

Stalker

Lucy Hamilton was born in Sheringham, Norfolk. Her mother was born in Paris and grew up in Toulouse (of Catholic and Jewish lineage) and her father grew up in Liverpool. She was joint recipient of the Poetry School Award 2006/7. Ten poems from her pamphlet *Sonnets for my Mother* have been translated into Arabic. In 2010 she became the first woman and first non-Muslim in the world to appear, by live satellite recording, reading her poems at the Havana Café, Mecca. She co-edits *Long Poem Magazine* and lives in Cambridge. In 2011 she co-judged the inaugural Cambridge University Benjamin Zephaniah Poetry Competition.

Also by Lucy Hamilton

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For Joanna,
and for Stefan

1. Ghosts & Clochards

Feet

The first morning I assume it's the result of an oversight from the night before. But the following morning and then the one after that I slowly begin to link my cousins' whispers with my coal-black feet. Eventually I have to ask Tante Annie what's going on. It started around the house, she says, gliding into their bedroom, standing over them like a zombie. Then into the girls' rambling room, climbing over the five beds, once even picking up little Katia before placing her back in her bed. One night they spotted me from an upstairs window playing *now you see me, now you don't* between the cypresses and poplars along the bridle-path. They followed me through the woods, down to the Garonne. "What did I look like?" I ask. "Just like in the films: eyes wide, arms outstretched." Late that night I sit on the edge of my bed cradling each foot in turn, trying to read its sole. Where does it want to go? Is it any part of *me* at all?

Ghost-riders

I'm attracted to the glow of the brazier, to the imagined camaraderie, to these low bridges beneath which the *clochards* apparently seek and find intimacy. Occasionally, strolling along in some reverie of my own, I'm alarmed by a sudden shout, or by a snatch of conversation flung by a squall of wind, like a flat leaf in my face. I glance up and see them shuffling around the fire, warming their hands, and smile at having been frightened. Today I can't see them at all. Voices reach my ears muffled in the thick milky mist that has reduced visibility to nil.

I don't proceed under the bridge—don't cross that line between the visible and the invisible, which is itself invisible. I remain on the edge, pushing my antennae into the heart of the dark. The smell is of sulphur not men. Nor meths. Nor chestnuts roasting in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. I can sense their bodies, misshapen and clammy inside newspapers and rags. Bodies ravaged by neglect and premature aging. Mine is hard and young under the reversible green and gold cape my mother made for me. I stand on the edge—in between.

It begins as a low vibration, a disturbance in the sluggish air brushing my inner-ear. And now I can hear it, the lovely chug chug chug of a *remorqueur*. A friendly, comforting sound like that of an airplane reaching across the isolation of childhood insomnia. Chug chug chug. The mist is thinning but still hangs in a thick blanket over the Seine. If you filled a pint glass with river and mist it would look like Guinness. And now, as the invisible barge passes in front of me, I laugh out loud. For all I can see is a pair of erect bicycles moving along above the layer of mist, and I swear their ghost-riders wave back to me as I call out a greeting. I stare after them until they disappear, and then I too walk on, thinking of that other constellation: The Horse and the Rider—Rilke's *stars of the land of pain*.

Tisane

Tante Annie is teaching me recipes, telling me family histories. She pushes the leeks and garlic through the Moulie and onions sting our eyes as she fills in the details, corrects my French. Once a month she stays in bed sipping *tisane* while Oncle René receives his clients in the Louis Quinze salon. Each time I look out the window I recall her porcelain face, that hollow, jaundiced look. I envisage her tiny boy lying on the cobbles like a dropped doll.

Rue ...

I'm walking blindfold, describing the road according to the fragrance of time of day and season, the odour of shop-fronts and the whiff of people passing. This *Furrière* for instance is for the rich women who arrive in taxis. I know this though I've never seen them. They're elderly and smell of my *Bonnemaman*—exotic cigarettes and a perfume that frightened me when I was little. It's the musk of the fox that's draped around the mannequin's neck and bears no price. Gleaming minks hug priceless shoulders but now a faceless, headscarfed woman hurries past me, coughing in the damp, twilight air.

All Hallows

As soon as they're out of the door me and my twin swap the sombre masks for clown-faces, scrubbing the ancient kitchen in a maelstrom of soap-bubbles and water-fights, chasing and shrieking through the apartment, dunking our heads in buckets. Meals are makeshift and fleet-of-hoof. Bedtimes are banished until we're through with baking and dancing. Well after midnight, when our cousins are sound asleep, we light the jack-o'-lanterns to show lost children the way home. We open the *Ordinaire* and a thousand djinns fly out. And before we can shout *Arrêtez!* they're cutting our long hair short with nail-scissors. And before it has time to grow again Tante Annie steps through the door, Oncle René turns purple and the demons hoot with mirth.

L'Heure du Déjeuner

Come rain and shine and upturned collars we seek one another's eyes as we scurry across Place Victor Hugo as if to some important business assignation or an eagerly anticipated rendezvous with a lover, or to a casual meeting with one of many friends. As we pass the brasserie we glance furtively into the glass-covered *terrasse* where groups of men and women are talking, drinking good wine and laughing as they slither oysters down their throats. A few sit alone at ease with themselves, reading *Le Monde* or *Le Figaro*, holding the espresso between index finger and thumb, the raised little finger chirpy in its signet ring. When we find each other out—which we always do—there's no feeling of shame, only of recognition as we hold each other's gaze and pass invisibly by.

Shadows

The hand striking the match is massive on the wall. The body extends up the sloping ceiling, its head above me. In my throat, sweet black coffee and the rasp of Disque Bleu. Someone's at the water-tap outside my locked door. There's a man coughing in the toilet where once a week I spend interminable night-hours squatting—arms outstretched to the walls on either side, thighs aching, guts racked following an evening of eating and drinking at an American doctor's apartment on Avenue Kléber, where the Scottish girl I met in class nannies three unhappy children. The body bending and stretching on the wall is my companion. Together we dance in the silence and bitter cold. I like the way her body speaks without making a sound. I like the way she moves, arching her arms, bowing her legs, spinning in a mock pirouette. Sometimes she does handstands, flipping over into a crab and sidling across the floor like Gregor Samsa. Now she's trembling with the cold. She pulls on layers of clothes: football-socks and jumpers and climbs into the low iron-bed. On the table, next to the candles, Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* and *The Great Hunger* by Cecil Woodham-Smith. Huge on the wall beside her, her friend takes a letter out of its envelope and begins to read.