

THE FLOWERS OF EVIL
AND
PARIS SPLEEN

Poems by Charles Baudelaire

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It's not everyone who can take a bath in a crowd; to enjoy crowds is an art. Such a man can binge on vitality to the detriment of the human race, but only if a fairy sprinkled on his cradle a taste for disguise and pretense, a hatred of home and a passion for travel.

Multitude, solitude: equal and interchangeable terms for the active and productive poet. The man who's unable to people his solitude is also unable to be alone in a busy crowd.

The poet enjoys an incomparable privilege: in his own way he's able to be himself or someone else. Like those wandering souls in search of a body, he enters anyone's personality whenever he wants to. For him alone all is vacant; and if certain places seem closed, it's because in his eyes they aren't worth the trouble to visit.

The solitary, thoughtful stroller finds a strange intoxication in this universal communion. The man who easily joins a crowd knows feverish pleasures that the egoist, sealed up like a box, or the sluggard, closed as a clam, will always miss. He adopts as his own all the professions, all the joys, all the miseries which circumstance supplies.

What men call love is quite small, quite limited, quite weak compared with the ineffable orgy, that holy prostitution of the soul which gives itself completely, its poetry and charity, to the unforeseen that happens, to the stranger passing by.

Sometimes it's good to instruct the happy of this world, if only for a moment, to humble their stupid pride, to show them there is a happiness superior to theirs, more vast and more subtle. The founders of colonies, the pastors of people, missionary priests exiled to the ends of the earth, doubtless know something about these intoxicating mysteries; and in the bosom of the vast family created by their genius they must laugh sometimes at those who pity their lot that's so rough and their life that's so chaste.

In love with pleasure; even atrocities delight.
More stunned than they, I drag myself and ask in pity:
What in Heaven are all these blind ones searching for?

92 • TO A WOMAN PASSING BY

The boom and yelping in the street had deafened me.
Majestic in her grief and widow's weeds, so grand,
So slim, the woman passed, one ostentatious hand
Lifting festoon and hem to sway them casually,

Lightfooted, svelte, her ankle nonpareil.
Me? I was drinking up, preposterous, forlorn,
From her grey eyes, like clouds where hurricanes are born,
The sweetness that ensnares, the pleasure that can kill.

One flash . . . then night—O beauty, must you pass from me?
One look and I'm reborn; my life is changed forever;
Shall I see you again in all eternity?

Somewhere very far from here! too late! or *never*!
You know not who I am; I know not where you go.
O you, I could have loved you. And I know you know.

93 • THE SKELETON AT WORK

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Among the anatomic plates
Hung in a bookstall's dusty nook
Where many a cadaverous book
Like an Egyptian mummy waits,

In drawings that fidelity
And wisdom of the artist clad,
Despite their subject, grimly sad,
With Beauty I can't help but see,

Windows

Looking through an open window from outside, we never see as much as when we look at a window that is closed. There is nothing more profound, more mysterious, more fecund, more shadowy, more dazzling than a window lighted by a single candle. What we can see in sunlight is always less interesting than what happens behind glass. In that dark or lighted opening, life lives, life dreams, life suffers.

Across the sea of rooftops, I glimpse a mature woman already wrinkled, poor, always bent over something; she never goes out. From her face, from her dress, from her gestures, from practically nothing, I have fashioned that woman's story, her legend rather, and I sometimes I tell it to myself and weep.

If it had been a poor old man, I would have fashioned his story just as easily.

And I go to bed, proud to have lived and to have suffered in someone besides myself.

Perhaps you say to me: "Are you sure that your legend is the true one?" But does it matter what reality is outside myself, if it helps me to live and to know that I am what I am?

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