

Lola Lemire Tostevin / from *Circadian Rhythm*

She likes geometry, the unknown disguised as letters, but Soeur Lucienne says it isn't much use to girls. Plane geometry is good for boys she says when they want to figure out things like the flat surface of a baseball field and she draws points, lines and planes of a baseball diamond on the blackboard. It enables astronomers to roam the altitudes of stars and planets and by reducing three dimensional space to two dimensions, draftsmen can sketch maps of different countries and travel anywhere they please. Soeur Lucienne says it was probably because of his keen sense of geometry that Columbus assumed the earth was round before he ventured out to sea.

If A equals B equals C. The authority of equilateral lines of the perfect triangle. It knows everything, sees everything. Enormous eye of the Trinity that gapes above the door of study hall scrutinizing the bowed skulls it is about to penetrate. It invades playgrounds, bathrooms, refectories, prowls dormitories, follows the small hand that accidentally brushes against downy genitals and budding breasts under sheets. Obsessive, lugubrious, it pursues even dreams in its insatiable thirst for young girls' aberrations, its vitreous sphere a background for the forbidden image it yearns to receive. Mute law of triangles that range each and everything in its proper place. The equals and the unequals.

Her best subject is English composition, the nuns always praising them, "*c'est bien, c'est au point,*" the young girl fully aware this is what is needed. To be to the point. Sharply delineated outlines without too many hidden meanings so she can never be accused of dreaming. Dreaming carries the risk of harsh judgment of one's character, one's moral fibre.

Her compositions are written in words and sentences that are unmistakably the young girl, they seldom extend beyond that, just as her sparse convent life never extends beyond itself. She deals in facts, precise, meticulous, and the nuns approve of that but she's aware that there is something about the clarity of her compositions that does not exhaust other possibilities. Unknown factors beyond those plotted by nuns and priests and rules.

When her parents deposited her at the Pensionnat at nine

years old, it was under the guise of a classical education and there's little doubt that they believed that. Everything that hurt was for her own good. For the first three months she could barely mutter a sound. Whenever anyone spoke to her, asked her name, her heart unfolded in her chest, filled her throat with fluttering as if invaded by an injured sparrow. She imagined her heart as raw and mangled as that of the life size Sacred Heart at the end of the corridor. Year after year it stood there welcoming the new girls with opened arms and bleeding hands and in spite of its bland expression it was sinister. From the moment the forbidding front doors opened and parents delivered their children to creatures wearing bird-in-flight coiffes and large crucifixes tucked into the front of their aprons, the statue at the end of the corridor conveyed one clear message. Hope for nothing and there will be nothing to fear. But convent life never seems to raise itself above fear, detection and punishment hovering in every act or thought. Everything steeped in fear. It is the means by which convent girls advance toward an order different from other children, their fear of being abandoned soon replaced by the worst fear of all, the fear of sin. Dread of the impure, the endless rites of penance. Purification.

There will be confession once a week, Mother Superior informs the new girl as she leads her to the chapel, genuflects before another Sacred Heart and dips the girl's fingers into holy water, and guides her hand to her forehead, *au nom du Père*, her chest, *et du Fils*, shoulders, *et du Saint-Esprit*. Against the constraints of one week's silence, she is compelled to list how she has defiled herself during that silence. In the half-light behind the woven screen a head tilts and a hound voice links itself to her ear like a leash. How long since your last confession. One week. Have you had unkind thoughts. Borne malice. Coveted.

Sins of anger, envy, greed, pride, laziness, disobedience, all are serious enough to be examined briefly but these are venial transgressions, excusable sins that merit only a few *Pater Nosters* or *Ave Marias* and are quickly dispensed with. Gluttony is never referred to, the priest is well acquainted with the nuns' culinary skills. It is flesh that consumes the mind. Have you had impure thoughts. Did you touch yourself there. Did you let

anyone touch you there. Flesh, *péchés de la chair*, the hush sound of its *shh* alone seals it with disgrace, commands silence. Flesh, soft part of a mother's body, *shh*. Bloody flesh, mucous flesh, entrails, organs, *shh*. Nakedness, buttocks, penis, anus, vagina, menstruation, *shh*. Sex, *shh*. The most vivid images of indecency, the most dubious parts of human nature, *shh*. These are mortal sins that stain the soul, deface it until it caves in under the weight of its decay, its own flesh and only the hound voice can wash them away. Only the wizardry of words, the fictive act of ablutions can redeem it from its perpetual mortal fate. *Que la passion de notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ, les mérites de la bienheureuse Vierge Marie, et de tous les saints, et tout ce que vous ferez de bien, supporterez de pénible, contribuent au pardon de vos péchés, augmentent en vous la grâce et vous conduisent à la vie éternelle. Amen.*

Since it's practically impossible, because of unrelenting supervision, to commit most of the sins suggested to her, the young girl has come to understand that confession, like her English compositions, is, for the most part, a re-enactment of the priest's vivid imagination. Through skillful prodding and suggestions, latent images of corruption are skillfully drawn and contemptuous acts are brought to the light of speech. Retrieved from silence she relays in detail how she has defiled herself during that silence and when she fears that her sins don't lend her confession sufficient weight, she invents bigger and better ones. Yes, someone touched me there. Who. Soeur Lucienne. Yes, after that I had bad dreams. Tell me your dreams.

From the time she's about ten a peculiar feeling begins to invade her. An uncomfortable feeling that separates her from everyone else which says I'm myself and no one else and how did that come to be. How come I'm me. During those moments, her sense of self is so powerful and lonely that it is invariably followed by the thought that if she were to die at that very instant, it wouldn't matter because she has experienced all that can be experienced. There is a place within her that is a storehouse for all she's known, and all that is to come is but a repetition of that knowledge. That's what the future is then, events that haven't happened but are going to happen and even if the events were to change, the feelings that go with them remain the same. The future holds more of the same and as such it has already been invented.

It will be much later that she will come to recognize that to be unlike everyone else is to be exactly the same. To be different is to be the same but at ten she can only focus on the difference. It will be much later that she will come to understand that a ten year old convent girl's life only seems repetitious and irrelevant. A ten year old understands so much, but at seventy I understand so little as if an unravelling had taken place. As if I were moving towards a space where nothing has existed. Hope for nothing and there will be nothing to fear.