

A monkey puzzle rocket burst

by Dorothee Lang

The theme of their breakfast this morning. It was a relative equation. $E=mc^2$ and its meanings. The respects of space and time. The idiom that those two variables can be figured out in one simple sum. Still she wasn't able to imagine the picture. Time curved into the universe, forming eternity without ending, without beginning. The universe and its fourth dimension pivoting around an invisible cross of coordinates. Tomorrow, yesterday, nothing but a twenty four hour wave of light away. The stars, illusions of the past.

"You need something from the city?" she asked on a more practical note. He didn't. That left her with three reasons to drive.

One was the library. She had finished her books, and the weekend was close. Not that there weren't unread books waiting. There was a whole shelf. But she longed for a fresh pile of unread pages, for books she could open and close, read and leave, finish or not, for they were not hers to last anyway. Sure, she could do the same with her books, but that was different. They were either gifts or paid for. They were more serious in a way. Like a well considered cinema visit, compared to zapping through channels. And yet, at this time, it was the zapping through pages that gave her more. More excitement, more play. More variety, and at the same time, in some pages otherwise never opened, more depth.

In the city, the hidden free spot she usually parked her car in was already occupied by someone else. A reality of centres: it takes some effort to get there. A reality of cars: they still need a parking lot once they brought you to where you want to go. And that lot isn't integrated yet.

She tried the next street, and the next. She tried another parking space, but that was full, too. That left her with the parking dome in the middle of all the. She sighed, and added herself to the crawling

traffic. The things we do for books, she thought. And for trousers. That was reason number two. She desperately needed a new trouser. Black. Should be the easiest thing in the world, you might think. Not so. A plain black trouser that also fitted, it proved to be one in a million, at least in this season.

In the third shop she finally thought she found it. Right size, right form. When she tried it, she had to learn that she didn't fit. Even though the trouser said it was her size. "The sizes don't really match," the shop assistant told her. Still it felt like it was not the trousers', but her fault.

In the cabin next to her, a girl, buying a miniskirt. Obviously her first. "And how do you *sit* in these things?" she asked the mirror. It didn't reply.

See, that is the good thing about books, she thought. You can try them by simply turning the pages, and you can like them even when they don't fit your expectations.

In front of the library, next to the police station, a chained dog, circled by school kids. "He's afraid," a boy explained. And he was. She wasn't. She had been the evening before, when she walked home while an invisible dog was barking in the night, coming closer. Maybe it had been him. She would never know. So many things she would never know.

Leaving the city outside, she stepped into the realm of the written world, into a maze of corridors, formed by books, leading from one topic to the next, from one level to another. She followed them, turned them, left them. Waited to find the right one, waited for the right one to find her. She recognized it the moment she saw his name. Joyce's Ulysses. "The greatest novel of the 20th century that no one's actually read," a friend had told her. That had been some weeks ago. She hadn't thought of him when she entered the library. Hadn't even known he was part of it, as she hadn't met him before in this place.

979 pages. She opened one at random. *"Evening hours, girls in grey gauze. Night hours then black with daggers and eyemasks.*

Poetical idea pink, then golden, then grey, then black. Still true to life also. Day, then night," he said, and became hers for a month.

On the other floor, Anais Nin. In passing, for the feeling of the moment, Banana Yoshimoto, Hard boiled, hard luck.

The bakery should have been next and last. Only that it wasn't. The third encounter happened on the way, in a side street shop. One she entered in search of a hair clip. Yet it was a chain that caught here eyes. A chain with a sign from the other side of the world. She knew it was hers. Knew it even before she read any explanation, saw the other eleven. Dragon and tiger, snake and sheep. They had been there, too. But she didn't even notice them. All she saw was this sign. She took it from the shelf, held it in her hand, turned it, and it was only then that she understood why it had drawn her so close.

On its back, engraved, there was the translation of the sign, the meaning: Monkey. Beneath it, a tiny list of birth years, confirming what she hadn't been aware of until a month ago, until an afternoon turned into a story turned into a page turned into a mail turned into an unexpected answer telling her what felt like another unknown piece of the puzzle that formed life.

She was a monkey.

Always had been.

One of those ten thousand who sit at keyboards and fill white pages with curled symbols, adding the unnameable fifth dimension, a space beyond place and time, a hiding place for all those other realities. The one without equations.

Day, then night.

Then words.

And in the end, the beginning. The title. She searched for it in the evening, and opened Ulysses, who still lay on her desk, at random. Read one single sentence. The perfect one. Too perfect to be true.

"A monkey puzzle rocket burst, spluttering in darting crackles."

Yet it was there, as true as fiction gets. With a nod to the Great Monkey, she finished the last line of the story. Then she picked up Ulysses, to share the bed with him.

