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The Garden of Earthly Delights
Suminagashi (The Japanese Art of Paper Marbling)
The Sadness of the Sea

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Man Opens Woman's Diary in Her Absence

Unable to resist the keyhole of her absence.
he violates her wardrobe
and dips a quiet hand
into its quiet darkness.
Rummaging through negligees
and panty-hose his fingers find
the smooth stiff curve of its spine.

Though there is no one, he looks around,
her book of whispers, warming to his palm.
He pries it open, this paper oyster.
And it yields.

Inside, it seems to him,
it is moist—from ink? from tears?
from the exhalations of his damp, hot hands?
It opens wider and releases
the scent of her
favorite cologne.

Inside, he finds, not pearls,
but flowers embossed on the helpless page.
She writes clearly like a schoolgirl,
her cursive script looping through golden lines
and printed birds with ribbons in their breaks.

Here, he believes, she has hidden her dreams.
Here, he will decipher her cryptogram of lust.
Here he may learn the how of her love.

And as he reads on, she is hurrying home,
unsettled by the click of footsteps behind her.
Though there is no one, she looks around—
her fear, an obscene whisper that sings her ears.
She senses unseen hands itching to undo her
And prays to Mary, mother of all men,
to keep her from harm.

Red Lips: A Villanelle on Wife-Beating

"You only hurt the one you love . . ."

Who was the first man
to strike a woman's face
to smear her lips with blood?

What reason did he have?
What crime did she commit?
Who was that first man

that flung manly fist against
fine-boned jaw? How did it feel
to smear her lips with blood?

Did the softness of her flesh,
as it gave way, thrill his pumping heart?
Who was that first man

to gaze at her glassy eyes
and let fly the hand she used to hold-
to smear her lips with blood?

Was his stout heart then bruised with guilt
to see his handprints on her face?
Who was that first man
to smear her lips with blood?

The Garden of Earthly Delights

A camouflaged prayer for Ambeth

Sumptuous reading rooms:
Dimpled armchairs of cordovan and oak,
Redolent of coffee or like infusions
that linger on walls of faded chintz
now rubbed with darkness and the gold time,
Here the world turns on the ear of a page,
Here are forests of words and whispers.
Here the souls of the dead collect
and are revived.

We would speak with the wise and they oblige.

When books are opened, suns rise,
 They outshine these lamps of bottle green glass.
 When books are shut, worlds end.
 But we remain seduced by those we cannot see.

And in the delicious solitude that remains,
 the serpent arrives, desiring to converse.

Suminagashi

(The Japanese Art of Paper Marbling)

1

On a cool day, under a tall tree,
 while the air carries hints
 of eucalyptus and pine,
 she pours water
 scooped from a mountain spring
 onto a wooden box,
 painted white and cleaned.

Then she waits for the ripples to subside
 and resolve themselves into a surface
 as seamless as glass.
 As she waits, she dips the tips
 of two rabbit hair brushes
 into stoneware bowls
 of different colored inks.

Now she is ready.
 Bending low, she touches
 brushpoints to water's skin
 and watches as perfect circles
 of paint spring full-blown
 onto her makeshift pond.

And then, with pursed lips,
she lets her breath play
over the floating tints
until, like smoke,
they twist and unfurl
and trace the contours
of snakes, the curlicues
of marble but on water
not stone.

She pauses again
to admire her work:
a trick of waiting and touch
as weightless as an eyelash.
She watches the slow-motion
world her watercolor clouds.

Even the crickets keep quiet
when at last she picks
a sheet of paper to float
on her liquid glass.
Breathlessly she waits
and then lifts it up again:
a photograph of a world
more weightless than ours.

Utsukushi desu!
Utsukushi desu!
How beautiful!
How beautiful!

She turns to me
this woman of the eyelash touch,
as behind her, the new moon
rises above the mountain,
as the water from her hands
drips down to her feet.

The crickets whisper as I watch her
and we all agree:
Utsukushi desu!
How beautiful!
How beautiful indeed!

2

Swirl of blue
on trembling water's skin
moves to slightest breath
or merest sigh

Wisps of madder rose
and cinnabar
uncoil like smoke
as slow as clouds

Spectacles of inky
cyclone's eyes
expand, expend themselves
on this meter squared,
shallow liquid sky.

This is art
that tests the subtlety of air:
the mastery of birdlike brushes
and their tiny pointed tongues.

Dip them into cups
of thalo blue or mauve,
vermilion or viridian

and with steady godlike hands
let the tiny hearts of pigment slip
to float on see-through
slow-mo water's skin.

Then watch their mute tableaux
where pinwheel, teaspoon galaxies
resolve themselves into involuted
peacock's eyes.

The Sadness of the Sea

Describe to me, she says, all butter-brown
and half-undressed, the hints of nipples
like question marks ripening in the night,
the many ways this shapeless sea
has shown herself to you.

I have seen it she continues
shatter sunlight on its crests
and turn from jade to emerald
under the influence of clouds.

I have seen it glitter she persists
from the clarity of its blue
and I have watched the seabirds use it
as a mirror for their sky.

I have felt its expert fingers
have their liquid way with me
and tasted it as its woman's kiss
dried piecemeal on my lips.

And look, with the sunsest,
still other aspects show
now amber, now amethyst
now golden plumes on scarlet light.

Then forgetting me, she turns
to that sea that makes her sigh
and her words trail off as I watch her—
wooed and won-
by the eloquence of her own delight.

Had she stayed, I would have told her
of quite another sea.
It does not dance for tourists,
it does not dress for youths,
It arrives at night, at the hour of deepest sleep
when dreamcrossed girls lie still engrossed
by the sweet nothings of their rest.
It shuns crowds, reflects no light.
It is our sea: the sea where all our dreams collect
when they no longer can come true.

Unseen and unremembered, this sea of endless sadness
unfurls its wet, dark shroud upon the weeping sand
and casts its million screams to shatter against rocks.