all begins with a *Felix Culpa*. A happy fault, a blessed wound. Blessed. This is what St Augustine tells us in his *Confessions*. The remarkable fortunes of this thematics of the wound are well known in the work of the other Augustine, James Joyce, but maybe less perceptible or explicit in other notable texts. In Proust it is buried, one must exhume it. For Genet the wound is the founding secret of all major creation.

You will remember that I said, above, that my dearest friends took refuge, I was sure of it, wholly in a secret wound. Now I wrote soon after '... in a very secret domain, perhaps irreducible ...' [...]

It is possible that his immense grief – the death of Saskia – turned Rembrandt away from all the daily joys and that he filled his mourning with the metamorphosis of gold chains, feathered hats, swords, into values, or rather, into pictorial feasts. I do not know if he cried, [...] but toward '42 he will experience his baptism of fire, and bit by bit it will transform itself, his prime nature, vain and bold. [...]

From the death of Saskia on – I wonder if he didn't kill her, in one manner or another, if he didn't rejoice in her death – at last his eye and his hand are free. From this moment on he undertakes a sort of licentiousness in painting: Saskia dead, the world and social judgements have little weight. One must imagine it, Saskia dying and he in his studio, perched on ladders, dislocating the order of *The Night Watch*. [...]