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Andrew Nightingale

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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Extracts from 'A thread through portraits of Marchesa Casati',
an unpublished sequence of 15 poems

Andrew Nightingale

Baron Adolph de Meyer, 1912

She's looking back at de Meyer,
throwing her gaze,
black veil,
over his face: cold wit, no mercy.

But to look over the back of a chair
is to turn, which is to figure
or to cut a new figure,
looking back to an idol for cover:

she picks a princess to dress herself in.
She cuts her cloth, she wears
the Belgiojoso, aping the embalmed lover
with a mannequin

at her table in Venice
when dining with the photographer.
She also raids that princess for
tall emaciation, the eyes of a sphinx,

the early PJ Harvey makeup,
charcoal smudging arum white,
a morbid aura of séance and scrying:
generally, eau de fin de siècle.

She's young, why fault her
for dressing in an iconic forbear
to wield a feudal power
from eyebrow, fringe and philtrum?

This first recorded stillness
is the first running stitch
along a straight seam that gathers in
tailored tropes, a sequence

of subterfuges that keep her alive
and (or is this how?) keep her never
quite herself as in a garment
without flesh inside.

Roberto Montenegro, 1914

Knockoff Beardsley
by the young illustrator from Guadalajara
makes an androgynous opening bracket of her
on the steps of Palazzo dei Leoni.

She wears Persian costume,
metallic silver with pearls,
a Paul Poiret,
and she holds aloft a gourd of perfume

like it was nouveau fruit. At heel
a masked footman
ushers with a lantern
and proffers a bowl of peach hearts:

fruit dressed as unholy desire.
The décor is orbs, button holes, eyelets
as beads in webbing or threshed kernels
or pawnbroker weft on a warp of nacre layers.

Her shawl recalls two black dolphin
handles mounted off the shoulders
of her vase – the vessel for which she offers
Montenegro anything in the shop.

The asymmetry of the bracket is corrected
later in Paris
with a life-size mirror image,
a waxwork in a matching outfit.

Joseph Rous Paget-Fredericks, 1940s

All over the place:
retro Deco
on a gold ink ground evoking
medieval icons, some tortured saint

but done up as Taoist wanderer
with, is that the traditional tasselled spear?
And two, no, three of her trademark cheetahs
back on loan from Kunlun Mountain.

She seems ascended, white blush enraptured
in a vaping trail of cloud mysteries,
her marchioness arts a prescient mastery
of shamanic catwalk patterns and

look! She's looking straight at me
and she's Golden Lady
of the Shining Lake...
Wake up! She slaps my cheek

and is gone
where the penniless
find grace in the privacy
of loss.

Time gradually pulls the spindle
bare, iron girders settle
their grid of anti-telepathy
and South Ken rain sews on sequins.

Cecil Beaton, 1954

Beaton pretends to take the Pekinese,
but Luisa still swerves, she turns away
and manages to shield her face
so a refusal is perceived.

These last images, a final first,
turn against the spectator,
the reflection in belladonna depths,
the cloak of bold defiance,

the back of the chair.
Beaten,
everything is taken and cheapened,
the bottles of meths,

broken clocks,
an old electric fire,
wilting artificial flowers,
keys to villas she's now sold off.

She wants Beaton sued for defamation
but she still takes tea with him.
He has her shots stuffed in a glass coffin,
high camp fit for a morality play:

the trauma
no cut can fix,
no costumier re-imagine.
Horror's the body's

irreducible trauma. A symbolic
ensemble can't deflect
the imaginary fabric's slough,
the stopping of the run of stitches.

A drunken placket
detached from the body hangs loose
to leave cloth words rot.