



© JACKSON POLLOCK
Number 34, 1949

PERMAFROST

Eva Baltasar

TRANSLATED FROM THE CATALAN BY JULIA SANCHES

She was French. Marseillaise, actually, like the national anthem. The nerve centre of her beauty resided in her being French. I was in love with her nationality, a second face with perfect features cast over the first like a semitransparent film, but with the charm of the great classics. Her name was Roxanne and she was shorter than me, slimmer than me, more intelligent and nobler than me. She was more educated, too: a PhD in literature with diplomas in English, German and Italian. On top of all of that, she was magnificent on the piano. She had one at home in a large room that I pompously referred to as the piano room and where she played long pieces from memory. She was, as Mom would put it, from a good family, and this being-from-a-good-family showed on her like a coat of varnish. In fact, it showed in every single gesture, no matter how insignificant. For example, she had a particular way of moving her chin when opening the door, lifting it very slightly to one side while casting her eyes down, and I always felt like she took for granted that someone would step aside for her. It's hard to explain – but it was obvious when I saw it. She was a climber and though at the time I couldn't imagine my life without her, the moment I saw her naked body, I decided all my future lovers should have loved climbing in their past. Her muscles were perfect, thrumming and covered in supple, impeccable skin. Her every

position in bed was an anatomical study in red chalk – improbably precise and as exciting as a first visit to Casa Buonarroti. I remember her stomach – quiet and commanding like a tortoise shell – and the tensed arch of her arms, her ass, her thighs and her calves – compact like thinking skulls – all centred on me and my pleasure alone, on reaching the summit of my pleasure. Never before nor since have I spent so many nights screwing. By that I mean whole nights, five or six or seven hours of relentless fucking, mostly with her on top.

‘Talk to me in French,’ I would ask. And she’d say some things I understood and others I didn’t have to understand. It was enough just to listen to her, to let her words penetrate my body, softening it in strange and unpredictable ways. Her voice shook me violently, consumed me, a wisp of hair singed by a cigarette ember. My body shrank and coiled at once, assaulted by her accent like a doughy maggot being pricked by a pin.

As I write this, I relive it, and millions of my cells pass along buckets of glowing water to put out goodness knows what fire. Fast and blind. My heart flares up, damaging the pleural membrane, which is so unaccustomed to playing along. Roxanne. When I met her, she’d just bought a professional camera. I envied the camera for spending all day in her hands, white with slender knuckles and polished tips. Before playing the piano, she used to splay her fingers over the keys, and it was as if they were simply resting for a moment, both contained and laid out, like a row of matching surgical tools before a very delicate intervention. Then she would subtly flex them and move them according to instructions from a series of neck muscles triggered milliseconds before her fingers. I listened as the sound of the piano strings penetrated me like her words, shaking me and giving rise to inexplicable surges and a sort of self-indulgent jealousy. I followed the unintelligible movement of her fingers as they drove the composition toward the moment when it would finally die out. She adored Satie.

‘It’s easy,’ she said. And over and over she played ‘Je te veux’, the first ‘Gymnédie’, and the second ‘Nocturne.’

‘They’re so long,’ I’d grumble. And she would laugh and retort, ‘They’re only three minutes,’ then play them again. And I renewed myself in that image, of my French piano-playing lover. But every second I died. And it was a very dignified, respectable way to go.

‘So, what’s it like with a woman? In bed, I mean.’

It’s half past twelve and it’s taken my sister two whole servings of almond chicken and fried rice to let her hair down. Or maybe it was the Coke. She hasn’t had any in more than three years. Slow-acting poison, she calls it. But tonight is special. Not everybody has a lesbian sister to comfort them after a breakup. Tonight’s heart-to-heart will be a real treat – irresistibly modern, maybe even obscene. My sister can’t help picturing herself as the lead in a popular TV series. Playing the sister of the lesbian is quite the role; it offers a seal of respectability.

‘Do you want Nestea?’ I ask her before dinner. She throws me a thunderous look, as if she’d just decided to go into business with the Mafia.

‘Screw it, I’ll have the Coke!’ she says, thrilled. Screw it!

‘Careful it doesn’t go to your head. You’re not used to such strong beverages.’

My sister doesn’t know her way around a can, so I transfer the Coke into a tall glass that she takes from my hands with a wanton gleam in her eye. The poor thing feels funny, she’s used to getting her beauty sleep. But great things are afoot!

‘What’s it like’ – enticing inquiry – ‘to fuck a woman?’

I swear this is the first time she’s ever uttered the word ‘fuck’, plumb-drunk on Coca-Cola.

‘So that’s what you wanted to know?’ I ask with a dash of cruelty. I flat out refuse to suffer fools, even when they try to make an effort.

‘You know that’s not true!’ she cries. I concentrate on the guest room and nothing but the guest room, crucial as fingernails.

‘Shall I tell you another story?’

She nods with a headful of eyes and the aspartame-laced smiles

of a pampered girl who will never, never ever indulge in another can of Coke.

‘All right,’ I consent. The tactic works. ‘Have you ever heard of action painting?’ Now she shakes her head. ‘Jackson Pollock?’ I insist.

‘No.’

‘Okay.’ I walk into my room and bring out a book of Pollock paintings. It’s tremendous; images like these make me re-evaluate my love affair with death.

‘This is art? A child could have made these!’ my sister blurts.

‘But a child didn’t.’

The woman must be dumb. Thick as two planks. This guest room is costing me a tidy sum, but what else can I do? Where else can I go? The glutamate in the sweet-and-sour prawns is affecting my ability to think, but I have another go. I’m sure that with some effort I can pluck a plastic flower from the dunghill, a plastic flower that will satisfy the dregs of curiosity of the poor aborted lesbian lurking in my sister’s brain.

‘This is an action painting,’ I begin. ‘Action painting is the product of impatience.’

She pulls a face like a cricket. ‘Around the mid-twentieth century, there was a period when artists were no longer being challenged. For centuries, they’d struggled with a series of problems: motif, depth, form, color, realism, fidelity, light . . . everything! In other words, they’d run out of lines of inquiry. And then Pollock rocked up with his huge, unplanned canvases stretched out on the floor, and wham!’

‘Wham?’

‘Look at this.’ I show her *Number 3*, flip pages, *Number 5*, flip pages, *Number 34*, a superb piece with that horrific red-thinking head and its two yellow hemispheres.

‘Look,’ I tell her. ‘Clear, simple manipulation of raw material! Pure experimentation! Pollock splattered canvases driven by the spontaneity of the moment. A work of art isn’t only the end result – it’s art in time, art in real time, in action, as simple and impulsive as a drawing by a child. But there’s a sophisticated concern below the

surface, an interest in process – life’s immensity concentrated in that process. Do you get what I’m saying?’

‘Sort of.’

‘All right. So now you sort of know what it’s like to fuck a woman.’

Seven months had passed. Enough for it to have metastasized? I had no idea. The mole’s growth had slowed. The bottom edge of its beautiful contour had blotted. Once a deep black, it was now a faded brown, consummated in a series of tiny specks that no longer formed part of the raised cluster but existed as solitary, pigmented entities hovering a few millimeters below what could still be considered the mole. To be safe, I canceled my appointment with the dermatologist and started the process from scratch. Ahead of me lay ten more months of waiting, ten months for the altered cells to migrate – not downward, but deep inside.

I always suspected that Roxanne was more suicidal than I was. That she would die first, I had no doubt, but most of all, that her desire for death had hardened within her into a formative whole. I was also convinced that she would die a more elegant death. Someone inside her was burnishing every single thing she did, every measured word she said – but who? Catalan phrases strutted out of her throat wrapped in French-accented mink, but with a lowly, port-like fragrance that I attributed to her Marseilles roots and which drove me wild. In her mouth, Catalan sounded the way it should sound as a perfect language. Any word that I said immediately afterward was a faded daisy in comparison, a silly little flower. I’ve never spoken as sparingly as I did with her, and I’ve never enjoyed the lead-in to a conversation quite as much. Whenever she opened her lips with a click of the tongue that recalled a book whose pages lay open under a strong wind, my heart would turn so slick it became an organ out of control. Every beat, every deliberate whiplash of life was trapped inside it. And it wasn’t just my chest, either. Every part of me flared up under the influence of her words.

‘Què vols sopar?’ she’d ask. And she would say it just like that, in italics, because she had the ability to apply font to speech. She did it every time, and without realizing. It made me dizzy. *‘Encara queda Camembert del que vaig portar ahir?’* And I was reduced to aftershocks of pleasure, at whose epicentre was the word ‘Camembert’. I tried my best to say something, stressing the paroxytones in an effort to appear interesting.

‘Of course. I had salmon for lunch so we could have the Camembert for dinner.’

Lies. Big. Fat. Lies. I’d had sausage and beans, except I couldn’t be with Roxanne and also be someone who ate sausage and beans. Absolutely not. I would have sausage for lunch, air out the apartment, take the trash down to the dumpster, and claim I had salmon. Because even though salmon isn’t Camembert, it belongs to the same part of the pyramid as the foods I used to save for days when I wanted to treat myself, as Mom likes to put it, before I met Roxanne. This never made sense to Roxanne, whose whole life was a treat. Roxanne often had croissants for breakfast – flaky on the outside, insides soft, buttery, and still warm. She bought them from a bakery four blocks from her house, where they were held for her. She drank coffee like I did, but not just any old coffee. She had her coffee delivered from a shop where it was ground *sur place* seconds before being packaged.

She didn’t have ordinary ham; she had smoked ham. When we ate at her place, she would cook a peculiar type of pasta that looked like a ruddy, serrated snail shell, sautéed with hot spices and served with sprout salad. She loved funky cheeses. She filled my fridge with Comté, Brie, Époisses de Bourgogne, Gaperon and Roquefort, none of which were labeled the way they usually were in supermarkets, if they stocked them in the first place. She got a different brand every time, each more authentic than the last, and imported. The same could be said of everything about her – her clothes, her hobbies, the building she lived in, her hair. She wore a single piece of jewelry: a striated ring the width of one finger on the middle finger of her right hand. She almost always dressed in dark clothes. She had pale skin

and liked to wear baggy sweaters with long sleeves that fell halfway down her hand. I used to dream about those sweaters. I would dream of her white, silver-ringed hand as it emerged from a deep-blue sleeve, cold and slow like a sea mollusk. My eyes would fixate on her hand as it stirred pasta in the wok with the chopsticks she usually used to cook.

I was captivated by that finger, her ring finger. It was perhaps her only concession to traditional constructs of femininity. Even though everything about her screamed femininity: head blond and shorn like a solid and recently shaven cunt, cracked-ice eyes, breasts long and continuous like tongues resting over a flight of ribs, crimped nipples, legs and feet soft and monochrome like the drawings in the classical *Kama Sutra*. Her flesh was taut, smooth and moderately full, her mouth wild like a natural cleft in a chunk of mineral rock, and her tongue . . . her tongue was a sovereign being that lived alongside her, a slave to my pleasure. It talked to me and fucked me and carried on talking while Roxanne fucked me instead, a partially domesticated animal, dogged and feral when entering my cunt. She hadn't wanted to at first.

'I love it when you eat me out,' she said on our first night together, 'though I don't usually do it myself.'

'You'd better start.'

Pleasure is a lower value, but Scheler had a knack for changing sides and change can be an excellent source of knowledge. She did it. It became her favourite part, in fact. She could keep at it all evening, like a lioness fixated on a wound. A slow, rhythmical licking. And I struck back. Our cunts were our favourite set of fine china. We plated them with fruit salad – segments of mandarin and sweet orange, which we peeled and sliced into pieces. We held fruit in our lips and between our teeth, dipped the pieces inside ourselves and fed them to one another. Now and then we doused each other in chocolate syrup or raspberry sauce, and if we spotted a seed, we would tuck it into the folds of our lips or lick it into the hole. Wiping myself after peeing the next day, I might come across a seed and smile. Innocent little

seed, in a pee stain, on a piece of toilet paper. A childlike gemstone of immeasurable worth.

She was a woman. By that, I mean a female rather than a male dermatologist. She wasn't attractive and yet the morning sun poured through the tall windows behind her with such force it seemed almost to penetrate her, magnifying her humanity and dressing her in a beauty that she certainly lacked outside the office. She'd just set beside her computer a small plastic cup rimmed with residues of coffee foam, and it occurred to me that her tongue must also be the intoxicated yellow that comes from drinking coffee.

I was her first patient of the day. I'd arrived a little before eight and sat alone in the waiting room, rereading Kierkegaard and collecting myself. The doctor saw me right away. She was younger than me. Her white coat looked new and hung loose on her body. Next to the sink sat a small plant with a couple of buds about to bloom. That same morning, probably. She smiled at me and everything – her youth, her baggy coat, the plant, her smile – made me feel guilty. Did I really have to go and ruin this doctor's day? She seemed nice. What if this was her first case of melanoma diagnosed at a first consultation and during a first examination in a woman as young as I was? My mole was now more a meteor than a mole, a dark comet with a powerful trail of particles glowing behind it. Its suckerfish had multiplied in such a way that the entire mole seemed to have shifted, creeping a few centimeters up my stomach. According to my mother's calculations, no less than a couple of colonies of malignant cells should have already taken root in some shimmering organ inside me. I wasn't concerned about the fact that I had no symptoms. I was sure they'd show before long, just as soon as I had a confirmed diagnosis. I prayed for it to be too late to get treatment; I preferred a sudden growth and a predictable end.

'So, what can I help you with?' she asked, looking me square in the eyes. Hers were brown and they sparkled, as though her skull was a pumpkin and inside the flame of a candle was flickering. How could

I get her to understand that I was beyond help? Without hurting her? Without snuffing out that lovely, animate, impermanent flame? In this woman? In vocation incarnate? In her white coat and Sistine Madonna-esque halo that the sharp light had drawn around her, filtered through the blinds? Did I really have to go and do that to her? On a morning bright enough to make buds bloom? Not me – I wasn't going to be the one to make her cry.

'My doctor told me I should have some moles checked out,' I said innocently.

'Let's take a look then,' she suggested. I followed the direction of her hand to the exam table. 'Where should we start?' she asked excitedly, just as if we were at our wedding-menu tasting.

She wasn't attractive, and now that she'd stepped outside the light her whole body had dimmed a little. But she had very nice, comforting hands.

'It's these ones,' I said unwrapping the green scarf with orange duck beaks from around my neck and sliding the collar of my shirt down a little. It's worth pointing out that I have an unconventional chest – inherited from my mother – with eight ruddy moles, shapeless and of varying size. These moles are not dainty moles. Three are clustered together in a primitive constellation like a pointy triangle at the base of my neck, a little off to the left. The other five look like someone shook them in a dice cup and scattered them on my chest. They're not a pretty sight, but I've had them since I was ten years old and I know for sure that they're harmless. Mom had had them looked at – at a private clinic, of course – and the doctor in question had assured us that my moles and I would live peaceably until the end of my days.

The dermatologist lifted her hands to my collarbone. Both hands. A couple of fingers alighted, smooth as a seaplane. I pictured her in bed, touching me in that gentle and focused way, determined and skillful. Her fingers circled my moles like inquisitive creatures around an intruder of unknown species. They tugged my skin flat, then released it, and carefully fondled the moles' granular surface . . . wait

a second. Was she actually fondling my moles? Without gloves? She was – she was touching them! I went into a state of shock. Not even I touched my moles with such intent. They were pretty unappealing. Did she not realize this? My sister had bullied me about them for most of my childhood, claiming that nobody would ever want me, that they'd turn huge and hairy like a cow's, that I'd have to wear a turtleneck to get anyone to fall in love with me and they'd still run away the moment they discovered my secret, leaving me all alone. For the rest of my life.

'You've got no choice but to become a nun,' she'd asserted somberly. I think she might have actually believed it. Unsung childhood trauma. Her words ate away at my liver until one day, she got moles too, on the inside of her arm, redder and bulgier than mine. For a few months, I had faith in the power of the mind – I'd infected her with them! I don't think I've ever been happier than the day her moles grew to the same size as mine, then kept growing until they were nearly twice as big. Next to them, my moles were timid Vietnamese ladies. Hers, on the other hand, reared up on pinker skin, like strange, cerise sand castles in ruins. One summer, they started to peel. We were sitting on towels at the edge of the pool playing cards when I screamed, 'Look!' then pointed at the largest mole, covered in a crust that looked like powdered sugar. She ran over to Mom, who comforted her and said they'd go see the doctor again. The doctor corroborated his previous diagnosis: totally harmless. Still, as a teenager, my sister had her moles removed. For psychological reasons, apparently. For similar reasons, I opted to keep mine. And there I was, ready to weaponize them. The dermatologist brought her lighted magnifying glass to my chest and lingered there a while, her face centimeters from my breasts, my head thrown back to keep out of her way. I could feel her breathing, I could feel her drawing oxygen from my pores and exhaling it as carbon dioxide, hot and heavy with viruses endemic to her bronchial tree. It occurred to me that inspections like this could be as infectious as an erotic encounter.

'You don't have to worry about these moles,' she said. She'd drawn

away and sat before me on a swivel stool, legs wide, ready to get to the bottom of things. ‘How about we give you a general look-see while you’re here?’

A general look-see? That was not a medical term. The woman was so sweet, she didn’t deserve to find out about my cancerous cells.

‘Go on, take your shirt off so I can check your back.’ It would have looked suspicious to refuse. I considered rolling up my shirt, bending over myself, and cradling my secret like a newborn while the doctor played with her magnifying glass, then getting shyly dressed and taking off before it was too late. I mean, too late for her and for her innocence, which was probably still intact. I did as she asked, and she ruled out the moles on my back.

‘There are a lot of them, but they’re all perfectly normal,’ she assured me. Perfectly normal. If the moles on my back could become permanent to such an unnatural degree without questioning themselves, why couldn’t I?

‘Let’s check your belly.’

Belly, what belly? I turned to her. It was clear I was going to have to say something about my melanoma before she pegged me for an idiot. My mother and my sister were the only women I could bear to think of me as an idiot.

‘I’ve had this special mole for a while but it’s never bothered me.’

Special? Eight in the morning, a perfect moment for dumb observations. I couldn’t get out of it in the end. I felt bad for her. She would just have to diagnose me and refer me on to someone else. I focused my attention on the plant. Did she water it herself, or did the janitors? It looked like an African violet – stiff, meaty leaves, a coat of almost pubescent fuzz and buds fair and tough like cherry pits.

‘This?’ she asked fondling the skin around the mole and pulling it up to the magnifying glass. Yes, I thought as I tried to make the flowers bloom from a distance.

‘Oh, this is nothing. Still, you should have them looked at – like the rest of them – at least once every couple of years.’ I let my head fall forward, stared at my stomach, and pointed at the shooting-star mole,

EVA BALTASAR

thick with black, clearly cancerous suckerfish.

‘This thing here is nothing?’ I couldn’t believe it.

‘No. Nothing at all. Though if you don’t like it for aesthetic reasons, we can make an appointment to have it removed.’

And all of a sudden, the inside of my head began to teem with flowers pink, purple and blue. ■