



# *The Pleasures*

Billie Chernicoff



LA MAISON

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The Pleasures  
is the thirteenth in a series of texts and chapbooks  
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*A threshold is a sacred thing.*

Porphyry, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century

*...et la consultation un acte d'amour.*

Yagual Didier, Le Jeu Divinatoire

The Pleasures arose in response to a deck of cards, 27 paintings by the artist Marina Karella, a series of tarot-like images published as Le Jeu Divinatoire. The writing strayed from the paintings, but Marina Karella's beautiful, mysterious archetypes are hidden in the poems, and this book is dedicated to her.

The last of the poems, XXVIII, took its inspiration from Charlotte Mandell's haunting photograph of a Cooper's Hawk drying its wings, for which I thank her.

## I. A Man

1.

Where we are written  
whose finger says  
of a mirror  
this is the way.

A man like the sky  
willing to hold everything.

He is only a beginning  
with a rough crown  
a king willing to be a man  
any fool can see in silvered glass.

Whose name is also called the door  
alchemy on a single page,  
spiral, hexagram, zodiac, rosary.

2.

Daleth,  
the door  
atomic D,  
liminal tonic  
against which we hear  
every sonnet  
traffic of all kinds  
and silence itself.

D, which is Re,  
Egyptian for mouth.

## II. A Woman

1.

It's hard to read  
her dark hair  
pale mouth  
the gravity of her gaze.

You are dreaming  
the prepositions  
her artful clothes  
conceal.

Oblique to your question  
its infinite history.

Who are you?

The one she sees  
and holds  
all your life  
her half smile  
the only argument.

2.

Prophetissa  
thy soft weasel  
beyond latin  
the secret language  
that has no father  
no motto to mutter.  
Forsake, by cadency  
your mothers also.

Come  
to nothing.

Nihil verius  
nothing more true.

### III. A House

For thou-making.

Windows lit  
the door slips open  
like silk to wolves  
or thieves  
who rest their heads  
on our shoulders  
read a page or two.

Or windows dark  
we dream  
our blue lake's a well  
the well a maiden  
and the maiden sings.

*Two urns  
elegant runes  
a choice  
in every tale brims  
for thirsty pollen-clad men  
gentle unto their beasts.*

A tree of answers and one of questions.

#### IV. The Children

What is a child  
but a troth,  
troth but a nakedness  
unashamed

god the shape  
between two friends  
the splendor that becomes  
difference

that which increases love.

## V. The Tree

World spine  
first crown.

Voice of bird  
snake, bee  
silence of Merlin.

You are our health.  
Into hand lap mouth  
fall thy gifts.

Source of cradle table  
chair bed coffin  
rib rafter keel floor  
ship and house.

Origin of desire  
and persuasion.

Origin of God.  
A wood so dark you see.

## VI. The Key

Language finding its way  
along the red of madder  
the red of cochineal  
flowering under your feet.

Aren't colors the future?

Trees keys to that oracle the sky.

Her slim self a key  
a word sheathed.  
Mirage, a traveler's illusion  
a girl's the very symbol of.  
The color of water  
brings you to your senses  
a market you enter

when you take something  
in your hand  
without thinking.  
That is the key.

## VII. The Journey

Le voyage, an accordionist  
in a shabby coat, cathedral of  
strange syllables we glisten  
an awkward waltz  
of shy glance, hand speak.

You can't read the paper  
so you read spilled salt  
your own palm, a stranger's  
gaze or gait.

Even better, a strange alphabet  
every character a love story  
sunrise or catastrophe.

The wise man leaves his dictionary home.  
Nor learn to say your favorite color, weather, aria  
nor what you do for love or money nor any  
words that convince you you are yourself.

Where is the station?  
Where is the bread you ask uncertainly.  
Where are the books? Why is the church?

Sometimes a stranger leads you gently to the bread.

## VIII. The Work

Scientist  
quietist virgin  
salt crowned  
pantheist  
who will not  
choose  
whose round arms  
pale as doves refuse  
all suitors and their emblems.

Multiplicatio, the work  
her immaculate  
inviolate milkiness  
replenishes.

She alone knows what she wants  
and what she means.

She is her own wife.  
No one can heal  
or resolve her  
devotion  
the beauty of her rib cage  
the fire in that house.

## IX. News

So little is new,  
the very point  
of my lance.

Is a blue horse a horse?

In a horse year  
marriage is likely  
or divorce  
a hot blooded sky  
the color of marigolds.

Chronomantic,  
each hour is restless  
religious, lucky.  
Each hour speaks  
wheels, veers.

The way is long  
my indigo,  
your chest a mansion  
a bed for the moon

one more night  
I yield to you.

## X. Love

1.

In winter buds  
prophesy like girls

in the mirror  
door locked  
practice kissing

imagine the bold  
tumescant lover.

2.

How god loves to express herself.

If we'd heard her once  
and remembered  
we'd have missed all this  
dangling and angling, the salt  
the whiff, wet goings on.

The last crystal of winter and we're on our own  
and who will be the first to say I love you.

## **XI. The Serpents**

Afternoon  
a soft golden cloche  
warms her, illuminates  
her beautiful face  
and the words writhe.

In surf to mid-thigh, a thigh crossed over  
reveals a little of a pale bush, a girl  
or boy lovely enough to be teased at school  
who fled dull hours for the unknowable.  
It foams around her.

Uncoil,  
snake girl, rise.  
Music is how we ask.

That's why she's here.

## XII. The Sun

1.

A woman after all  
Goethe's rose,  
darkness  
spilling into light  
with bare breasts  
and calm hips  
instructive hands  
on her casual thighs  
cloth flowing  
down to her feet.

A quiet god  
self possessed  
she could be  
someone you know  
or are  
who wakes  
to practice  
before the birds.

2.

More you than you know  
steeped in love's intervals  
streams and collisions

she gives birth to herself  
and to her father, all terms  
of cause or origin are her names.

At noon, bright as Egypt  
in a mirror, the tryst  
with one's own soul.

### XIII. The Devil

How much time is there?  
I was a watcher, a holy one  
God's other son  
"awake" they called me  
and I'm still watching  
these lunatics and infidels  
swim or eat grass.  
I'm still hopeful,  
no less eager, less  
desperate.  
I invented the mirror  
but they weren't ready  
I taught clouds and prayers  
how to say them  
and how to write them  
the sweet and the bitter.  
The truth is,  
when they say I fell  
I fell in love, they call me  
"slanderer" and worse  
I love them still  
their crises and guesswork  
their gardens and sins.  
My iron hoof  
rooted  
my eyes  
never shut  
I shoulder this remnant  
of the burnt out  
goat of me, rule  
a mute city of cold salt  
magnesium,  
sulfur, no woman  
would have me now.  
Yet even here there is a rose  
even here, revelation.

I hold the Book  
shut till you're ready.  
Forgive me,  
it's been so long since someone asked.

*The rose lieth hidden through the winter in this water.*  
*Thomas Vaughan*

#### XIV. Star

1.

When the mist  
burns off it's never clear

whether one can return  
from so far away

with prodigal eyes  
and a tangled crown

the signs and serifs  
I love you for.

2.

This line receives evening.  
You slip through my fingers into a cooler, more abstract climate.

This line is a wire for you to walk on all the way across the park  
through twilight over the green, past steeples and oaks.

Palindrome, unsolved crime,  
proof vanishing.

These are the Pleiades, doves on a branch.  
This is the moving line of your lips.

## XV. L'Equilibre

A substance like time, luminous  
contained, invisible decanted, spills  
across the mind, a seductive arc  
you raise your hand to interrupt.

L'equilibre, the alchemist  
hides you in her skirts  
like a mother  
hides you in her peat fire  
her opal, her incantation.  
Abandon your regrets.  
We have nothing but hours  
all this red this ripe  
life implicit, the sap.

The poem is just behind her  
between one vessel and another  
in her hair, Byzantium  
ablaze, lifted in her wings  
scattered on the checkered floor  
between the two of you  
your predicament  
richly framed.

*Do you want to live again?*  
To feel everything again  
ashamed and exalted,  
to change everyone?  
Something dappled, fawnlike  
lays itself down in you and breathes.

## XVI. The Fox

Camouflage,  
to be at one  
with what he knows.

Thief, consort  
of the grain.  
Heretic,  
who runs opposite.  
Descant above the book  
the unscythed gold  
fugitive tense,  
he won't go  
without a kiss.

He says "I" to himself.  
The cunning of love.

If you think he's gone  
look again.

## XVII. Fish

1.

Fish, thank you for speaking  
the original iridescent  
wish-granting  
language,  
silence.

Silence of the acquiescent girl  
and her son, our teacher and bread,  
we who swim in the waters of the book.

2.

Vesica piscis,  
before you were a prayer  
you were Aphrodite's womb  
delphos, the oracle,

that which must be said.

Touch is the only sense.  
To read the only act.

3.

Your lovely eyes,  
transparent  
as any lie, any god.

*Scholasticism with its subtle argument, theology with its  
ambiguous phrases, astrology, so vast and complicated are all  
children's games to alchemy.*

*Albert Poisson*

## **XVIII. Death and Resurrection**

A long and tedious journey  
of embodiment through coral  
granite, limestone, schist  
algae, fern, lily  
snake, horse, tiger, bee  
a thousand, thousand human births  
mother, magistrate, merchant, magician  
to That, sound body born in mind  
and sensorium, bliss.

## **XIX. This**

This is an egg  
this is smooth  
this is surprising

this is a wolf  
this has roots this  
has parts

like flowers this  
causes confusion  
is a witch, an ankh  
called flying

this is what hands are for  
this is an oboe, this is bone  
determined to be born

this unties the knots  
this whorl that  
ripples out  
rises to meet you.

## XX. The Magician

1.

Your tent, traveler  
a single crimson petal  
holds the whole bright wood  
all the words to be lost among.

Come through the trees who are your parents  
who are lithe girls and sly nephews  
the winged and wicked, strung like lyres.

There is the tree that will one day have you  
and changing colors all you can do.

Prince or thief with checkered sleeve  
from dream to deed the road is never plain.

Down to your last dove.

2.

Cheekbone, collarbone  
jawbone, snake.  
Chew three leaves and spit.

Dark around the eyes  
and around the words  
the woods.

Tantric is my little campsite.  
My coat held over us  
the letter C.

## XXI. The Lion

The body roars  
spurts sun  
and sprouts moon  
the only food  
falls from the sky  
a woman's hand  
on a lion's shoulder.

He swallows the sun,  
swallows her.

She opens his mouth  
the gnostic ruby  
speech before thought,  
a swarm of bees  
from the hive of his chest.

Breathe in this balsam,  
the human smell  
of days, the pulse of  
emotional gold, incense  
of the one who eats us  
and dreams us,  
eyes open.

## XXII. The Wheel of Fortune

1.

Mystic sister  
eyes closed  
hands on the wheel  
going by ear.  
No luck no irony  
here, beasts  
in their houses.  
Whatever it is  
is already so.

2.

ROTA The wheel  
TARO of tarot  
ORAT prays  
TORA the scripture of  
ATOR Hathor.

Hathor, most joyful of us  
utterly drunk  
love turns the wheel.  
Our lady of the cattle  
of the sky,  
the Sycamore.

3.

Crow.  
The dark  
darkening,  
a coming true  
beating its wings.

Swan, uprising  
a brightening  
declarative.  
It is her time and not  
yet yours.

4.

At the moment of ascent  
a breathing fire paints  
mist for its pleasure  
to be tintured, each hue  
accordingly.

*Therefore, close the door  
and drink only of the work.*

### XXIII. The Lightning

The sky is always telling you  
a sword cleaving or dragon  
burning down the house  
revise your thesis on beauty.

It's a lover's spine  
you the ancestral hero  
climb from earthly cleft

to paradise, axis mundi  
umbilical friend  
a lover's tongue, the teacher  
changes everything.

## XXIV. The Moon

Ornamental illusion  
of distance  
when they are so close  
those most difficult  
most beautiful problems  
the ones she loves.

How did we come here and whom do we serve  
is anything true apart from the eloquence  
of its articulation, is there a cosmic constant  
in Shiva's dance, does the multiverse pivot  
on his naked foot?

Is the moon then a pearl  
a bead of his rosary  
god particle  
that tunes the sea?

What can be said of the moon  
vanishes at the horizon  
an invention like the mind  
Brunelleschi's mirror, Alberti's window  
Galileo's occhiale, his starry peep show.

You can tell it's real when it falls into your mouth, a word  
with a slight grittiness between the teeth, and everything begins  
again.

*A tiny particle of the Philosopher's Stone, if cast upon the surface of water, will...immediately begin a process of recapitulating in miniature the history of the universe.... A miniature universe is formed which the philosophers have affirmed actually rises out of the water and floats in the air, where it passes through all the stages of cosmic unfoldment...and finally disintegrates into dust again.*

*Manly P. Hall, Secret Teaching of All Ages*

## XXV. Justice

Above the blaze  
justice has a throat  
of cool elusive violet  
the scent of whose  
subtle pronouncements  
you can barely  
only briefly  
detect.

Only tenderness  
herself need be  
so austere  
unrelenting  
arms crossed,  
wings folded.

You trust her  
with your tears  
as Dante his Virgil  
his tercets.

But what am I thinking?  
Winter is over, the fish at play  
and all is light, light in the balance.

Don't look away.

## XXVI. Wisdom

Prospero's book, a fish  
glimmering, refusal  
to disappear  
the nadir.

Let it go.  
There is a deeper blue.

Set your light down  
that little moon  
between someone's horns.  
Hang your coat by the door.

When you know enough to sit  
she sits down with you.

Clothes full of moonlight  
when you tell her your secrets.

## XXVII. The Pleasures

Being is round.  
A sigh  
circles inside.

The music  
tells you

she is  
yourself,  
ever a daughter

whose revels  
and terrors  
reveal the pleasures.

Rosy doors  
admit your dreams  
those deadly sins  
when the vessels break

everything is real.

## XXVIII. The Bird

1.

The prayer I lost,  
a lover's explanation.

Sound of D, daleth  
door in the air  
vibrant atom of

reconciliation  
god's X-rayed  
heart.

2.

I meant or meet  
you, friend  
of every sonnet

the mind's  
own lie  
le mensonge

whose profile  
changes hourly  
under such moon.

The word you were  
thinking of  
I was too.

3.

Creature of shy numbers  
sly mistakes  
are your invention.  
Fables, symbols  
the art of denial  
and concealment.

On the template of a scar  
an f-hole,  
Egyptian eye.

4.

Phi a lingam-yoni  
two lambdas woo the moon.  
Ma-Phallasath

goddess of whom  
so little is said,  
sky dancer

through whom god speaks.  
Dakini with a hat.

5.

Cooper's Hawk  
a labyrinth in the sky  
over your house

tore right through  
the screen of mine.

A heartbeat  
trying to say  
what a man is.

6.

Shield shaped  
bird of heraldry  
engrailed  
muse's muse  
embattled lily  
with meat-like  
scent deep.  
Ancestral haunch,  
wing, bezants  
for supper.  
Deus pascit corvos  
god feeds the ravens.

7.

In the crisis of time  
an image  
imprints the air  
  
and the mind  
shakes off a fine rain  
untangles his wings.