

The Descent of Alette

Alice Notley



PENGUIN POETS

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Author's Note

A word about the quotation marks. People ask about them, in the beginning; in the process of giving themselves up to reading the poem, they become comfortable with them, without necessarily thinking precisely about why they're there. But they're there, mostly, to measure the poem. The phrases they enclose are poetic feet. If I had simply left white spaces between the phrases, the phrases would be rushed by the reader—read too fast for my musical intention. The quotation marks make the reader slow down and silently articulate—not slur over mentally—the phrases at the pace, and with the stresses, I intend. They also distance the narrative from myself, the author: I am not Alette. Finally they may remind the reader that each phrase is a thing said by a voice: this is not a thought, or a record of thought-process, this is a story, told.

BOOK one

“One day, I awoke” “& found myself on” “a subway, endlessly”
“I didn’t know” “how I’d arrived there or” “who I was” “exactly”
“But I knew the train” “knew riding it” “knew the look of”
“those about me” “I gradually became aware—” “though it seemed

as that happened” “that I’d always” “known it too—” “that there was ”
“a tyrant” “a man in charge of” “the fact” “that we were”
“below the ground” “endlessly riding” “our trains, never surfacing”
“A man who ” “would make you pay” “so much” “to leave the subway”

“that you don’t” “ever ask” “how much it is” “It is, in effect,”
“all of you, & more” “Most of which you already” “pay to
live below” “But he would literally” “take your soul” “Which is
what you are” “below the ground” “Your soul” “your soul rides”

“this subway” “I saw” “on the subway a” “world of souls”

“On the subway” “we rode the trains” “Got on, got off” “Sat &
watched, sat” “& slept” “Walked from car to car” “Stood in stations”
“We were caught up” “in movement” “in ongoingness” “& in ongoingness”
“of voices,” “for example” “Which of us spoke? did” “it matter?” “Who

saw what” “was being seen,” “knew what” “was known?” “Gradually
what was seen” “became what I saw,” “to me” “Despair & outrage”
“became mine too” “Sorrow” “became mine—” “To ride a” “mechanical”
“contrivance ” “in the darkness” “To be steeped in” “the authority”

“of” “another’s mind” “the tyrant’s mind” “Life of bits & pieces”
“cars & scenes” “disconnected” “little dreams” “False continuum”
“mechanical time:” “What do we miss?” “What do we miss?” “Was there
once” “something else?” “There are animals” “in the subway” “But they”

“are mute & sad” “There are singers” “There are corpses” “There is
substance” “of darkness” “And emotion” “strong emotion” “The air”
“is all emotion”

“A woman entered” “a car I rode,” “had a misshapen” “slowing foot; &”
“she wore” “thick-lensed glasses” (“her eyes were small,” “over-focused”)
“She carried a cup, announced,” “I need” “enough money—” “the amount
is eighteen dollars—” “to take my daughter above the ground” “for one
night” “just one night” “I promised her a night” “above the ground”

“Money will not” “be enough,” “a woman said to her,” “Not just money,”
“he wants your things,” “your small things,” “your emblems,” “all your
trappings” “You must give up” “to the tyrant” “all your flowers”
“all your carnations” “Or your cut hair” “Give him your hair”
“You must give him your jokes” “your best jokes,” “he takes whatever—”

“Makes fun of it,” “but uses it” “Give him your only” “silk scarf”
“your tiny” “turquoise pendant” “Your old-fashioned watch” “your copper
barrette” “& your nail polish” “Give him your lotion, your gardenia”
“perfume” “Give him your coat too” “But keep your sweater” “Let him take”
“what he wants” “from your wallet” “red leatherette coin purse” “& then

he’ll let you” “go upstairs” “& walk around in” “our times” “He will smile”
“his boyish smile” “& let you go up there awhile”

“There was a woman,” “in a station,” “with a guitar &”
“amplifier,” “who sang” “sang a song” “that said this:”

“ ‘As the old man lies dying” “in his bishop’s robe & gown”
“surrounded” “by museum cases full of jewels” “& gold”
“shards of Venuses” “oldest potteries” “He” “is on exhibit”
“too” “as he is dying” “As we watch him,” “the women,”

“we receive our” “emerald rings” “They grow”
“begin to grow” “around our fingers,” “as we watch him”
“Because” “we’re his loyal” “secretaries” “as we
watch him” “on exhibit” “always governing” “always ruling

as he lies dying” “He” “could die forever” “On exhibit”
“in his mansion” “in his Vatican” “in his Parthenon” “in his”
“admini-” “strative offices” “See” “in the emeralds ”

(“which can get murkier” “uglier”) “an endless” “endless male
will” “But the tyrant” “is a mild man” “Look in our emeralds”
“& see shadows” “We are those” “against the green” “green
lush light” “We are weightless” “Left with rings,”
“we will be old &” “left with rings” “By the time the”

“lakes thaw the” “green lakes” “of the great cities”
“of the North” “We will be dead” “With emerald rings”
“Green stones upon our” “fingerbones” “That is our love”
“Must be our love” “that we” “will be dead &” “he”

“will live forever,” “on exhibit” “in his museum’ ”

“I was standing up,” “on the subway,” “holding on to” “a metal strap” “A man in” “an army jacket” “sat in front of” “me, eating” “eating a piece of meat” “which he held” “in his hand,” “a piece of cold steak rimmed with fat” “& with black dots of pepper on it—”

“He gnawed the meat” “awhile, then” “looked up & said to me,” “ ‘I need to find” “our father” “our fathers ... ’ ” “ ‘But what about” “our mother?’ ” “I said auto-” “matically,” “ ‘the one mother” “first mother” “of all?’ ” “He said nothing,” “finished eating,”

“leaned back into” “his seat” “He was young,” “familiar-looking to me” “He fell asleep then” “his chin doubling” “as his head” “fell forward” “He was brown-haired” (“brown-eyed, I’d seen”) “moustached &” “straight-nosed” “He spoke” “in his sleep—”

“ ‘I need a dolor” “a few more dolors” “Then after that” “I’ll see our father’ ” “Another time” “he spoke & said,” “ ‘I’ll give him floral rocks” “floral rocks’ ” “After a while” “he awoke” “& said” “to me, ‘Shall we look for them?’ ” “Or I’ll” “look for him,”

“you” “look for her ... ‘ ” “ ‘Then yours” “would be easier” “much easier,’ ” “I said with anger” “ ‘But I am agonized,’ he said” “ ‘I killed for him,” “I was a soldier’ ” “The train stopped” “He abruptly” “left the car” “Disappeared” “disappeared”

“We couldn’t find” “our fathers—” “there were several” “of us” “We were walking through subway cars” “looking” “for our fathers” “Endless train” “It seemed the longest” “train there is” “as if it circled”

“the world—” “& we walked it, we were searching” “for our fathers,”

“when we entered” “a car of” “suited... animals—” “men, actually,”
“in business suits,” “clean shirts” “Charcoal suits, &” “navy-blue”
“ties (crimson stripes)” “—beautiful suits—” “And the men all” “had
animal” “heads.” “It was a dimly” “lit car” “the lights” “on occasion”

“would go completely:” “Darkness” “Silent” “Animal” “Faces” “Shaggy”
“or Sleek:” “He is a falcon, a gyrfalcon” “his head cocked toward his”
“business-suited” “wing-arm” “His eyes,” “clear-dark-round,” “stare”
“Or he’s a lemur” “a reddish lemur” “reddish eyes” “fur, tipped in orange,

glows orange ” “above his gray suit” “He’s a panther, black sleek hair”
“You want to touch” “above his nose” “feel his short hair plush face,”
“black velvet” “He’s an owl” “His face is feathers, it is ruffed,”
“his eyes are critical, a” “gray owl:” “Were these our fathers?” “And

if so, which” “was which,” “who” “was my father” “your father?”
 (“And the men” “couldn’t speak to us” “made no sound” “made no sign”)
“Can you” “find your father?” “Mine is probably” “an owl” “He stared”
“He stared at me” “But owls stare” “And then he looked away”

“ ‘An animal-mother’ “is crying,’ ” “a voice said” “to another (I”
“couldn’t see them,” “I was sitting—” “a crowded car:” “Bodies”
“pressed together” “Braid of voices” “& machine noise”) “ ‘Animals
don’t cry,’ ” “the second” “voice said” “ ‘She has large, furry forearms,’

the first continued,” “ ‘Can you see her’ “over there? She is showing”
“such sorrow’ ” “ ‘They don’t do that,’ the other said,” “ ‘& don’t have ”
“things like sorrow’ ” “ ‘You mean emotions?’ said the first” ‘I

see her,’ ” “said the second,” “‘Why” “is she wearing” “a dress? What”

“animal is she?’ ” “ ‘She is one,’ ” “said the first voice,” “ ‘of the large cats—” “a long-haired, large cat” “The species” “is thought to be” “mostly” “extinct” “& for a long time—the gray-eyed” “brown-haired” “silky” “cat of the—” “I can’t remember where, exactly—” “with a

musical—” “It’s not a roar,” “a softer sound” “It would blur” “into the wind” “from high up on” “rocks & hills” “There were” “rocks & hills” “where the cats lived” “where they once lived” “A dress was put on her” “in the subway” “You can’t ride this train” “without clothes” “Unless

you’re crazy” “really crazy” “She has no one” “See her sorrow?’ ” “The second” “voice replied,” “‘They must be” “the only” “cats that cry,” “what” “happened to them?’ ” “The first said, ‘We don’t know” “They don’t tell” “But we think” “her children—” “the children of” “her

generation—” “are suicidal,” “eat datura,” “have no real mates’ ” “ ‘Animals,’ ” “said the second voice,” “‘are not” “suicidal’ ” “ ‘I’ll bet she carries things,’ ” “the first said,” “ ‘They carry things” “in their pockets” “I’ll bet she has” “a bit of snake bone” “a bit of creosote”

“a bit of tiny” “yellow blossom” “or other blossom” “A pebble” “2 pebbles maybe” “A rusted bottle cap” “A piece of paper,” “a scrap of it” “A lock of fur” “clump of fur’ ” “ ‘I don’t believe you,’ said the second voice,” “ ‘She’s an animal’ ”

“A mother” “& child” “were both on fire, continuously” “The fire” “was contained in them” “sealed them off from others” “But you could see the flame” “halo

of short flame all about the” “conjoined bodies, who

sat” “they sat apart” “on a seat for two” “at end of car” “The
ghost” “of the father” “sat in flames” “beside them”
“paler flames” “sat straight ahead” “looking
straight ahead, not” “moving.” “A woman”

“another woman” “in a uniform” “from above the ground”
“entered” “the train” “She was fireproof” “She was gloves, & she”
“took” “the baby” “took the baby” “away from the”
“mother” “Extracted” “the burning baby” “from the fire” “they

made together” “But the baby” “still burned”
 (“But not yours” “It didn’t happen” “to you”)
 “ ‘We don’t know yet” “if it will” “stop burning,’ ”
 “said the uniformed” “woman” “The burning woman” “was crying”

“she made a form” “in her mind” “an imaginary” “form” “to
settle” “in her arms where” “the baby” “had been” “We saw
her fiery arms” “cradle air” “She cradled air” (“They take your
children” “away” “if you’re on fire”)

“In the air that” “she cradled” “it seemed to us there” “floated”
 “a flower-like” “a red flower” “its petals” “curling flames”
 “She cradled” “seemed to cradle” “the burning flower of” “herself gone”
 “her life” (“She saw” “whatever she saw, but what we saw” “was that flower”)

“A woman came into” “a car I rode” “about thirty-seven” “maybe
forty” “Face” “a harsh response to” “what she did” “had to do”
 “face rigid” “but she was beautiful” “Was,” “we could see,”

“one of the ones who” “strip for coins” “on the subway—”

“They simply” “very quickly” (“illegally”) “remove all their clothes” “Stand, for a moment” “Turning to face” “each end” “of the car” “Then dress quickly,” “pass quickly” “the cup.” “But she—this one—” “face of hating to so much that” “as she

took off her blouse,” “her face” “began to change” “Grew feathers, a small beak” “& by the time she was naked,” “she wore the head” “of an eagle” “a crowned eagle” “a raptor” “herself— ” “And as she stood” “& faced the car” “her body” “was changing”

“was becoming entirely” “that bird” “those wings,” “she shrank to become the bird” “but grew wings that” “were wider” “than she had been tall” “Instantly,” “instantly, a man caught her” “A cop came” “As if ready” “as if they knew” “Her wings were clipped,”

“talons cut” “as if as quickly” “as possible” “She was released then, to the car” “to the subway” “Perched” “on the bar the straps hang from”

“I entered” “a car” “in which I seemed” “to see double” “Each person I” “looked at seemed” “spread out” “as if doubled” “Gradually” “I perceived that” “each person” “was surrounded by a ghostly” “second image” “was encased in it” “& each”

“of those images,” “those encasings,” “was exactly the same” “each was in fact” “the tyrant” “Though colorless,” “a gray ghost of him” “But he bent & swayed” “& walked with” “every person, his” “expression” “always” “the same.” “mild &

benign” “And he encased many” “men not so” “uncomfortably ”
“But others,” “especially women,” “looked as if they” “suffered from ”
“trying” “to fit inside” “this other” “As if his form” “squeezed
theirs,” “their breasts & hips,” “very painfully—” “his long

thin streamlined form” “One woman” “tried to cast him off,”
“shake him off” “Writhed & jumped” “Then I felt him” “begin to
encase me” “He sank down” “into my head” “into my thoughts,”
“which instantly” “separated” “assumed a terrifying” “strict

order” “unfamiliar” “to me” “Each felt distinct” “from each,”
“arranged” “in a progression” “My head” “contained an
army” “of separate” “same-shape thoughts” “Soldiers”
“soldiers marching” “Never touching each” “other” “It wasn’t”

“wasn’t” “like a mind” “No thought felt true” “Thoughts felt
efficient” “He squeezed on me” “would squeeze away” “my shape”
“I cast him off” “& ran” “from the car”

“At a subway stop, crowds of people” “some sleeping” “on the
platform &” “Behind them,” “caveish stores,” “a row of stalls niched
in the walls” “A snake” “lives in this stop,” “lies there” “on the
platform” “before a door—” “which is an exit—” “lies large

coiled & sleeping” “Women” “vaguely whorish” “come & go here,”
”they are ant-faced—” “smooth carnelian” “carapaces” “above bright-
colored” “cotton blouses” “There are men” “large-handed furry”
“They are round-eyed” “gray spiders” “But the snake sleeps” “before the

door that's" "an exit" "to the tyrant's world" "She is black,"
"gold, & brown" "Sleeps because" "she is sad" "is drugged by"
"melancholy" "Corpse-souls" "from the cemetery" "wander here" "near her
coils," "disturbed &" "white-dusty" "Too many of us" "underground"

"But we think" "the snake is growing" "She is growing; here's an
example:" "A woman" "who is standing," "waiting" "for the train,"
"is someone who" "will be allowed" "to exit—" "wears a business suit
big shoulders" "Her animal familiarity" "to us is" "powdered over,"

"pearlized" "She's attractive," "is suffused with" "her powers"
"a sense of" "her own powers" "But she" "is surrounded by" "a pale gel"
"a thick light" "a viscous" "transparency" "It sets her apart from us"
"Some other" "kind of will" "It is substance of" "the tyrant's thought"

"She belongs to" "the tyrant," "though she thinks she's" "her own"
"Now this is" "what happens:" "There is a figure" "in her body"
"another one, it" "steps out of it" "Leaves her body" "It is brown,"
"& naked" "Both humorous" "& shadowed" "of face—" "A spirit leaves her"

"& lies down by" "the snake" "Becomes ghostly" "brown coils"
"Disappears into" "the snake"

"A woman" "a crazed woman—" "seems crazy" "crouches naked,
in a corner"
"of the car" "Seems to try" "to stand up, it's as if her legs" "won't work"
"won't quite" "Or as if" "she can't remember" "if it's okay" "to be
naked," "if you're wearing a" "shawl" "an ugly shawl" "It's the color of"

“a dirty pale kitchen wall” “Now stands up” “She stands” “even though she is naked” “Assumes a place here,” “anyway” “How old is she?” “maybe, in her fifties” “She is speaking” “Is it to us?” “Lips are moving,” “speaks softly,” “but urgently:” “ ‘No place no” “place” “except me” “No place”

“except under” “this shawl” “I can have” “this *place*” “I don’t want you” “Don’t want it” “Please don’t” “give me anything” “Money, clothes ... ideas” “What you think are” “yours’ ” (“Says to me,”) “ ‘It’s all made by” “a man” “You were made by” “men, made out of man-thought” “All women now,

all of this here,” “man-made—” “Under” “my shawl” “I try to be, I” “am” “another world” “a woman’s world—“Why I may be” “the only one” “the first one” “since before” “the tyrant’s history” “So you must leave me alone...” ” “And then she left us” “unsteadily, walked away” “afraid of us”

“afraid” “we would corrupt her” “corrupt her world”

“ ‘When I was born,” “I was born now” “fully grown,” “on heroin” “When I was born” “fully grown” “in the universe” “of no change” “nothing” “grows up from’ ” (“Who sings this, whose voice?” “This person” “is in a shadow” “down at the end of” “the platform” “I can’t see him” “at all” “He continues

his song:”) “ ‘When I was born,” “I was now” “When I was born,” “I’m not allowed” “to remember when I was” “the little baby” “in a darkness, joy of darkness” “Was I the cub” “for an instant?” “if so” “only an instant,”

“before I” “was a soldier” “before I” “was a soldier ...” “(“Where is the

battlefield?” “At a station” “no longer” “in use” “Train goes right
past it” “But veterans” “know how” “to get in” “In that station” “is kept a
piece of” “a battlefield” “of the old war” “In that station” “grow white
flowers” “large blossoms” “that are faces,” “with eyes closed” “lashes

closed white” “White skin white hair” “Soldiers go there” “Call to”
“the victim-flowers” “They don’t answer but” “seem to grow” “The soldiers
water them” “water the flowers” “which were” “their own victims:”)
“ ‘When I was born,” “I was born now” “When I was born,” “I’m not allowed”

“to remember if I was” “the little baby” “the little boy” “Was I the cub”
“for an instant?” “Or was I” “already” “a soldier...” ”

“When the train” “goes under water” “the close tunnel” “is transparent”
“Murky water” “full of papery” “full of shapelessness” “Some fish” “but
also things” “Are they made by humans?” “Have no shape,” “like rags”
“like soggy papers” “like frayed thrown-away wash cloths” “black”

“& encrusted with” “dirt & scum” “The fish” “move among them”
“& weeds which”

“grow black,” “dirty in” “blackened water” “A fish, an” “immense fish”
“approaches” “our window” “A face as if” “to be recognized” “nuanced,”
“full of pain” “A face” “as of a man” “wide-eyed,” “of course,” “& gulping

but” “a face of” ” “a man” “No it’s a fish face,” “slime-encrusted” “Is
it a man” “or a fish?” “Someone stares,” “stares back at him” “& cries”

“just a little” “She says, ‘He’s so sad-looking’ ” “His face changes”
“often changes” “as if we have him” “out of focus” “He blurs” “The

woman says,” “ ‘It makes me” “so uncomfortable,” “that I can’t”
“see him right’ ” “And the fish, too” “seems to weep” “moist blackish beads”
“He can’t keep up” “with the window” “& is left behind” “Then the
woman says,” “ ‘He looked” “so familiar” “to me...” ”

“There is a car” “that is nothing but” “garbage” “Shit &
spittle” “dropped food” “frayed brownness” “dirty matter”
“pressed down & flattened” “Paper piled” “piled on the floor”
“heaped on the benches” “Napkins yellowed” “tampons bloody”

“paper twisted” “torn & sodden” “Ashes &” “gray rags &”
“old skin & nails” “Old hair” “old bones” “& a Corpse”
“a skeleton corpse” “a skeleton in a” “dress, some sort of
old” “native dress” “of tattered skins” “animal skins”

“animal skins now brown-black,” “coral beads now greasy” “She
lies against” “a mound of garbage” “at one end of” “the car”
“She has a small skull small finger bones” “a small woman”
“elegant skull” “The only ones” “who ride in this car” “are

those who” “take drugs” “So it’s left this way—” “They”
“don’t mind the smell” “They say” “she protects them”
“protects them from fearfulness,” “by being” “the gentle fearful”
“herself” “They don’t” “touch her though” “They say she hums”

“like a motor” “Or something does” “in the garbage”
“Something” “is still alive in there,” “has power”