

Chaney Holland

Alain Cavalier's *Therese*

This morning I fell asleep at mass again. Mother punished me. Sister Luke says be patient, the first thirty years at Carmel are the hardest, but I never wanted to live here. Until you came. My cheek creased against the chilly vestry floor, the rustling of habits as each sister carefully stepped over me. Hateful obeisance. Already they've seen the wildflowers I left on your cot, the welts I raised on my body bared and shamed for its need. Then like the disguise, the mirage of morphine, you deflect my love back onto me. No, don't ask me to stop. They mean to keep us from one another. Through the hours of wringing sheets, ironing, washing, prayers like gutted fish, I chafed and you obeyed. You cried for joy at your wedding, even the eventual lost faith well-defined, the grating path of the crucifix dragged across the stone floor. Like a collapsed lung I never had any to begin with. Saved tears, locks of shorn hair, fingernails, save the little we are allowed, what endures. One day a sailor brought seaweed, we cradled a wooden child in our arms and Celine costumed you, the youngest, as Joan of Arc. It was Mary's Day and the light in your blushing face nearly killed me. You dropped sword and flag, fell, the camera flashed, blood gushing from your mouth. We could not lift you, we who loved you most. The grim, scourged mouth of our Mother, the Martin sisters enfolding their flesh, their death. Pauline, Marie, Celine and Therese.

Aster, fleur-de-lis, primrose and illuminated rose, the flowering of such care. Whoever showed my barren jealousy such tenderness? In the wavering months left, I wept when I heard your faint cries as though under glass—God, the father, my husband I beseech you, enter my garden, come into your orchard and receive your fruits. The silent silence answered for the vision that comes from looking directly at the sun. For you I imagined Egypt, a burning sky, the natives shrieking below two radiant nuns perched on the hump of a spitting camel. There, your death has released me, I have escaped in my wedding dress, with silver in my shoe. Walk for me. I have divorced Jesus, I have traded a violin for a train ticket to Paris. Walk for me, plain Lucy now. I am seeking the Egypt of mystery, and my secret sorrow, the rosary of your blood and saliva.