

Eric Morgan

The Scent of Mnemosyne

by Dilli Novikova

I'm watching her as she combs, coaxing her loose chevelure¹ from the darkness, at first a tickle of caressing tresses, drifting, twisting and curling closer before awakening me with a bilious waft of her ripe sweat.

"Dilli?"

My dream sliding into a nightmare, I open my eyes to find her crouched beside me in the pale light of dawn, her long fingers moving delicately over the sand.

"A strand, Dilli. I had a strand of my hair," she whispers, "But a breeze came and it is gone."

I tell her that it is still dark; I can barely see her.

"Oh you poor thing, deprived the pleasure of gazing upon my countenance."

"What bothers me, Violet," I divulge in my sleep fog, "is that your odour is becoming in my mind a reassuring thing."

Her eyes light up, "Of course, as it should be. I am your protector."

"At least it has finally overcome the stench of that coat from the man you killed."
(She insists on wearing it, slashed and splashed with blood and his stomach contents.)

But I'm awake now; let me speak instead of the beauty here in the gorge. Even the sand has that inner glow I remember in Rembrandt's glazes, graded into drifts of greys and ochres in rare times of rain. Washed from another place, for our cliffs rising high around us are of a different stone, smooth steely blue with veins of asbestos running through, and high up in the light a rust red, now cast down as a glow over my Violet's bare shoulders.

There, the strand of hair she seeks, caught against the lace of her mancheron sleeve. With a fingertip, I lift and lay it over her hand, catching and holding the flash of gratitude in her eyes.

Finding my pencil, I draw in the dim light as she carefully winds the strands around her finger. When her hair falls forward to curtain her face, I reach without a thought to tuck it back over her shoulder, my gesture stopping her still, lips parted in surprise. I pretend nothing happened, continuing until I am pleased with my drawing, a loose bouquet of her hands, her curling fingers the petals of each bloom.

Her hair now safely under the edge of her sleeve, she holds her hands out towards me, no trace of a tremble, but I rest my eyes in the loose lace of her bodice, blurring, the slow rise and fall like floating on a calm sea.

Off to the lagoon to check our traps, our bare feet slip over the smoothed stone floor of the curving corridor of the gorge. Keeping my eyes closed, I can feel the walls around us in the echoes of her babbling banter. She names the blooms and grasses we pass, showing me how she maps her way with a nomenclature of scents, finishing with the sedges and reeds and our still duckless traps where the gorge opens out into the

¹ Fr. head of hair

wide lagoon. The sounds are coloured differently here and, feeling exposed, I choose sight again. My hunger is just a background ache to the pleasure of warming myself on the sand. Invisible to her, I remove my clothes and lie with my feet in the water while she plays, flicking her wet hair over me, then wandering off, one hand brushing the stone wall of the cliff, her thin reed held in the other. I close my eyes and drift away.

“Here Dilli, keep your eyes closed and breathe in.” Tricked before, I flinch and try to turn away, wondering how she knows my eyes are closed. “Oh no, you must trust me,” she makes that annoying giggle, “I promise this time they have not been entwined in my peli pubici².”

I shouldn’t trust her, but I lift my head until my nose brushes a petal. With the scent I am suddenly a child again, skipping along the path beside the stream, those pale crocus blues warming in patches of sunlight, single left, triple right; even then I danced my way; no insouciant shepherdess³.

“Dilli?” She parts the petals with her fingertips, “To me, this feels like a place of intimacy. Is that how the petals seem to you? If you were making a drawing, would it rhyme in your eyes?”

She holds me close in the present, not allowing my olfactory drift into mnemosyne. I admit the similarity, fully aware of how she steers me into insecurity.

“Press with your fingertip, until the petals begin to fold.”

I reach out as she holds the flower, eyes wide, lips quivering.

“I can feel your touch, Dilli, through the stem.” Now, quizzical, “If it were me you were touching, Dilli, what do you think I might do?”

She has crossed a line and I roll into a defensive crouch.

“I would not be able to control myself,” she admits, her eyes uplifted, then pushes her tongue into the petals. With a soft, “Ohh,” she opens her mouth, about to engulf the bloom. “If I were to take its maidenhead, might you try to stop me, my démasqua⁴ Dillochka⁵?”

“You want me to remind you that Crocuses are poisonous, Violet?”

“Ahh, the crocus, pretty Vishakanya⁶ for its poor cousin, das Veilchen, crushed underfoot.”

With the stem caught between her nose and her top lip, she sings, “Zu ihren Füßen doch, Das arme Veilchen! Es war ein herzigs Veilchen!”⁷

She pouts at me, “Surely then, you would allow me to feast upon something more palatable?”

I reach into the water to splash her.

² It. pubic hair.

³ Dilli references Johann von Goethe’s poem ‘Das Veilchen’ where the shepherdess treads on the flower.

⁴ Fr. demasked.

⁵ Slavic diminutive of ‘Dilli.’

⁶ Sanskrit. Poison maiden

⁷ Beneath her darling feet. Poor little violet! It was the sweetest violet.