

ABCS

Susan Yankowitz

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AN APPLE

Manuelo Manchik admires the apple before devouring it. He cups the thing in the palm of his hand, turning it this way and that; the light bounces off the curves of its golden skin. O golden delicious, you make a mouth water! The fruit is round and firm and fully packed; unlike the mealy banana, it will resist his teeth just a little. Again his mouth waters as he delays the coming pleasure. He cups the thing in the palm of one hand, stroking it with the other; it is smooth and cool beneath his fingers. O golden delicious, you do tempt a man! Yes there is no doubt, you were made to be eaten. He opens his mouth wide and chomps through to the core in a single bite. Two black seeds slither in a rill of juice down his chin.

BREASTS

At a gathering of talents, artistic and profane, MM had spotted across the crowded room his own dreamed-of Olympia, half-reclining on a fat settee. The exquisite naturalness of her Manet pose enchanted him no less than her near nudity. Under her see-through blouse her breasts were classic. O wonder. O no wonder that they pushed out the silk (or was it cheap nylon?) of her blouse exactly like breasts; that to exploring hands (at other hours of course for now she was half-reclining naturally alone) they were as round and firm and full as round firm full breasts; and that the nipples which tipped these breasts resembled nothing so much as the nipples which tip such breasts. In short and in sum, her breasts were truly like breasts. But MM had no interest in the obvious. He was a man of imagination, of poetry even. The excesses of similitude multiplied by their exact number his pleasures. He saw what he saw: Olympia with breasts which were breasts and at the same time various other roundnesses not breasts. And roundness was all, preferable even to that commonplace of literature, ripeness. Only one fact was crucial and he had ascertained it, subtly brushing his fingers against her shoulders: she was not made of wax. So when MM opened his mouth wide one night days later and bit with gusto into the breast on the left, that same breast bled. Damn, he had erred in his distinc-

tions! But Manuelo Manchik was not a man to hang fire. With a gesture of magnificent unconcern, he wiped his chin and continued eating.

CHYME

Olympia had accepted that name, accepted too the play of tongue and teeth, accepted even the discomfort of her body crushed beneath him when poing! she was punctured. Too late to cry foul! she fell, undone by mastication. Softened by saliva she travelled in mouthfuls through his gullet and into the fat sac of his stomach. There she lodges, divided against herself.

Fool, she chides herself, to have come to chyme!

Her head is separated from her body. Her legs, each in one long piece, are severed from her crotch and from each other, Her two loose breasts bounce from wall to wall, free-floating, as his stomach contracts and dilates in digestion. Pressed against the locked pyloric door she is grateful at least that she will not be further fractured by the cleaving peristaltic actions of his intestine. There is no disguising the situation: she is split, sundered, she is not in one piece. If she does not want to sour in his belly (and why would she desire such a fate?) she must somehow (but how?) reverse the process herself. But herself is not. From deep inside Manuelo's stomach, she surveys the chaos of her members and thinks: I must pull myself together!

DREAM?

Maybe it's all a dream, she reasons reasonably enough, and when I wake up I'll find myself me again, just me, no one's Olympia, in toto. And so she falls to sleep so she can fall awake. This is the dream she finds: she is standing in water being fucked in the ass by the shameless beak of a crane. His long legs pinion her hips. He wades and fishes, taking his time. It hurts. What can she do but submit? Her name is not Leda; the power is all his.

ESCAPE

She wakes up gagging with her left foot in her mouth. No use sucking on the toes, they're not sour balls, they won't dissolve or sweeten her palate. Her mouth is dry with sleep and anxiety; she could have suffocated during that nighttime shift. There is no escaping the fact now: she must escape! But how? She wags her head a few times to float the foot free as she ponders the ins and outs. The nearest exit is the rear. Can she deliver herself through there? MM is

notoriously tight-assed. She experiments, jamming her foot in the door; MM jumps. Assured of the flexibility of that aperture, she glances upward to the other hole, further away but far less foul. Keeping her foot wedged in the crack she sticks a finger up his throat; MM gags. Both routes are open to her. Which out should she take?

FLATULENCE

MM ejects a fart and holds his nose in indignation. The cream of the art world thins around him. Many noses are held. How could she, the bitch, upset him so? He excuses himself gracefully from the room, leaving his smell behind. Is he stuck with her forever? Must he pay with his immaculate reputation for one night's over-indulgence? O she is lodged there in his gut, forcing him to take strong measures.

GLUTTONY

"I'd like to eat you up," he had said. She had been enthusiastic. Whose sin was it then? Definitely food for thought, his and hers.

HIS AND HERS

HIS: She tempted me.
HERS: He ate.

INDIGESTION

"I'm carrying her around. She weighs me down. Really, I'm not a free man anymore," Manuêlo confided to his friend the doctor, picking his teeth with an indigestible sliver of fingernail. "You must get her out of your system," replied the learned doc. "May I prescribe a laxative?"

JUSTICE MORE OR LESS POETIC

She hadn't cared who drove into her. He had had a full set. It was good sport yes. And what a ball! He had swung hard, lifted high and, rimming the cup first with a brilliant display of control, had dropped right in: hole in one. Manuêlo Manchik was not the sort to putter around. Well, neither was she.

"You're a real swinger," he complimented her. "Just par for the course," she replied, referring of course to her life.

Now she was teed-off, finding herself in the trap. O she had been green in those green days, but she would lie in the roughage no longer. With a method to her madness she slices into

his intestine with her teeth. MM howls then doubles over, squeezing her (according to plan) more closely together; his cramp adheres her. When he straightens up she delights to see the connections: her legs secured to her groin and her groin to her torso, o classic venus though still not Olympia for her breasts and arms are still somewhere adrift. And her head, that obstinate be-bumped ball, is lying slightly off-course, planning the next shot.

KIDDING

When she reached twenty-five, her psychiatrist had said (though gently): "All kidding aside, my dear, you are no longer a child prodigy." She had run home crying to her mother, blurt-ing the tragic news. "So? What are you going to do with yourself?" mother had asked, heart-to-heart.

"I gotta grow up sometime, ma. He's right. So here's what: I'm gonna have a baby!"

"What? What?" disbelieving ma had hollered, flinging her daughter from her sacked-out breast. "I'm going to have a bastard?"

"No, ma, no," she calmed her mother. "I'm gonna have the bastard."

The child was born crying and one gulp of air later, died. The bereaved not yet a mother invited her psychiatrist to the funeral and told him then and there that they were quits. That was how he would remember her: standing gravely at the grave, dressed all in black, a grown-up color.

LIKE

"I like you," MM had said (as had others), thinking to flatter.

"No you're not," she retorted almost at once, angry almost. "You're not like me at all."

MILK OF MAGNESIA

He takes the prescribed dosage and waits.

NO ANSWERS

In the park, Abigale is lying on her belly, waiting as pre-arranged for her best friend, the putative Olympia. She pokes with a spring twig at the underside of a caterpillar, trying to hurry it out of its skin.

"Where are your wings, caterpillar?" she asks. "And where was I before I was born?"

"And where, sky, do you get off, looking down on me?"

Everything is mute. The silence is its own question.

OSCILLATIONS

Suddenly everything starts churning. Using all anchored organs for ballast, she holds herself together; he will not shake her up, will not fragment her. His belly bloats with gases, goes into a rumble. So! He is trying to purge himself by purging her. The rejection infuriates her. She will come out when she is good and ready, and she will use the exit of her choice. Tough shit, Manuëlo! She braces herself against his spasms.

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P'S & Q'S

"Mind them!" her mother had warned. But what were they? She had learned the alphabet thoroughly but the deeper meanings of p's and q's had eluded her. If she had gone further in her study of letters, would she have led a simpler life?

REFLECTION

MM strains.

O resists.

The battle is in earnest. Some old words rise to the occasion. "The man who hates you and the woman who is hated are probably one and the same," her psychiatrist had suggested, maddening her (at the time) into silence.

Was he speaking of suicide?

Hers?

The thought sobers her and sheds light. After all, it is almost spring out there. The crocuses are already beginning their day-open night-close ritual. She could if she chose walk outside without a coat, breathing sunlight. Someone, also without a coat, might be coming round the corner, fated to bump chests with her. Her mind too, she realizes, can turn corners. And certainly Abigale, her old friend, must be waiting for her in the park this very moment.

SURE IS

His stomach is storming around her with a vengeance. She holds on for dear life. O yes, it is so so dear, good old life. It is indeed of the essence, hers in particular. Her imagination has never yet failed her. She will live! Out of the darkness, the closet, the belly of this male whale. The way is lighted by divine coincidence as MM opens his mouth widely to expel a belch. The light rays down his throat, a sign. Her route has been decided. Really, there are possibilities in everything, even a belch, she concludes.

TRANSLATION (AFTER RILKE)

Manuëlo has thrown caution to the winds. "Do something," he pleads. "I need help."

"Yes," agrees the doctor, "you must change your life."

O but it hurts! His eyes are blind with tears. Manuëlo weeps with the effort to restrain them.

UNITED SHE CAN

He falls back into his chair, trying to relax, inadvertently giving her the room she needs to maneuver. She holds herself snugly in her own arms; they mate with their respective sockets, home at last. Now, able to manipulate with her hands, the rest is easy. She catches her drifting breasts and fixes them onto her chest. She knows which is which, having observed in moments of self-criticism that the left is slightly larger than the right. It occurs to her at this juncture that nature is purposive in all plans. Nothing is very much like anything else, each thing is essentially itself and under no compulsion to be other. Goodbye then, Manuëlo's Olympia! Goodbye velvet settee and languid pose! MM's ass presses down into the seat, squeezing her upward. Her body rises toward her head and miraculously naturally unites with it. He cannot keep her down. He does not want to. She is on her way.

VOYAGING

Still afraid that she will fall apart—these connections are so tenuous, so untested—she kicks her feet, gingerly at first, then with increasing vigor as she finds to her elation that they will move her. She paddles upward toward his heart. O the current there is strong; she struggles bravely; she falters, sucked into its vortex; she kicks, she flails and manages, through stratagems newly known to science, to bypass the whole throbbing mass. The worst is over. She catches her breath at his lungs and then, with a great final spurt, dives through his esophagus.

WHOOPS!

She spills out of his mouth.

"Hi, Manuëlo."

"Olympia!"

They stand gaping at each other, both of them messy with blood and other slime. She sets him straight at once. "My real name's Claire. Can I take a shower?"

Claire, not Olympia then. He looks at her in this new light as he scrubs her back. How could he not have noticed those pimples on her shoulders? Perhaps that is why he was unable to stomach her. But no, no, the mystery is more than skin deep.

"Scrub harder, Manuelo."

He does, marveling at the dead skin which peels off, flake by flake. How many layers are there? He stares into the skin, lost in ponderings beneath the surface and then, with a wild cry of exultation, realizes that he has found his calling. Dermatology will teach him the topography of the flesh. Through that mundane profession he will explore the twin mysteries of desire and disgust.

"You're breaking the skin again!" shouts Claire. "Enough!"

YOU

"You have helped me to find myself," they admit simultaneously and, with a tender embrace, part forever.

ZOON

Shining in the sunlight which is shining too, she runs to the park. Abigale is asleep; a caterpillar is making a moustache on her upper lip. Claire picks it off and tosses it carelessly into the grass. It slithers away as Abigale wakes.

"Where have you been?" drowsy A asks. Claire hesitates. What words could convey the absurdity, the enormity of her adventure? An attempt is necessary. She begins to stammer a reply but her stomach, miraculously to the rescue, speaks first: loudly it rumbles, fiercely it growls. Both women laugh. The noise suffices for response.

Claire stretches out her hands to Abigale and, with a little tug, pulls her to her feet.

"It's time for another beginning," Claire says.

"It always was," Abigale grins.

And off they go, old friends hand in hand, in search of apples.

Susan Yankowitz's first novel, *Silent Witness*, was published by Knopf in May. Her play, *Still Life*, will be produced in January at the Women's Interarts Theatre, and her published plays include *Slaughterhouse Play*, *Terminal*, *Boxes*, and *The Prison Game*, among others.

Do You Think

Jayne Cortez

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Do you think this is a sad day
a sad night
full of tequila full of el dorado
full of banana solitudes

And my chorizo face a holiday for knives
and my arching lips a savannah for cuchifritos
and my spit curls a symbol for you
to overcharge overbill oversell me
these saints these candles
these dented cars loud pipes
no insurance and no place to park
because my last name is Cortez

Do you think this is a sad night
a sad day

And on this elevator
between my rubber shoes
in the creme de menthe of my youth
the silver tooth of my age
the gullah speech of my one trembling tit
full of tequila full of el dorado
full of banana solitudes you tell me
i use more lights more gas
more telephones more sequins more feathers
more iridescent head-stones
you think i accept this pentecostal church
in exchange for the lands you stole

And because my name is Cortez
do you think this is a revision
of flesh studded with rivets
my wardrobe clean
the pick in my hair
the pomegranate in my hand
14th street delancey street 103rd street
reservation where i lay my skull
the barrio of need
the police state in ashes
drums full of tequila full of el dorado
full of banana solitudes say:
Do you really think time speaks english
in the mens room

Jayne Cortez was born in Arizona and grew up in the Watts Community of Los Angeles. She is the author of three books of poetry—*Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares* (1969), *Festivals and Funerals* (1971), *Scarifications* (1973), from which this poem is reprinted, and a recording—*Celebrations and Solitudes* (Strata East Records, 1975).