

BARRY N. MALZBERG and KATHE KOJA

ORLEANS, RHEIMS, FRICTION: FIRE

In the cell: And the Dauphin close to her, wet breath, odor of teeth and robes the odor of death itself: is this what she wanted? France, yes, a kind of salvation she had called it but was it not extinction in another dress, reek of loam and excrescence to bury her along with the prayers? and now her death was the Dauphin, leaning against her, taking her small hand in his fist.

"It is not too late," that breath, those hands. "You must pray, you may find remission, you must ask by all the tokens of light for the grace of the Saviour Himself --"

The Saviour himself? and what does this clownish, duped and poisoned man, sunk into an indifference so profound it masks as faith know of the Saviour? She herself knows nothing but feels, ah, feels like sun on the skin the search and bum of those eyes, that dense and bloody forehead: at every step, every station betrayal seeps through the centuries, death is always death and screams are screams are the screams of disbelief and hatred as the true Saviour, stripped now of all radiance, shrieks from the vault of his emptiness Why have you forsaken me?

It is finished.

Yes, finished: finished for Jeanne too, all these hours in the dark have brought to her a bleak and blacker light and, preparing to present to the Dauphin that inextinguishable truth -- that in giving herself to what she thought was France she has only rehearsed the last, disastrous discovery of Christ, that He had sacrificed Himself -- oh God forgive but it is so, every instant, every dull dead beat of her dying heart knows it is so w given Himself to nothing and she as well: as here in this place, boxed nave become not only her cell but the shape of her heart she feels the Dauphin's hands upon her, the two of them grasping, small and rhythmic squeezing and through the establishing rhythm of that grasp the flutter and beat of his pulse, counterpoint upon her wrist and as she stares at him then, pale with blasphemy unuttered, she tumbles trapdoor to another understanding: beyond France, beyond the stations, beyond the bereaved and apostasie Jesus Himself she sees the receding glow of what had come upon her in the fields, small terrible radiance which had seized her just as she fears in the next reflexive movement of his hands the Dauphin will seize her and take her station by station past the portals of her own damage, into the lie of light which had so enpooled her.

"Pray," says the Dauphin to Jeanne, "let us pray."

On the porch, caught not in prayer but some attitude of distant witness, ironic supplication: on the porch, tilting on the boards, feeling the liquor rise inside and Joan on this false veranda too high for the house, blurred, drizzling

dark and she alone, all alone in T-shirt and silk skirt blowing white smoke at the rain. How could she have come here? what did she want? Silver light on the distant corner, street light and inside the party reeling on, stupid role-playing party, stupid game: L' Histoire Concrete or who am I? Perhaps the real question ought to be Who was I? but not here, not now because the game must be played: ask of others the questions, find out who you are and each guest assigned their little roles, a piece of paper slapped on her back as she walked in the door: gotcha, gotcha now. She had cheated, calmly cheated in front of everyone and not for the first time: JEANNE D'ARC plucked from behind to stare and then replace and the man in the black jacket, put on a collar and he could have been a priest, smirking and defrocked and asking archly "Don't you believe in fair play?"

Foreplay, did you say? smartass Joan in her school play might have asked but that was a long time ago, she did not say things like that now, said nothing at all because anyone could see he meant to pick her up, would more than likely make his move as soon as he knew for certain she was here alone but soon is as good as never because St. Joan of the Flowers, St. Joan of Chavez Ravine is not going to let him do it, is not in fact even listening to his pitch. What can he say -- even given a collar --worth the time it takes to hear it? Despite the stupid jacket (and maybe he meant it to be stupid, maybe he's smarter than he looks, than she thinks) he could almost be attractive but not to her, not tonight, not ever; she is not going to fuck him or anybody, not up or down, not in or out: tonight she is definitely going home alone.

Nothing like an ashtray on the porch, fenced by walls from the house but part of the screen curls outward, faint mesh unglued from its nails, hanging in the drizzle and she bends to stuff the cigarette butt through that hole, send it falling into the wet black below, no sound, no hiss, no nothing but the dark and she is tired, tired and chilled from that rain and the dark, barely midnight but the thought of going home exhausts as surely as the thought of going back in. True name: why bother? Jeanne d'Arc had visions but this Joan of Chavez Ravine has only glimmerings, snapshots of embarrassment or anguish; this Joan has no terror of blasphemy because this Joan knows she has been fucked good and proper forever and long ago and so in defeat, in silence she lights another cigarette, procession of tapers leading her toward her indistinguishable night and she smokes and thinks of nothing, of everything: of the stretch and curl of time escaped, chronology sprinkled like stars through her memory, l'histoire concrete as concrete as an animal's gaze, a broken body, the drip and slip and slither of water down a warped and broken screen to pool like blood in her own empty abscess of memory and of loss.

The walls of the prison are always wet here, wet like the fields in stricken autumn, ribbons and droplets, prisoners' tears. Witch's sweat, says the old warder, a pious man unable to look her clearly in the eye: he wears his keys like a churchman wears a cross and "See?" he says, gesturing to the water, "see how it shines? It shines like blood, like your tears, like your stinking heart, witch, soon enough." And then into his prayers, all night she can hear him chanting, sometimes affixing broken pieces of the Mass to his misquotation and in the pater noster of his murmurs she can hear the ripe curses of Orleans. Her

soul will burn as brightly within his piety as it will in the center of the Dauphin's disbelief, her soul will bum everywhere, all the flames and fires of France leaping from her windowed self: witch: soon enough.

And she says nothing, adding the warder's name to that long list which lives within her, the ones for whom she must pray: the indifferent, the evil, the liars, the silent, the ones who say this thing and mean another, the sheep and the sheep and the goats. A sheep's wool smells musty in moisture like this, rain like the rain she hears falling outside: death all around her from the skies and inward from the fire, a long, long time since she has walked thus, wet grass to hiss in motion like the gown of a fine lady, fine Joan, elegant Joan with a sound of silk and arch of bosom. Not my lady soldier in her boots and gauntlets, leading her weary horse, her weary men, how did it happen so? Witch, witch, the tower warder's laughter or perhaps it is she who makes the sound, uneven breath the ratchet whisper of that laugh. Oh, go back, make the journey, think again: one day crouched small amidst hummocks and gray skies, counting her beads on her fingers, here Mary, here Michael, here the lower blessed saints and the muted grumble of the flock entrusted and the next the center of men who followed as simply, as singly as the sheep, her name their ave, her living flesh their standard: oh how had such a thing ever happened to her? Voices, they said, she hears voices, she hears the voice of God Himself telling her what to do: but that was wrong: the voices were one thing, instructions, directions, those she had been eager to follow, obey the light behind their light: but not God, never God, never that unmediated ave, the cry of God resounding but instead -- and what had she done, what evil made manifest in her own clumsy work for good that she should be so persecuted -- instead to her the stricken, the betrayed, the slowly evaporating Christ stumbling on the stones and whispering his frightened cries into her heart, cries then to pass through the filters of her own station and become instead a claim for France, salve Franco, salve Gaul and it was this, the whimpers of the betrayed Jesus, which had at last so fully told her exactly not what she must do but what she was, had become, had always been even there in the fields and the water no less than here in the water and the stone: there might as well have been no God at all, God hung somewhere behind the shroud of sky and his disciples as unquestioning as her own, her followers his, his Son her passport to this abandonment, the rest only brute forms of men surrounding her, carrying her to her own place, the place inside the fire.

And yet the rain, slow and steady on the walls to press upon her as did the pressure of prayer inside her head, that unvoiced cry, that voiced desire, blood in the bone, bone in the body, body a prison of bones made of terror and desire, the same desire which had nailed Christ to the cross of wood: to escape the void and the darkness, to do the work of the Lord.

"Hi again," near-silent hiss of the screen door, beside her now on the porch the unfrocked priest with a drink for her, a glass of pink champagne. "Oh, you should hear them," he says, handing her the glass which she accepts to set at once upon the porch, between her feet without comment or thanks. "They're going nuts in there, Martin Luther's arguing free will with Marilyn Monroe."

"Marilyn Monroe's not a real person," she says. "Image concrete, no?"

"Well," he says after a pause, "she's supposed to be real. Anyway there they are, the two of them, made for each other." His smile a supplicant's slyness, churchman's smile, warder's wink: "I think he's trying to score off her," he says. "Nail her to the wall."

"Better than a cross."

"Well," and another pause. "It's just a game, right?" He smiles at her; her nipples are hard from the rain and the chill, she sees, feels him staring and "Stop looking at my tits," not bothering to turn away, to hide herself: why hide from him, what does he know? "Women hate that; I hate it. Stop it."

Stillness: the sound of the rain: does he like the acknowledgement that he has disturbed her, reached her, or is all of this simply beyond him? "They've got everyone almost figured out, concrete," he says calmly, a little subdued, looking out as does she at the darkness. "Martin Luther, Henry Ford, Marie Antoinette --"

"Marilyn Monroe."

"Marilyn Monroe, right," and grateful he nods, smiles, forgiven, "and Bette Davis and Edgar Allan Poe and Joe DiMaggio," gently tapping his own chest, "and Joan of Arc." Looking at her, making the little smile big. "I thought it was, was intriguing, what you did," touching the piece of paper, yellow note still stuck to her back, replaced. "That you looked, you know, at who you were."

More rain, tiny breeze to move her skirt, port-wine color, the color of blood. How late is it now ? is it late enough ? is it time to go home, can she leave now? Is it over? From his jacket, that ugly jacket the odor of cigarette smoke and perfume, his own odor, skin-smell ubiquitous as the flesh itself, fleshly priest, carnal priest among his lost congregation, warm meat to carry the oldest smell of all, that cold, bold retention amidst the stones of night but: no, that other Joan died a virgin, bride only to the fire and this Joan knows secrets of another kind.

"It's important," she says, looking straight at him, all eyes, one stare as reflexively he retreats, one step back and two and "It's important," again, insistent, "to know who you are. People forget. Who knows about Joan of Arc today? How many knew who she was at the time?" And what is it to you? she thinks, old knowledge, old fire, who knows where all the bodies are buried and burned? "We can only forget," she says, eyes wider now, "the movement of life is toward forgetfulness and the failure of memory. That's how it's meant to be. That's how it has to be," forward the march into the darkness, the light one dies reflecting consumed as well to darkness by that fire, it is all she knows, all she needs to know and he says something about this, false priest, priest of folly murmuring against the rising rain, mutter like a voice between her eyes; the offering hand, the pink champagne and this time she takes it, holds it, stem and circle in her hand, leaping streaming bubbles like angels dancing in the night, halo and firmament as he leans a little closer, just a little closer

still, just close enough so she can hear the murmur of the echo of the memory of the heat, dark and concealed, meat on the bone to rise like sparks in the center of his own supplicating fire.

So they feed her but only a little: weeviled bread but not much, a watery drink they call with heavy laughter the Dauphin's toast. After a long wait during which she tries to think of nothing no Golgotha, no Saviour, no blasphemy, no loss, they come to take her before the tribunal, men wrapped in deep cloaks against the ruinous cold, it is very cold yet the water on the walls continues to flow, beads to drip and run, witch's sweat.

You are a witch, they tell her.

No.

You hear the voice of the Devil speaking to you. You hear many voices because the Devil speaks in all tongues. It is Satan who has driven you on.

No.

You are a tool and accompanist of Satan, you bear the wound of evil in your soul, you have incited to treason and death men whose lives by those deaths have been made evil, whose deaths first describe and then damn them eternally: their blood is on your hands.

No. You do not understand --

You have called to Satan in the fields and he has possessed you totally and you have in turn possessed those men.

No, no, no.

This continues. Scholars all their attempt is to distort and debate, twist her own words to make confusion, trap her, trip her, make her lie; she will not lie. Mary and Michael, the water on the walls, she could no more lie than could the sheep. You are going to bum, they tell her and that at least is true: that is what one does with a witch, a sorceress, no? You crucify a God, stone a saint, burn a witch. They call her a witch; very well then, she will burn.

The Dauphin at one time might have been expected to help her, might have been relied upon, watched for and awaited if he were more of a ruler and less of a child but inside he will always be a child. Some men are like this, has she not found this to be so? Tell them what is to be done and in their empty spaces, from their absence they will offer only assent: not so? Of course. Yes. Yes. There will be no aid from the Dauphin, no aid from the men in the cloaks who at any rate are bent on burning, no aid from the jailers or the other prisoners or the men who live or the men who died, died in battle, died in blood and fire, shrieks and prayers and at last in a kind of suppressed fury the questioning ends and she is allowed to leave, to be taken back to her cell where she is pushed to fall on hands and knees, where she keeps that posture to pray, head

low, on all fours like an animal who does not raise its eyes to the master, who crawls across the stones, snaffling and breathing the water of its own sweat, who waits for the master's hand to bring punishment or pleasure, death or life, the water or the fire.

"-- but without her deposit they wouldn't refund it," he says, "and I, I was going to try to make it up but I just couldn't, you know, at that time I couldn't really afford it." Touching her arm with the green lip of the champagne bottle, bare arm, wet glass; so cold, so bold, so old. "You want some of this?"

"No. I don't want any of it."

"But anyway," pouring for himself, elbow nudging hers, "she and I are friends again now, at least I think we are, I think it's good to stay friends. Don't you? To be friends, to try to --"

"Garbage," she says. "No. None of it."

"Not good to be friends?"

"No," she says, "there are no friends. Only the concrete,' and phantoms all around it."

"Mmm," he says, "thoughtful," and lights another cigarette for her, uses the motion to put that arm around her, lightly, oh so lightly but she feels it like iron, iron warm from the body enslaved and she knows she should turn to him, stare at him, tell him to get his stupid arm away ... but oh the cold, the rain and that cold, dark passage of time so heavy all around her and he keeps talking, warm body, flickering heat seen only through closed eyes and his moving lips, talking and telling her all sorts of things. Ex-girlfriends, ex-wife, all the women who are all still his friends and "Don't you think," he says, arm so firm and steady, so soft that murmur in the brain it could be her own voice conflated, "don't you think that making love, really making love is the best way to know a person? I mean really know them, know them all the way down; know what they're like, what they want, what they need? This is the way we touch, the way we communicate and I say when --"

"No," at once and brutal, "no, I don't. I don't believe in any of that. That's just another kind of scrap you're trying to put on my back, just another stupid note, that's all." Oh, what they need, what they need: fire and water, water running from the gutters, beading on the screen, is there enough fire in all the world to quench that water now? Her voice again but more quietly, as if her mouth has frozen, her lips so stiff and cold and "You want to know what I think? I think your making love is just a cheap euphemism for fucking and I don't think fucking solves anything or changes anything or makes anything happen but fucking and I think pretending anything else is just a lie, just a soft or hard lie depending on whether you're moving in or moving out because it's friction, it's all just friction." Shaking now, little hurt in her chest, big hurt from something else echoed and echoing and "It's all a lie," she says, "you're just a voice in my head. You're a voice in your own head, and none of it means anything

at all to you, all you want is the heat, that's what I think. It's all a lie," she repeats pointlessly.

He says nothing. His hands are very warm.

She hears the voice as light in her head.

Nothing.

"You see," says the monsignor, his mouth still greasy from the medianoche, chicken grease, chicken bone, "you see, my daughter, Our Lord is very good to you. He has blessed you after all and beyond what you deserve: He has taken those voices from you, He has given you this silence in which to contemplate your repentance, He has freed you from the grip of the devil so that you might recant your evil and name your collaborators. Come, my daughter, make full and free confession," hands wiping quickly, fingers shiny on his robe, "come back to the arms of the Lord and it will be as if you had never left."

"I want a dress," she says, pulling with stiff fingers at her clothing, the same filthy breeches and white shirt gone gray worn when last she battled for God and St. Michael, for the ruined and ruinous Dauphin, for betraying' France. "I want to wash myself, I want to be clean." Let me stand in the rain, she thinks. Let me stand in the rain as I stood in the fields with my sheep, hearing the voices for the first time: they were so sure, she was so sure then. Her head feels so light and hot but to the touch of her palms it is cool, almost cold, cold like the dead and "Let me," she says, "let me stand in that rain until I am clean, until I cannot smell my own body like some dead sheep lost from the sheepfold, until the heat is gone and the body shrinks and all the fire dies."

The monsignor says nothing more to her then or at least she does not hear it but they do bring women's clothing not that shift and apron with which she is familiar but such as she has never seen. Oh how complicated and magnificent these garments, the garments of a proud woman and she has never worn anything like this in all her life and besides she will not strip there in front of the guards, she will not do this. "Go away," she says to the monsignor who has returned, "make them all go away. I want to be with my God and with myself."

"But my daughter," says the monsignor, "this should not be necessary. In the field they say you ate and slept and relieved yourself in full view of your men, you lived the life of a soldier yourself, is that not so? Why now is it different?"

How can she tell them? How can she talk of the arc of the empty field and the cries of the men, the standard flowing before her, how can she tell them when there is only silence in her head, her hot and aching brain; why should the voices leave her now, now when she is trying so hard like the sweet, damaged Christ lurching from stone to stone, begging for remission, for absolution, for meaning on the cross, trying so hard to be good, to do what is right: why now? and the monsignor's stare, the warders beyond and at last, crouched like a child with the clothing in her arms at last she breaks, weeping mouth open like an

urchin in the streets, huge wet sobs so her body shakes, vagrant lump of flesh shuddering and trembling like a standard in the wind and one of the warders makes a sound, chuffing cough of disgust or dismay and "Let her be," he says, "let her be. She is only a child," and they all withdraw, the monsignor defeated, the warders perhaps in shame, how can she know? She is only a child: she is not yet eighteen, she has forgotten that, sometimes it seems as if she has lived forever.

They are all gone now, gone away and she alone, all alone, all alone in the black vast cathedral of the scream, of her empty heart, of her silent body burning now, burning from the inside out and after the weeping comes a state of voicelessness, comes then a silence so enormous it seems it will crush her to death where she lies against the stones, crush her to rags to lie beside those other rags.

Rags and distemper, brackish water and renunciation, forgive, Father, it is finished: those lady's clothes the assumption of which is beyond her, those lady's clothes that after some time a warder comes to take away, remove from beside her as if a cross too heavy for her frailty, her sickness, her narrowed sorrow to bear.

At least she thinks it is a warder but as it had been in the fields when first they spoke to her, it could have been God Himself.

"You're so cold," he says, he whispers; her T-shirt is damp, damp silk below, everything wet and cold and time brings nothing but the pressure of chronology to crush the living into the dead, the dead into the dead, Marilyn Monroe into Martin Luther, Jeanne into Joan into France into fire, everything smashed at last to silent fossils, small detritus, little chunks of bone and stone and rock over which that tricked and suffering Saviour can crawl, the defrocked priest can stroke, those places that no heat can ever conquer nor God resurrect: his hands are on her breasts but she can barely feel them, his clumsy mouth against her neck and "Let me," he says, "oh let me, let me --" like the rags on the pile, heat the cold and curtain, pile the wood around her like a temple or a home: let it go, her own voice and no other's inside her head, let it burn, let it go.

As she burns the rains continue to fall. Breeches and stained shirt and oh, see her smiling: someone in the crowd is screaming We have burned a saint! but most of them just watch, too stunned by their own wretchedness yet laved by the burning, finding less than a moment's true diversion in her death. Away they will turn as soon as she is gone, they will resume like a rucksack their own unhappiness and it seems to her that the pain -- which is worse, even, than the voices advised her, those voices at last returned like water in the desert, like manna in the mouth, honey in the horn of self, warm hands to hold hers in the terror and the cold, cold as the body on the stones of Gethsemane, the waters running out, the casting of lots, the dark and the noise of the soldiers: that pain is for all its magnitude a kindly figure as it strokes and strokes her body with iron claws, claws as clear as water, bright and hopeful claws to claim her and make her their own: just she and the shape of God itself, hammered to the



stones and flying wood.

"What's your real name?" that closed-in voice, eyes closed as her own are open to watch: see: feel that rhythm against her thigh, rubbing and butting, heat against rock against cold and "What's your real name, your true name?" as he plucks at her nipples, as inside the house -- shielded from them by walls, three silent walls and a silent door -- something, a bottle, a body falls to shatter and somebody laughs, oh laughs so loudly as the rain becomes words in her mind, voices an endless ribbon like the ribbon of time turning back, helix, on itself, turning and twisting like the flesh to the fire and "What's your real name?" but oh, not now, not again, the fire next time but this time only the rubbing, the inflation, the murmur insidious of that voice and "That's me," she says into the sound of the water, her own voice a little cough, a croak, death's welcoming peep in the terror and the cold, cold as the body on the stones of Gethsemane, the waters running out, the casting of lots, the dark and the noise of the soldiers and "That's me, it was always me," as his fingers stroke her, as she pushes her body against his, seeking the friction that brings the motion that brings, might bring, must bring at last as the bowl of heaven inverts, as the cauldron of mind empties to fill again with the blood inexorable of the inescapable self: must bring at last the fire.

I have seen it all before, said the Dauphin, and held high the flag from the barren fields.