

*Lipstick Traces*  
Maisie Mattia





*from Petals (2015)*

It's just that every time I loved lipstick my stomach ached and the only way to make it stop aching was prove that boys did not love lipstick, and so because I was a boy I did not love lipstick either. But all of a sudden I would love lipstick and because no one told me I could love lipstick, I thought that meant I could not love lipstick, and the more I loved it, the more I would die. I thought that the day I surrendered to that love was the day I would no longer be anything at all—I would not even be a butterfly. And butterflies barely exist. Butterflies are the residue of our dreams.

I need them to show me the way to the dark heavens. The heavens that are beneath our feet. It was by following butterflies that I became an author. 'Butterflies' are what I called the angels, falling in the distance. They led me into a cave, where I found a typewriter; they told me to sit before the typewriter and tell it my story. The typewriter listened, dim and glistening. Then it offered me the alphabet. Our vital riddle. Without it we do not even know our own names.

I want to say thank you to the devil, because the devil has the dark power of caves and roots and the devil is the princess of spring. The devil ripens fruits deep within the earth and offers it to us in sweetness. The devil invented the alphabet. But god forbids the alphabet in the kingdom of heaven. God has no language.

I have always wanted simple things, but the world told me I could not be simple and also love lipstick, I had to choose. So I renounced simple things, and because I

renounced simple things I never learned that sometimes it is okay to be simple. And now I don't know how to tell a story, or how to buy fruits and vegetables at the market, or how to love you. But I am sentimental, when it comes down to it I am sentimental, and not intelligent, I don't understand riddles, I can never figure them out...

Perhaps if I write what the angels ask me to write, if I distribute their epistles, one day they will tell me why I loved you? But to explain my love does not require that I understand the explanation. So when I tell my story, then you will know why I loved you, but still I will not know. Just as I can write a book about life and still not know what life is. But when you read it you will say: ah, so that's it. Because my vision was given to me in scraps, and so I wrote it in scraps. But it was given to you like a pebble is given, or the dawn. It was given to you like the gust of a great wing. All at once.

But my grace is this: when I do not know why I love you, then I know I am alive. There is no way out except in, so I amble through dark forests and into caves, where in the endless dark I hear the waterfalls sparkling over rocks into a further, fathomless night. I abdicate the light of day for the alphabet and the sweetness of the good devil. The devil does not steal our souls, he just shows us how to type on the typewriter, and relieve our souls from the burden of their solitude. But god is a propagandist who told his angels to tell us that the devil steals souls, and that he steals them with the twenty six mystical letters of the alphabet. So I sit before the typewriter in the dark, and in the endless recital of my fingers upon the keys I am angry at you for loving me, I wanted to hurt you for loving me because you looked at me and did not look away and I was frightened that

when you looked at me you would see how I shimmer and if you looked close you would see that I only shimmer at the beginning and soon the shimmering fades and beneath the shimmering is what I do not give words to. And all the petals I crushed to make perfume, I am drunk on my perfumes but only when I am alone and in front of the typewriter. They sicken me because my beauty has brought me nothing and nonetheless I crush and crush, I crush up all the flowers I love and admire, and maybe when there is nothing left I will be loved, and if not I will be an object with hands full of crushed flowers. But when you looked at me I forgot how to make the perfume and so I suffocated because unless I crush them the flowers grow too great. I gave my kingdom to you, I let the crown tumble and said rule over me terrible prince, I want to be ruled by you alone. But you said you don't want to rule me, you want to love me. And I said I don't know how to love you except by saying my kingdom stands or falls for you, everything I have built here, the marble columns and wisteria-tangled grottos, and the endless rooms, empty but for wind in lace curtains, they are for me until I remember you and then they are for you.

A miracle is when God cheats, because it makes the story sweeter.



*from Estrogen (2018)*

We uncover our eyes, we raise our heads. A vast powder-blue galley is shipwrecked in the swaying grasses of the pasture; sails in the shape of orchids hang from the masts. Anastasia's ageless corpse adorns the prow. Ochre mushrooms bloom from her skin; jessamine bursts open between her legs; turquoise moss, bespattered with milky dew, sprouts from her breasts. She reeks of rotten oranges. Slowly, very slowly, she swivels her gaze toward our gaping faces. Then she smiles. Her teeth are jagged shards of porcelain. 'There are lakes,' she says. 'Subterranean reservoirs, deep beneath the soil. I can feel them. We will find them if we follow the roots of the trees.'

We board the galley. Laughter echoes up from our lungs; we pass around glasses of rosé. Then the earth shifts. Cracks resound between the cliffs; the very air begins to vibrate. We cling to lacquered curlicues, porcelain levers, Andalusian horse-hair ropes. We peer off the prow. A portal rips open in the pasture, swallowing clumps of grass and crumbling granite, forming an abyssal aqueduct, a slanted tunnel of pink bedrock which funnels a stream of frothing milk into the dark. The milk flows from Anastasia's breasts, down her hips, past her toes. She gasps from the effort; she stifles screams. Her skin is riddled with infinitesimal cracks, forking, webbing; with every breath, these widen, threaten to tear asunder. But then she exhales a final breath; then the prow tips forward, and we slip, at last, beneath the surface. There is nothing new under the sun. But under the soil is

another question. At first we see nothing but a diminishing point of light, hear nothing but the splash of liquid, and smell nothing but damp moss. Then our senses are stolen, diminished to the limit of nonsense: sensation as faint as a remembered face, a remembered voice. For this interval of underworld we possess only heartbeats, pulsating organs, the internal rush and squirt of fluid; we are bodies not seen, not heard; only felt. Time is difficult to measure. Then something brushes our cheeks, faint and swift. I say *deja-vu*, an untraceable memory of peacock feathers; I say the passing wings of silver-haired bats; I say a long-lost angel, who remembers God only as a density of light, and so seeks Him, mistakenly, in the Earth's molten core. Our breath expands the width of an instant, even if not the length; angels, bats, and feathers swirl and swarm inside a closed sphere.

Now we are dazzled by sudden free fall. The blue galley pours out into a lake of milk, within what soon reveals itself to be a vast domed cavern, whose floor, whose folds and clefts are festooned with bioluminescent fungus, swaying, glowing, offering the air a dim celadon haze through which moths the size of stingrays drift wantonly among glittering stalactites. Blind salamanders poke their eyeless pearlescent heads through the opaque surface of the lake, the neon fronds of their fernlike cherry-red gills shivering, twitching. We approach a dock: slats of driftwood wedged between two rows of stalagmites. I throw a pink marble anchor, you lower the gangplank. After we dismount, the vessel sinks behind us under the lake, where it will settle into curdled sludge. 'I will be here if you need me,' says Anastasia, half-submerged, pale bubbles popping from her lips.



Embowered by cascades of lion's mane mushrooms that appear to us like some spectral isomer of wistaria, a carved-oak cloister winds away through fields of fairy-fire; we follow it, whispering, emerging soon into what seems, at first glance, the unkempt ruins of an amphitheater, whose overgrown cut-stone seats vault up into the dark. We stand on the stage, where a 1926 Royal typewriter drips thick glistening ink down a mossy pedestal, glazed clusters of honey mushrooms bursting through its steel tendons like the unmarked keys of a divine rotten alphabet. Thin ochre roots branch from the rusted metal and disappear into tangled thickets of flora. 'I've seen this before,' you whisper. Suddenly a voice addresses us from the audience; we scan the ruins in search of its source.

The amphitheater is filled with a crowd of half-visible women, whose bodies are webbed within the innumerable forking roots of the typewriter's honey mushrooms. The roots infiltrate their ears, their mouths; their dreaming faces are still, silent, save for shivering eyelids. One among them opens her eyes, lifts her head. Airing herself with the crenellated fan of a splitgill mushroom, and bedecked in an enoki headdress, this anonymous woman addresses us as her kin: 'Sistren, did you know that the splitgill possesses twenty-eight thousand distinct sexes? Inspiring, isn't it? I apologize that I cannot rise to meet you. You see,' she says, gesturing around herself—she is seated at the altitude of somnolent moths; her voice sifts through the everglade gloom, attenuated to an arrow of sound—'You see, we are all connected to the Library of Oneironautics, composing an Ode against the Apocalypse, which includes the howling of wolves, the laughter of hyenas, the mourning of beluga whales, various stanzas of birdsong, and of course, a few

parthenogenetic silences, in honor of our fungal confrères.  
If you wish to join us... type a word into the typewriter..'

One after another we approach the pedestal. The chatter of keys echoes within the cavern, multiplying our single words into entire novels, then dissolving, once more, into silence.

'Sistren...,' says our anonymous host, yawning, sinking back into the roots.

She flicks her wrist with drowsy beneficence.

'Sistren,' she says.

'Goodnight.'



*from* The Fifth Wound (2020)

Are you a man?

No.

Are you a woman?

No.

Are you a god in disguise?

No.

What are you?

I am a blurry object.

I want to say that I feel, at last, like I can think. I can hear the beginning of a new song. Perhaps it's because I'm hidden in a copse of cyprus trees with no audience other than vultures and strawberries, no longer distracted by men and women asking me to explain, to explain and reexplain the simplest facts about my fairy mind and its fairy desires. I just can't do that. Real sorry, ma'am. 'Minimalism' is a luxury that belongs to people who can expect to be understood. There would be no need for rumination, for the double helix of dependent clauses which fairy-shame irrepressibly encodes into any assertion, if a girl could assume her subtext were a universal truth: but the species of eyeless skull-dwelling spirits whose echo-locating astral howls sometimes scramble and restructure

my inner monologues such that every thought, rather than performing a fearful recursion of the last, briefly assumes the flavor of a revelation as bright and unrecoverable as a blue star dissolving in a kaleidoscope's rainbow abyss, are fitful, unpredictable, certainly not universal, so unless I make myself extravagantly explicit, unless I ensure every atom of my vision is as rococo as a Fabergé egg, unless I trap my reader's precarious faith in sentences as labyrinthine as Escher's staircases, such that any attempt to disprove me results, inevitably, in vertigo, that is, unless I sublimate my confessions into a Gordian equation of symbols, who will believe in my outraged scrap of self? Most every fairy I know is a maximalist because we fear each chance is our last and only chance to speak.

Look, if you have seen my photographs, then you know about my surgeries, I don't need to tell you. And if you haven't seen my photographs, the truth is I don't know you, and you probably want to see them to decide for yourself whether I look enough *like a woman* for you to think of me as a woman. So let me tell you this: If you saw me only in the present moment of my face (if we had spent our whole lives not knowing one another and then you walked up to me at Mood Ring in 2020 and touched my forearm and said, 'I'm Ezekiel,' and if I turned to face you smelling like strawberry smoke and some memory of horses in a field, smiling languorously, saying, 'Honey...') by which I mean if you weren't studying my face like a palimpsestic scrap of parchment for any trace of a boy you once knew—well then without a doubt you would see a BRUNETTE BOMBSHELL WITH BUXOM BREASTS. And I am, it's true: I became my own mirage. But by saying this much I have already trespassed the vows of Womanhood, I have made

my beauty speak when Beauty is made to be unspeakable. Beauty is a relationship between subject and object where the object in itself needs nothing and so expresses nothing, because it is fulfilled already by its form. For an object to speak itself is excessive. To save it from so much as the suggestion of indelicacy, the object is separated from language like cream from milk. Beauty is as silent as a block of butter.

But I can't help it—I am sprouting in the sunless furrows of your Brain, petal by petal I am transmitting a graft of my object Eden to one of the dull wet wordless folds of your occipital lobe. What a pleasure. To be here with you. And somehow I'm sparkling to you, somehow my sentences are haunted by a sparkling. Because I have made a secret of the alphabet (I'm calling my story a 'secret of the alphabet') but it is a secret that reveals itself only to those who—well, let me say that one man's trash is another man's treasure. But there is a sparkling nonetheless, so let's pray for both our sakes that today you find treasure. May I be extravagant with you? I swear they always misread my kitsch. I tell a story about a feather boa, and they applaud my courage. To them I'm always unintentional—caught in the act of my own candor. Once I spent a night in a stranger's arms, in an apartment crowded by ferns and old love letters and wooden reliquaries of ketamine and dehydrated oranges. He fingered me while I sipped coffee and talked about Tony Soprano's windblown bathrobe. The next morning I went to see my therapist, who asked me, at the end of our session, whether I knew my nipples were visible through the gauze of my sheer sequined blouse. She said she was genuinely worried I was unaware. As if I hadn't

turned the head of every man on the sidewalk. And more than a few women, too. When I'm writing to you, truth be told, I remember that I am a 'transsexual.' I feel antiseptic. My love is cold, so cold—stuck like an echo in a series of caverns. It has been five years since I loved you like I was inventing love. Now I have nothing left but dry retches. Pass me the lipstick and I'll write it all down, my beauty so useless and a Siren song. Let me forget about you in the dazzle of bright lights, and I'll rip open another dimension where angels fall forever.

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Excerpts chosen by the author to accompany  
three photographs by Elle Pérez:

*Mae and flowers*, 2015/2020

*Mae (three days after)*, 2019

*Mae at Riis*, 2020

For the exhibition *Nine Lives*

September 12–November 15, 2020

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Curated by Karsten Lund and Caroline Picard