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## A Baudelairean Girl

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It started with a song about Wilhelm Reich and UFOs, Patti Smith on the tape deck of my dad's beat-up Pontiac.

I have an assignment for you, Dad said. I need you to help me understand this really weird song. Is she singing about being taken up into a big black ship? Yes, I said. Can you get the rest of the lyrics? I could, almost. I listened obsessively. I read what I could find. I looked up every poet Patti Smith had ever referenced and read until my brain was exploding from it. I was eleven.

In middle school French, we learned only that the young girls wearing hats were going to the swimming pool or perhaps, at the very most, to the beach. At no time did it occur to me to connect these girls and the language that failed them with the poems I read late at night. I read the poems in English, it never occurred to me to do otherwise.

In high school French, some poems about owls and cats showed up in our textbook but seemed unrelated to the Baudelaire in my head. My French teacher married the football coach and taught us to match verbs to their appropriate auxiliaries by means of the name Vandertramp. I wrote poems in composition books and stayed up all night reading. I made friends with the night watchman and bummed cigarettes from him and snuck into the school chapel to blow smoke on the crucifix. This felt much closer.

I found a little Laurel library paperback of *French Poetry from Baudelaire to the Present* tucked away on one of my parents' bookshelves. The poems were in French with prose translations running along the bottom of the pages. The pages were already yellowing when I found it, the cover half torn off. It's still here on the shelves by my bed, encased in pink plastic to keep the crumbling pages in one place, well-travelled, unreadable, talismanic.

I moved to New York City with the express purpose of becoming Patti Smith. This didn't happen. I did work in a bookstore. I went to college. I studied poetry and languages and philosophy. I read Benjamin on Baudelaire. Walking city streets alone became my favourite pastime. I moved to Prague, then London. I read a generation of Czech poets who turned against nationalism and German by turning to Baudelaire. It worked for them. I moved back to Prague. I no longer needed translation but carried my battered Laurel book with me everywhere.

At no point did I ever identify with any of the women in Baudelaire's poems.

I moved to New Jersey, which has a different ring to it. In seminars we read Paul de Man on Baudelaire and on weekends my father-in-law ranted about Paul de Man and politics and talked about Baudelaire and classics and gave me books. I had now read every word Baudelaire had ever written.

Sometimes I summarize my graduate school career as the process of failing to understand *Spleen II* in increasingly complex ways. This is the most accurate summary.

I spent a summer in Paris looking at all the paintings Baudelaire had ever mentioned and researching his journalism in the National Library. I spent days arguing that I needed to look at journalism and fashion magazines and poetry at the same time. I would need to bring materials together in rooms and on seats that had been marked for different and mutually exclusive purposes. I would need to make reservations precluded by the operating system. In the end, I would require a manual override and an escort to bring journalism to the poetry. It was a violation that made the workers there uncomfortable. It also performed the main argument of my thesis, which I explained to my escort in a way that amused him.

I talked my way into every art museum by explaining that since Comparative Literature included art history, I was essentially an art history student and should be admitted for free. French was not a very living language to me, and so I sounded like a cross between the nineteenth century and Belgium, a perplexing and unappealing mixture. And yet, I paid very little for my museum visits.

I went to Baudelaire's grave and imagined how he would have despised the poems and watercolour paintings piled over his long-decayed corpse and been deeply gratified by them at the same time. A drunk woman urinated on the sidewalk as I passed and I thought Baudelaire might have despised and been gratified by that, too. And me, of course. This seemed clear.

At some point, I had noticed that the women in the poems were not as I would imagine myself, and that even if I tried, I could not see myself in them. I had noticed that Baudelaire loved and hated them in interesting, compelling ways that I felt more connected to, which distressed me. I found that how Baudelaire loved and hated women was equally repellent and fascinating to me and responsible for many excellent poems as well as some real duds. I found I did not wish to explain it away. I found I had developed a terrible personal fondness for him over the course of twenty years that I knew would not have survived five minutes in his actual company.

Not for the first or last time, I was grateful to work only on the dead.

Once, I was in labour for over twenty-four hours, unmedicated and hallucinating. When my daughter finally made her way to join us, she picked up her head and looked around, which is impossible. She looked old, which is common. I thought, *j'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans*. This remains my favourite failure to understand 'Spleen II'. And if I imagine Baudelaire would feel vaguely ill at the prospect, I only like it better.

I recently learned that Patti Smith meant to dress like Baudelaire on the cover of *Horses*, the album that had been my adolescent obsession and set much of my trajectory for the next quarter century. I like to think she would be pleased with this legacy, and that Baudelaire would despise and be gratified by us both.