

MAROSA DI GIORGIO

The History of Violets (1965)

translated by Jeannine Marie Pitas

xi

The gladiolus is a spear, its edge loaded with carnations, a knife of carnations. It jumps through the window, kneels on the table; it's vagrant flame, burning up our papers, our dresses. Mother swears that a dead man has risen; she mentions her father and mother and starts to cry.

The pink gladiolus opened up in our house. But scare it, tell it to go.

That crazy lily is going to kill us.

xv

The mushrooms are born in silence; some of them are born in silence, others with a brief shriek, a soft thunder. Some are white, others pink; that one is gray and looks like a dove, the statue of a dove; still others are gold or purple. Each one bears—and this is what's awful—the initials of the corpse it comes from. I do not dare to eat them; that most tender meat is our relative.

But, come afternoon the mushroom buyer arrives and starts picking. My mother gives him permission. He chooses like an eagle. This one white as sugar, a pink one, a gray one.

My mother does not realize that she is selling her race.

xviii

At that hour, the tiny underground creatures were starting their work (those ones that wear heavy coats and work to the rhythm of drums: toc-toc). At that hour the moon had reached the summit of its brilliance, and all the doves scattered over the moon.

But from a distance those birds looked like butterflies, great, sparkling flies. The doves flew over the moon, pecking at it, caressing it.

All of this became clearer as I watched the scene from the black forest of orange trees. And my grandparents sitting there, frozen, their cloaks a pale pink, their ill-fated braids.

They always held some too-brilliant thing in their hands; they showed it; they hid it. Is it a fallen dove? I stepped closer, looking, asking—Or is it a little hare from among the irises?

But they always gave me the strangest reply.—It is a saint, they said.—It is San Carlos, San Cristóbal, Santa Isabel.

I cannot put my memories in order.

The moon wrecks them every time.

xix

Beyond the land, through the air, in the full moon's light, like a lily's stem, it loads its side incessantly with hyacinths, narcissi, white lilies. The wolves draw back at the sight of it; the lambs get down on their knees, crazy with love and fear. It moves on, goes off like an errant candelabra, a bonfire; it goes towards the house, passes the cabinets, the hearth; with only a glance it burns the apples, illuminates them, wraps them in candied paper; it flings colored stones into the rice; it makes the bread and pears glow. It drives itself into the table like a November yucca branch; it hunts a star, it stuffs itself with candles, pine nuts, little bottles. It breaks into the bedroom, spins over my dream, over my wide-open eyes; it floats in the air like a three-tiered crown of pearls, a lamp. It is a fish, a coral branch outside the water, each piece of coral as swollen as a bud or a lip. It flies back toward the moon; it scares the horses and owls, who break into flight and instantly stop. It calls to me. To me, sleepless, and we go off beyond the hills, away from the night workers who tried to mow it down like a hydrangea.

xxii

The silver onions of red gauze, with their very rigid braids, limp curls; the garlic of lilacs and ivory cocooned in organdy and smoke; the deformed potatoes that, thanks to those oddities of the underworld, suddenly sprout from their sides a rosebud, gleaming rose; the cauliflower's marble branches, more like delicious wisteria; the tomato like a carnivalesque orange; the peas pale blue like Spanish pearls; the lettuce in perpetual adolescence, with its greenlight steps, full of grace; the fish, cut in half and covered with little pearls and wings and flowers; the chicken, recently dead and already crowned with a halo of rice, plums and oil; the millennial nut, full of wrinkles and perfume, like a perfume sprayer or a little old woman; the long-eared hare—who looks like death—listening in her sleep; the old shepherdesses in their raffia gowns; the merchants. Father.

xxiii

The gladioli are made of marble, of pure silver, of some ghotly fabric, organdy; they are the bones of Most Holy Maria; they are still walking through this world.

For a long time these spectral stems have followed me. At night they come in through the window; if I am sleeping, they enter my dream; if I am awake, I find them standing at the foot of my bed.

The gladioli are like the angels, like the dead. Who can free me from that tenuous stem, from the gaze of that blind man?

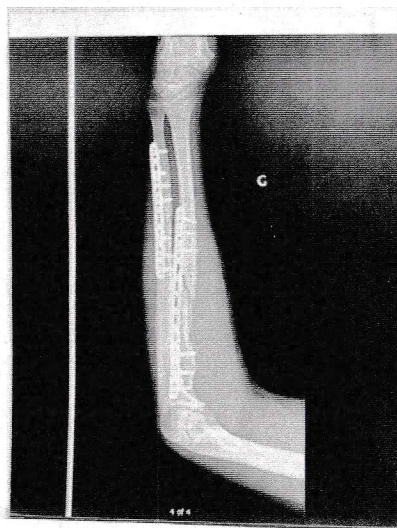
xxxv

I remember the white, folded cabbages—white roses of the earth, of the gardens—cabbages of marble, of most delicate porcelain; cabbages holding their children inside.

And the tall blue chard.

And the tomato, a kidney of rubies.

And the onions wrapped in silky paper, rolling paper, like
bombs of sugar, salt, alcohol.
And the gnome asparagus, turrets of the kingdom of gnomes.
I remember the potatoes, and the tulips we always planted
along them.
And the snakes with their long, orange wings.
And the tobacco of fireflies, who smoked without ceasing.
I remember eternity.



SEI SHŌNAGON

The Pillow Book (1002)

translated by Meredith McKinney

Elegantly intriguing things—It's delightful to hear, through a wall or partition of some sort, the sound of someone, no mere gentlewoman, softly and elegantly clap her hands for service. Then, still separated from view behind, perhaps, a sliding door, you hear a youthful voice respond, and the swish of silk as someone arrives. It must be time for a meal to be served, for now come the jumbled sounds of chopsticks and spoons, and then the ear is arrested by the sudden metallic clink of a pouring-pot's handle falling sideways and knocking against the pot.

Hair tossed back, but not roughly, over a robe that's been beaten to a fine floss, so that you can only guess at its splendid length. It's marvellous to see a beautifully appointed room, where no lamp has been lit and the place is illuminated instead by the light of a brightly burning fire in the square brazier—you can just make out the cords of the curtains around the curtain dais glimmering softly. The metal clasps that hold the raised blinds in place at the lintel cloth and trefoil cords also gleam brightly. A beautifully arranged brazier with fire burning, its rim swept clean of ash, the firelight also revealing the painting on its inner surface, is a most delightful sight. As also is a brightly gleaming pair of fire tongs propped at an angle in the brazier.

Another scene of fascinating elegance—it's very late at night, Her Majesty has retired to her chamber, everyone is asleep and outside a lady is sitting talking with a senior courtier. From within comes the frequent sound of go stones dropping into the box. Delightful to hear the soft sound of hire tongs being gently pushed into the ash of the brazier, and sense from this presence someone who isn't yet asleep.