

# **A Nun's Diary**

**Ann  
Diamond**

**SIGNAL  
EDITIONS**

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## Visible Gods

### THE CONVENT AS THEATRE

These days it's not very glamorous to be a nun. When I began *A Nun's Diary*, I was living, in Greece in a tiny cement room and trying to write a novel. It was the winter of 1981, the coldest and loneliest of my life. I had never thought of becoming a nun, but at that time I had the feeling life was conspiring to turn me into one.

Sometimes gale-force winds would blow and rain would pour down for days, forcing me to remain isolated in that damp little cell without even a radio for company. Male visitors were rare and mostly involved in varying stages of psychic disintegration. Without a circle of friends, I found a certain consolation in the imagery of Greek island life, whose Orthodox rituals still held traces of ancient vitality. I took solitary hikes in which I tried to immerse myself in the noises and rhythms of nature. Now and then, on some goatpath winding down from a convent in the hills, I'd encounter a market-bound nun swathed in black and riding a mule.

I returned to Quebec with my notes and finished *A Nun's Diary* in 1983, after a stint in a Zen community in the American Southwest. After it was published, however, I found myself with some explaining to do.

In the first place, it's not easy to sell a book with a title like *A Nun's Diary*, which is funny only after-you've read it.

A marketing expert might hypothesize two classes of thwarted readership: Those for whom it was intended -who would find the "inspirational" title an instant turn-off, and never buy it. And certain unsuspecting Christians -who would be in for a little surprise! I slowly came to appreciate the inherent boobytrap of it all. Sales upheld this theory, but reviews were amazingly enthusiastic. I reread the text with a strange sense of detachment, almost amnesia. It seemed unlikely that I had written it. I could recall my winter in Greece; I remembered details of a broken relationship that had changed my perspective on marriage. I also remembered the night in

1983 when the pivotal metaphor of God/Man/Monster suddenly dawned on me: I was so excited that I went for a long walk in the dark, pausing to laugh every 100 steps or so. Actually, in retrospect, I think it was nervous giggling.

I have another memory of stumbling across a cemetery near a convent in a suburb of Montreal, where rows of identical little crosses marked the graves of hundreds of nuns. It was like looking at a springtime field of crocuses or daffodils -the emptiness of it touched me more deeply than the religious monuments which our tradition urges us to revere. The nun's life of self-negation can still seem vastly preferable to the religion of machinery and institutionalized greed which has swallowed up most of western society.

I think the roots of this narrative run deeper than a few borrowed images, however. My mother was Québécoise and (it goes without saying) Catholic, but she married a Presbyterian man from a small town in Ontario. For reasons having to do with the social climate of fifties' Quebec, I was raised as an English-speaking Protestant. It wasn't till my mid-twenties that my mother suddenly confessed to having secretly baptized me in infancy, behind my father's back. She had wanted to prevent my soul from going to Limbo-sometimes I think this move may have backfired. At age 12 I announced I was an atheist and began refusing to go to Church.

Still, despite a certain nihilism traceable to Buddhist influences, I don't think one could call this text atheistic. The religious problem of the story is not that God is absent. Instead he is all too present, the stumbling-block/stumble-bum/retarded child of his own Creation. Smart readers always understood that I was playing with a metaphor- that of a sick, aging God whose illness entails a frightening descent into humanness.

The central role of metaphor is probably one reason why I was able to get *A Nun's Diary* published as poetry. It also became an issue in the process of trying to adapt it for theatre.

The convent world, with its suppressed sexual and power relations, provided a wealth of dramatic material. The problem was finding a director who could see the contemporary under-currents in the Medieval setting, and bring them to life as a counterpoint to the written

text. Proponents of theatrical “realism” sensed the dramatic possibilities of *A Nun’s Diary*, but were stumped by questions such as whether God should appear on stage or maintain his invisibility. In December 1988, Marianne Ackerman of Theatre 1774 contacted Quebec director Robert Lepage, the internationally-acclaimed creator of *La Trilogie des Dragons*, *Vinci and Circulations*. He agreed to direct his own version.

Lepage translated the story into theatre by means of a system of visual imagery which encourages actors to develop their own gestural language. In assuming a new, physical dimension outside the constraints of conventional theatre, the narrative was able suddenly to walk without literary crutches. A space was created, the world of an imaginary convent in a medieval village. Within this foreign yet familiar space, the actors learned to move, at first instinctively, later with a greater sense of intimacy and control.

In observing the workshop process, I made new discoveries about the original “diary”. The actors noticed that the text felt “religious” while remaining sensual and earthy. Someone remarked on the pervasiveness of odours - “the smell of roasting flesh”, flowers, barnyards, death, etc. Others pointed out that animal characters are depicted as messengers. The text on the whole tends to focus on the lower end of the spectrum of Creation. We see no angels, hear no extraterrestrial voices, although signs appear in the sky at one point. In the end there is only the sound of the spluttering radio, announcing the attenuation of human will in an age of destruction. The view is very uncelestial, perhaps in reaction to western Christianity's traditional tendency to flee the mundane in search of a “higher reality”.

In *A Nun’s Diary* I tried to keep a sense of playfulness which the actors extended. Despite the blackness of the vision there is respect for the world in which humans/animals/angels cohabit and change places, sometimes battling and at other times mirroring each other in an endless dance of mutual attraction and repulsion. It is certainly a world of suffering from which a sensitive mystic might wish to escape via religious or other forms of transport. But it also has a strange warmth and beauty. What amazed me in Lepage's vision was his sense of simple gestures as sources of ritual. He and the actors put me back in touch with a landscape of cyclical movements (sleeping, waking, death, life) in which worlds exist within worlds, the spiritual alongside (not above) the material.

Using props as starting-points for improvisation (candles, bowls, spoons, a red mattress, a metal bedframe), the actors explored levels of meaning inherent in simple everyday reality. In choosing the bed as the central image for his workshop, Lepage zeroed in on the metaphor of marriage which was central to the diary.

Perhaps their most powerful discoveries involved relationships between sexuality and spirituality, our two great sources of energy and ritual. Western culture seems trapped in a pattern by which it compulsively denies one in order to exalt the other. Perhaps theatre can evolve new ritual languages to help us understand both energies as aspects of the same universal process, essential to our survival.

ANN DIAMOND

When I first came here, I loved the life of a nun. The daily rising at four. The cold bath in the cellar. The hours of candlemaking In the workshop. Pouring the tallow into the little molds. Watching the white stuff harden. Sitting in silence over a meal of thin soup. The waxen faces of the other nuns, who burn up their lives for God.

For God. But where is he?

There is a legend in the village that the convent is his hideout. That we have him here in a special wing of the building. That he is recuperating from a long illness. That eventually he will recover, and become rational enough to resume his responsibilities on the outside.

In the village they believe in him even now.

The forest garden, my robe open and flying out behind me, my long black hair catching in the branches, the wet moss underfoot, my hair shining with raindrops, the sound of his breathing behind me, my heart racing, the blue robe open, the soft mossy bed where I fall, the bed giving way under the roof of dripping branches, the bed of torn petals, dividing and falling, the soft deep bed of petals, the strange silent music, a most flowerlike surrender.

A new day dawns. The roosters shriek as if their throats had been cut. Then all the secret infants wake up and scream. The mules have a go at it; the dogs bark like fiends. The noise wakes the deafmute whose job it is to ring the village bell. By this time the nuns are at work in the courtyard; others are still putting on their habits, roaming around, scratching themselves.

From the roof where I hang up the weekly wash, I can see down into the village. The sun climbs higher, and the world is formed again amid the familiar dust and rocks of the field.

Noon, and peasant women gossip on thatched chairs, under straw canopies. Siesta time. The smell of roasting flesh wafts up from the walls. Babies squirm in their cradles. Friendly donkeys look down their noses. Dirty chickens peck at the road.

At evening, the mountains turn their backs to the sea. Along the coast, the sea complains: ROU-AGH. ROU-AGH. After dark the harbour grows silent. The moon imagines he is alone, and grins at his own face in the water. Along the quiet pier, the fishing boats nudge one another.

From the convent roof, I can make out the olive groves, and on the hills between, patches of bramble and juniper. At night the full moon looks like milk at the bottom of a bowl. I feel sorry for the moon: confined by the night, and so weak and pale. Here where the sun is overpowering, like a conqueror, the moon treats the land gently, as the barefooted girl rode the donkey yesterday, with unearthly patience and grace.

In the village they think of God as being so much Holier than Thou.  
But the truth is, he's not well.

He struts around here as if he owned the place. His attacks of  
temper bring us all to the ground in nervous fits.

They say man made God in his own image. But the likeness was  
disturbing. So someone had the bright idea of sending him here to  
us. We can barely keep him clean; we can't prevent his depredations.  
Even in here his illness spreads. His radiation penetrates everywhere.  
Our walls of twelve-inch stone are nothing, absolutely nothing.

In the beginning God imposed his sickness on us and we took it for a great Mystery. It was he who needed us and not the other way around. Since his conversion to Catholicism, God has not been himself. Yet he insists there is nothing wrong with him. He refuses even to listen to any differing opinion. To him, the entire sub'ect of his illness is distasteful. He discourages us from talking about it, even among ourselves. In conversation, he is infinitely sly in evading the topic.

Ferdinand, the smith's half-witted nephew, lost his beloved horse, Old Bay. It ran away to escape the tortures of the horseflies.

One night, Ferdinand dreamed that Old Bay came back to visit him, very wild-eyed, which was not like Old Bay, who had been a calm horse.

The dream had a strong effect on Ferdinand. The next day he came and told Mother Superior a blasphemous story. She repeated it at dinnertime, when all the nuns were assembled.

It seems that in ancient times, Christ became a horse, and travelled through all the heavens and hells, and all the levels of material and spiritual existence, trying to find God. And when he returned, he again took the form of a man, and said to his disciples:

"I have searched in all the realms, and I tell you, there is no God.

"Well, sisters, said Mother Superior. "Is the story true or not?"

All the sisters looked at their soup, and refused to say a word.

But yesterday Ferdinand was back, and he was very drunk. His horse, Old Bay, had been found. It had merely gone into hiding at the house of the repulsive little man, Philemon, who pursues women in the streets late at night, singing to them in his beautiful voice .

Of course, the horse has said nothing. It eats and swats its flies once again, just as if nothing had changed. After all, it's only an old broken-down horse; it knows all it needs to know about the various worlds, the heavens and the hells. It knows it can't expect much more than a daily bucket of oats and some water. And of course, the horseflies, which have to be welcomed like guests every day, and never seem to have their fill of a horse.

"Well, on second thought, " I said to Ferdinand, "perhaps the story is true. Perhaps there is no God. " That perked him up; he became almost cheerful.

(But just then God rang the service bell, and I had to run and see what he wanted.)

“Il ne faut pas e'tre hypnotise' par des signes qu'on tient pour bons ou mauvais. Ça c'est de la religion que je déteste”

G.

“Le corps comprend la re'alite' d'une façon plus intelligente. On retrouve ses propres pouvoirs dans les profondeurs de la douleur.

G.

Dans les bras de G., j'ai appris:

Lamour du corps.

A laisser les idées spirituelles. Que toutes les idées sont impuissantes, enfantines.

Last week Mother Superior delivered a speech to the assembly. Her topic was “The Encounter with God.” No one from outside was invited to attend, so we knew in advance that there had been more trouble. I went, of course, but reluctantly, and stood at the back of the hall, holding myself apart from the gullible ones who actually allow themselves to be frightened by the Mother Superior's threats. I'm sure she noticed, but she did not comment.

Her talk was shallow, just the usual pious drivel, but she wagged her finger and glared out from under her cowl. I knew she was directing her remarks at me, but I yawned and pretended not to be listening. That put her in a proper rage.

In the past the Gods were distant, incandescent monsters. Now increasingly we see their ugly faces. The oily pools of their eyes. The rank stubble pushing out of their chins. The whole groaning hunger to bruise a world that has laughed in their faces, calling them stupid and brutish. In their nice new uniforms, they can no longer be mistaken for subhumans. No subhuman wears such shiny boots. No subhuman could maintain those gleaming metal buttons. It's obvious we are dealing with a special breed, a new strain, well suited to winning the War. You can see this fact in their rigid features, their faces with the dangerous wounded eyes. Something in them starves for love and feeds on hate. They will repay our cold shoulder. We have taunted them with our "Truth" and "Beauty". Count on them to smash everything that has ever been held over them. Beginning with the spluttering lamp of Civilization.

It must be remembered that when God came here, he was seen as a sick man with an unspeakable burden of pain, and an unattractive personal history. For a long while he held himself aloof. But recently he has begun to give personal audiences, as if silence itself had become too heavy for him.

This practice of meeting with individual nuns in private has already led to some gossip in the village. Not surprisingly, there have been one or two "Incidents".

We would all do well to proceed with caution when dealing privately with God.

Between every woman and God there 's always the moment when their mutual attraction threatens to dissolve the distance between them. It is up to each of us to prevent God from going too far. The devotee, for her part, must restrain her natural desire to be “absorbed”. She must be firmly the mistress of her emotions. If God should say to her, “Come closer, I am willing, “ or something of the kind, she should not take this as a sign of anything more than God's friendly interest in her progress and readiness to be of assistance.

Should it happen that God invites a devotee into his private studio, removes his shining robe, and displays to her his genitals rotting with syphilis, this should not evoke feelings of despair or suicide, or even an ordinary sense of disappointment. Should a devotee have the honour of receiving such esoteric teachings, she should assume this trust and its consequences with a cheerful heart, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary.

Consider the bride on her wedding night who discovers that, due to a recent accident, her new husband is completely impotent. Does she rush to her parents to have the marriage annulled? No, she sets out to make the best of the circumstances which fate has allotted her. In the same spirit of self-sacrifice, we should endeavour to become worthy of each new gift of knowledge, remembering that in the beginning it was we who asked to see God, and not the other way around.

Increased wisdom always implies increased responsibility.

History weighs heavily on God these days. Sometimes bloodstains appear on his hands, and he has difficulty breathing. Wherever he looks, he sees Himself. He is the prisoner of his own omnipresence.

'All this is me. " His hands tearing helplessly at his face, as he stands in the mirror. "It's only a reflection - but it's - so ugly!

He thinks we blame him for what has happened to the world.

"Of course you do!" he screams. "I made it all in my image! Oh, how you must hate me!"

He has never had a sense of proportion. If only he could laugh about it all. But that's beyond him, of course.

"It's turned into Hell, every inch of it, Hell! Sometimes I feel I'm about to explode.

It's just like dealing with a child.

God is addicted to the idea that he exists. This is a sad trait, which prevents him from enjoying himself. It creates an air of self-absorption which is the death of all relationships. Then God gets depressed and lonely; later on he runs amok. God is the prisoner of his own cycles of creation and destruction.

If only God could see himself as others see him. He might get a kick out of it. If God could laugh at himself, perhaps then he would be able to get along with a woman. But God is in love with being God. And so God remains very angry. And alone.

His is a truly monstrous ego, tottering on the edge of an ugly precipice. God holds his breath, stalling for time. Like many so-called divinities, God is afraid to look down.

God is sensitive about his Jewish background. He dislikes being questioned about his relationship with his mother. When this happens he turns snail-grey and coughs: "Who said I had a mother?" He shrivels and withdraws, looking away. Fear in his eyes and on his breath. He dislikes it when his nature is exposed to ridicule. Above all, it is forbidden for God to appear childish in the eyes of his people.

I caught him again, pulling apart flowers in the garden. He blushed and feigned innocence, but he was standing kneedeep in petals and foliage.

“I wanted to find out how they were made. “ Of late he affects an interest in botany but no one is deceived.

“I know you all think I just like making things and tearing them to pieces.

Questions about God's behaviour in the garden are rarely raised anymore. There is an uneasy silence on the matter.

Was there ever a more stubborn, egotistical female than the Mother Superior? She compares herself to Ste. Therese of Avila. All these years in a dreamworld and now she is losing her grip. She eats less, drinks more, and throws herself into mysticism. Gets up in the wee hours of the morning to write. Rheumatism beginning to take hold. Her hair almost totally grey. The threadbare old habit carefully pressed and arranged on a hanger. Her cell spotless. A growing rigidity of the mind. Her vocation begins to grate on her nerves. Inadvertently she has turned into an old maid; the truth is unbearable to her. When she came here she was a young woman with literary pretensions. Now she's just a failure and past her prime. A creeping bitterness. She tells herself bigger lies. That she is bound for immortality. That there is a reward coming. Does she know how little the world needs another religious poet? Her assertions grow more strident. "I'm afraid I've become the object of a lot of literary jealousy in the village. " Deranged. Erosion of reality. The life of the mind. She ends up an exile, peering down into hell. Refusing to admit she will simply disappear someday.

How I pity her fear of fire. Her twisted shape in the bedsheets, inhaling the phantom smoke. Once she screamed when I walked past her room with a lantern. "Oh, what's that light? Where does it come from? That awful light!" I could hear her later tossing in her bed and moaning, "The Light! The Light!"

I dreamt that I was racing through the corridors in the first light of dawn, a nun in a medieval convent, somewhere in the south of France. Little squares of light fell through the tiny windows, lighting up austere walls like medallions of the Virgin. I climbed to the belfry and took hold of the bell. In the night I had seen a vision; now I was waking the other sisters, to tell them the wonderful news.

The ringing rolled out in joyful waves in all directions. “Wake up sisters! He has not left this world! He will stay here with us a little longer! His work is not quite finished. He still has faith in us! He is planning a great World Tour!”

No sooner had I spoken these words than I collapsed on the floor in convulsions. When I woke I had aged twenty years. My hair was dry and grey, my lips caked from an unbearable thirst. The face I saw in the mirror was full of derision. It was the face of a nun, in a medieval convent, somewhere in the south of France.

And all along I had thought I was a beautiful dark-haired lady, married to a duke, in the region of the Loire, who only dreamed of being a nun.

“You imbecile!” said the face in the mirror. “Now at last you've woken up. You wasted your life and nothing has happened!”

I put my head against the stone and the inhuman howling began.

The world would be more peaceful without Mother Superior's it "charity". Her over-cherishing of everything and everyone. As if we all had to be preserved in lifeless, crystalline form, like precious little exhibits floating in formaldehyde solution. And the laborious work of labelling each one and watching it closely to ensure that it does not metamorphose. Constant vigilance. The witch in her laboratory.

When she is away, things change and grow according to natural inclinations. When she returns, everything freezes. She is our kindergarten teacher, responsible for our every move, our every distorted effort to be ourselves. A class full of mutants and gross monstrosities, and she the only perfected one. The only human among us. An angel! Our angel, observing us as we writhe in our Bosch landscape.

If only she knew how we behave when she leaves the room. G. for example, and his uncontrollable urges. How he follows me from corner to corner, in search of an opportunity But we are never alone for long. Wherever she is, she is always watching. With her sunny disposition. And her knitting.

How she hates me. I see her hating and envying me all the while she is smiling and talking in her lighthearted little way. She envies me that I am the one he dreams of sodomizing. She envies me the basement room with the strange machinery. The hooks and belts and the table with the handcuffs. And his masterpiece, the Chair, with my name carved into the iron headrest. My name, not hers.

She smells our secret pact. She lies awake at night, the details boiling in her brain. Of course she wants to be leading lady. She drools for the prestige. She volunteered, but too late. I had already swallowed the paralyzing drug. They were shaving my head when she stormed in, hot for martyrdom. Sorry, I said, but this seat's taken. As you can see, I'm already screwed in. She

eyed me and the chair as if to say, “You look stupid. You're all wrong for the part. “ She saw herself in that seat.

Alone, alone at last. I hear him breathing somewhere in the dark. My hair roots clench. I am bolted to the wall, waiting. And now he is here. Was that a gasp just now? He seems to be approaching, concealing his excitement.

And here we are at last. Where she can never find us. Upstairs she is knitting. She doesn't know where down here, exactly below her little feet. A moment ago I heard her pacing. Pacing and knitting at the same time. I think she senses something. It must be seeping up through the floor and stimulating her through her soles.

Yesterday too, he was here. I was hanging from the ceiling, as planned. He approached me from behind, and planted a hand on my stomach. My body oozed like the walls. I was accepting, I didn't scream when he implanted his tiny organ. For raping boys in the other World, they gave him a small but penetrating tool in this one. I am not the first woman he has gotten to know this way. He pities me slightly. For hanging here. I said, I do it for Beings like You. I felt his sneer against my neck. He stiffened. “I have no sympathy for that,” he said.

No sympathy? I said. Then why are you here? Why did you bother to come?

At times he still appears at the door in flames, wobbling a little on the two roaring pillars of his legs. Fire burns from all his pores. His eyes are empty furnaces. "Please," he asks, "can you help?" We are moved by his suffering which the years have not diminished. Gently we urge our children forward to be nearer to him. His head is sorrowfully bowed, but he allows them to approach, until they are so very near that their eyes are round little mirrors of flame. He holds his arms out to them. One by one they walk to him. When the last is gone he sighs. "They were so trusting. Have you anymore?" We see he will never have enough. His look is dejected and full of shame. Such insatiable loneliness awakens our pity. We weep till the flames subside. Then he stands there, appalled by our tears: a middle-aged man with gum disease. Who still needs one of us to sing him to sleep at night. Who can't even mend his own clothes. I saw him only last week, trying to slip some into the garbage. Socks with only a few holes in them. Furtive as a rat he looked.

I mentioned this in a recent letter to the Pope, but the Mother Superior intercepted it. "The Pope is not interested in your domestic observations about God. He'll accuse us of meddling in theology, and cut off my Christmas bonus. Anyway, it's easy to criticise God, but really, have you any right? Is it his job to empty the chamberpot? Don't be silly. God has other duties. He has to maintain his Air of Mystery; you have to keep the ground floor clean. Get that straight in your own mind, and everything will fall into place, nice as you please. Take me, for example: When I came here I was nothing but a girl, and I thought I knew everything there was to know about God. But just the other day he said to me, 'Did you know I've been thinking of getting married?' Why, sure enough, I'd never guessed. So there you are."

What sort of woman would God be looking for, I wonder?

A motherly type. With a love of family life. Responsible. Good with a broom and mop. Someone to pick up after him. Put things right. Bring him his glasses. Help him keep his mind in order. A kindhearted woman who, above all, will be sympathetic to his liaisons. Someone to comfort the girls after he has ditched them ... that is... taught them that separation from God is the deepest mystery....

Well, are you interested, said Mother Superior.

You must be joking, I answered.

“Il ne faut pas e'tre hypnotise' par des signes qu'on tient pour bons ou mauvais. Ça c'est de la religion que je déteste”

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In the past the Gods were distant, incandescent monsters. Now increasingly we see their ugly faces. The oily pools of their eyes. The rank stubble pushing out of their chins. The whole groaning hunger to bruise a world that has laughed in their faces, calling them stupid and brutish. In their nice new uniforms, they can no longer be mistaken for subhumans. No subhuman wears such shiny boots. No subhuman could maintain those gleaming metal buttons. It's obvious we are dealing with a special breed, a new strain, well suited to winning the War. You can see this fact in their rigid features, their faces with the dangerous wounded eyes. Something in them starves for love and feeds on hate. They will repay our cold shoulder. We have taunted them with our "Truth" and "Beauty". Count on them to smash everything that has ever been held over them. Beginning with the spluttering lamp of Civilization.

It must be remembered that when God came here, he was seen as a sick man with an unspeakable burden of pain, and an unattractive personal history. For a long while he held himself aloof. But recently he has begun to give personal audiences, as if silence itself had become too heavy for him.

This practice of meeting with individual nuns in private has already led to some gossip in the village. Not surprisingly, there have been one or two "Incidents".

We would all do well to proceed with caution when dealing privately with God.

Between every woman and God there 's always the moment when their mutual attraction threatens to dissolve the distance between them. It is up to each of us to prevent God from going too far. The devotee, for her part, must restrain her natural desire to be "absorbed". She must be firmly the mistress of her emotions. If God should say to her, "Come closer, I am willing, " or something of the kind, she should not take this as a sign of anything more than God's friendly interest in her progress and readiness to be of assistance.

Should it happen that God invites a devotee into his private studio, removes his shining robe, and displays to her his genitals rotting with syphilis, this should not evoke feelings of despair or suicide, or even an ordinary sense of disappointment. Should a devotee have the honour of receiving such esoteric teachings, she should assume this trust and its consequences with a cheerful heart, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary.

Consider the bride on her wedding night who discovers that, due to a recent accident, her new husband is completely impotent. Does she rush to her parents to have the marriage annulled? No, she sets out to make the best of the circumstances which fate has allotted her. In the same spirit of self-sacrifice, we should endeavour to become worthy of each new gift of knowledge, remembering that in the beginning it was we who asked to see God, and not the other way around.

Increased wisdom always implies increased responsibility.

History weighs heavily on God these days. Sometimes bloodstains appear on his hands, and he has difficulty breathing. Wherever he looks, he sees Himself. He is the prisoner of his own omnipresence.

“All this is me.” His hands tearing helplessly at his face, as he stands in the mirror. “It's only a reflection - but it's - so ugly!”

He thinks we blame him for what has happened to the world.

“Of course you do!” he screams. “I made it all in my image! Oh, how you must hate me!”

He has never had a sense of proportion. If only he could laugh about it all. But that's beyond him, of course.

“It's turned into Hell, every inch of it, Hell! Sometimes I feel I'm about to explode.”

It's just like dealing with a child.

God is addicted to the idea that he exists. This is a sad trait, which prevents him from enjoying himself. It creates an air of self-absorption which is the death of all relationships. Then God gets depressed and lonely; later on he runs amok. God is the prisoner of his own cycles of creation and destruction.

If only God could see himself as others see him. He might get a kick out of it. If God could laugh at himself, perhaps then he would be able to get along with a woman. But God is in love with being God. And so God remains very angry. And alone.

His is a truly monstrous ego, tottering on the edge of an ugly precipice. God holds his breath, stalling for time. Like many so-called divinities, God is afraid to look down.

God is sensitive about his Jewish background. He dislikes being questioned about his relationship with his mother. When this happens he turns snail-grey and coughs: "Who said I had a mother?" He shrivels and withdraws, looking away. Fear in his eyes and on his breath. He dislikes it when his nature is exposed to ridicule. Above all, it is forbidden for God to appear childish in the eyes of his people.

I caught him again, pulling apart flowers in the garden. He blushed and feigned innocence, but he was standing kneedeep in petals and foliage.

“I wanted to find out how they were made.” Of late he affects an interest in botany but no one is deceived.

“I know you all think I just like making things and tearing them to pieces.”

Questions about God's behaviour in the garden are rarely raised anymore. There is an uneasy silence on the matter.

Was there ever a more stubborn, egotistical female than the Mother Superior? She compares herself to Ste. Therese of Avila. All these years in a dreamworld and now she is losing her grip. She eats less, drinks more, and throws herself into mysticism. Gets up in the wee hours of the morning to write. Rheumatism beginning to take hold. Her hair almost totally grey. The threadbare old habit carefully pressed and arranged on a hanger. Her cell spotless. A growing rigidity of the mind. Her vocation begins to grate on her nerves. Inadvertently she has turned into an old maid; the truth is unbearable to her. When she came here she was a young woman with literary pretensions. Now she's just a failure and past her prime. A creeping bitterness. She tells herself bigger lies. That she is bound for immortality. That there is a reward coming. Does she know how little the world needs another religious poet? Her assertions grow more strident. "I'm afraid I've become the object of a lot of literary jealousy in the village." Deranged. Erosion of reality. The life of the mind. She ends up an exile, peering down into hell. Refusing to admit she will simply disappear someday.

How I pity her fear of fire. Her twisted shape in the bedsheets, inhaling the phantom smoke. Once she screamed when I walked past her room with a lantern. "Oh, what's that light? Where does it come from? That awful light!" I could hear her later tossing in her bed and moaning, "The Light! The Light!"

I dreamt that I was racing through the corridors in the first light of dawn, a nun in a medieval convent, somewhere in the south of France. Little squares of light fell through the tiny windows, lighting up austere walls like medallions of the Virgin. I climbed to the belfry and took hold of the bell. In the night I had seen a vision; now I was waking the other sisters, to tell them the wonderful news.

The ringing rolled out in joyful waves in all directions. “Wake up sisters! He has not left this world! He will stay here with us a little longer! His work is not quite finished. He still has faith in us! He is planning a great World Tour!”

No sooner had I spoken these words than I collapsed on the floor in convulsions. When I woke I had aged twenty years. My hair was dry and grey, my lips caked from an unbearable thirst. The face I saw in the mirror was full of derision. It was the face of a nun, in a medieval convent, somewhere in the south of France.

And all along I had thought I was a beautiful dark-haired lady, married to a duke, in the region of the Loire, who only dreamed of being a nun.

“You imbecile!” said the face in the mirror. “Now at last you've woken up. You wasted your life and nothing has happened!”

I put my head against the stone and the inhuman howling began.

The world would be more peaceful without Mother Superior's it "charity". Her over-cherishing of everything and everyone. As if we all had to be preserved in lifeless, crystalline form, like precious little exhibits floating in formaldehyde solution. And the laborious work of labelling each one and watching it closely to ensure that it does not metamorphose. Constant vigilance. The witch in her laboratory.

When she is away, things change and grow according to natural inclinations. When she returns, everything freezes. She is our kindergarten teacher, responsible for our every move, our every distorted effort to be ourselves. A class full of mutants and gross monstrosities, and she the only perfected one. The only human among us. An angel! Our angel, observing us as we writhe in our Bosch landscape.

If only she knew how we behave when she leaves the room. G., for example, and his uncontrollable urges. How he follows me from corner to corner, in search of an opportunity. But we are never alone for long. Wherever she is, she is always watching. With her sunny disposition. And her knitting.

How she hates me. I see her hating and envying me all the while she is smiling and talking in her lighthearted little way. She envies me that I am the one he dreams of sodomizing. She envies me the basement room with the strange machinery. The hooks and belts and the table with the handcuffs. And his masterpiece, the Chair, with my name carved into the iron headrest. My name, not hers.

She smells our secret pact. She lies awake at night, the details boiling in her brain. Of course she wants to be leading lady. She drools for the prestige. She volunteered, but too late. I had already swallowed the paralyzing drug. They were shaving my head when she stormed in, hot for martyrdom. Sorry, I said, but this seat's taken. As you can see, I'm already screwed in. She

eyed me and the chair as if to say, "You look stupid. You're all wrong for the part. " She saw herself in that seat. Alone, alone at last. I hear him breathing somewhere in the dark. My hair roots clench. I am bolted to the wall, waiting. And now he is here. Was that a gasp just now? He seems to be approaching, concealing his excitement.

And here we are at last. Where she can never find us. Upstairs she is knitting. She doesn't know where down here, exactly below her little feet. A moment ago I heard her pacing. Pacing and knitting at the same time. I think she senses something. It must be seeping up through the floor and stimulating her through her soles.

Yesterday too, he was here. I was hanging from the ceiling, as planned. He approached me from behind, and planted a hand on my stomach. My body oozed like the walls. I was accepting, I didn't scream when he implanted his tiny organ. For raping boys in the other World, they gave him a small but penetrating tool in this one. I am not the first woman he has gotten to know this way. He pities me slightly. For hanging here. I said, I do it for Beings like You. I felt his sneer against my neck. He stiffened. "I have no sympathy for that," he said.

No sympathy? I said. Then why are you here? Why did you bother to come?

At times he still appears at the door in flames, wobbling a little on the two roaring pillars of his legs. Fire burns from all his pores. His eyes are empty furnaces. "Please," he asks, "can you help?" We are moved by his suffering which the years have not diminished. Gently we urge our children forward to be nearer to him. His head is sorrowfully bowed, but he allows them to approach, until they are so very near that their eyes are round little mirrors of flame. He holds his arms out to them. One by one they walk to him. When the last is gone he sighs. "They were so trusting. Have you anymore?" We see he will never have enough. His look is dejected and full of shame. Such insatiable loneliness awakens our pity. We weep till the flames subside. Then he stands there, appalled by our tears: a middle-aged man with gum disease. Who still needs one of us to sing him to sleep at night. Who can't even mend his own clothes. I saw him only last week, trying to slip some into the garbage. Socks with only a few holes in them. Furtive as a rat he looked.

I mentioned this in a recent letter to the Pope, but the Mother Superior intercepted it. “The Pope is not interested in your domestic observations about God. He’ll accuse us of meddling in theology, and cut off my Christmas bonus. Anyway, it’s easy to criticise God, but really, have you any right? Is it his job to empty the chamberpot? Don’t be silly. God has other duties. He has to maintain his Air of Mystery; you have to keep the ground floor clean. Get that straight in your own mind, and everything will fall into place, nice as you please. Take me, for example: When I came here I was nothing but a girl, and I thought I knew everything there was to know about God. But just the other day he said to me, ‘Did you know I’ve been thinking of getting married?’ Why, sure enough, I’d never guessed. So there you are.”

What sort of woman would God be looking for, I wonder?

A motherly type. With a love of family life. Responsible. Good with a broom and mop. Someone to pick up after him. Put things right. Bring him his glasses. Help him keep his mind in order. A kindhearted woman who, above all, will be sympathetic to his liaisons. Someone to comfort the girls after he has ditched them ... that is... taught them that separation from God is the deepest mystery....

Well, are you interested, said Mother Superior.

You must be joking, I answered.

God admits he is incomplete. He begins to speak of marriage. He appears ready to modify, slightly, his old, rakish ways. He might even take the plunge. We sense his lack of preparation, his touching vulnerability, a truly childish trust. He is thinking: Maybe if I marry, I won't have to stay in Hell. This is a laughable notion. From this much we can predict a terrible outcome.

It is just past dawn when I awake in my little cell. I hear an ear-splitting ruckus coming from outside the window. I lean out to see what can be causing it. There in the courtyard stands an eerie figure, all dressed in grey rags, beside a cadaverous horse. Behind them is a wagon, which at first evokes some sort of gypsy caravan, minus the colour and gaiety. It might be a wagon for garbage and rags or it might be a funeral wagon. Man and horse both seem at death's door. Grey flesh hangs in leathery strips from the horse's ribs and haunches, but the creature does not bleed. And its head is even more horrible, like a death's head, or the skull of some huge reptile.

Perhaps it's for one of the villagers who has died in the night. But suddenly there's a terrible pounding at my door. I turn round just as the man bursts in, wagon, horse and all! He can barely control the wretched animal, which stinks like death itself.

“Hi ho!” he cries. “Here's your Delivery Man! Don't say you haven't been expecting me!”

I fight him off but he lunges at me and pins me to the floor.

His stained rags fall away as he collapses against my body. He tears at my clothes with yellow fingernails. His filthy hair entangled in his crumbling teeth. He drags a rough old tongue along my throat. I feel his savage hammering between my thighs, but it means nothing to me, nothing at all.

“I told you not to visit me here. My voice is weak. Of course it's useless to complain.

“Lava, Lava, “ he grunts. I know he means “Love, love. “ But love was long ago. I take his dry old head, light as a birdskull, between my hands, and whisper strange encouragement. I kiss the staring eyes, blinded by recognition. I press the burning lips to my breast as he erupts.

I rock him to extinction like an old mountain.

I wish they had sent someone else to town for provisions this month. A nun becomes a laughing stock at carnival time. The worst elements always surface; there is drunken, savage shouting on all sides. Crowds of men roam the streets, hiding behind crude masks and costumes; disguises that wouldn't fool a child. Everyone knows what they're looking for. Decent women stay indoors, but they are in the minority here. Even the donkey is terrified and throws his load of grain to the ground the moment my back is turned.

I am afraid of running into our “Delivery Man” here in some narrow street. These days the sight of him alone is enough to provoke the apocalypse. I said to him the last time, he ought to take better care of himself.

“Why?” he answered, cocky as you please. “What for, when the Lord's day is at hand?”

“It's always at hand,” I said. “That's no excuse for going bathless.”

“Haven't you heard?” he replied. “There are signs in the sky.”

“When aren't there signs in the sky?” I asked.

He made a disgusted face. “But not like this! I've seen the things myself. Men crawling about on all fours. Clouds in the shapes of slaughtered saints. A giant winged caterpillar gobbling the sun. The sound of laughter and farting coming from nowhere. Some people say there's a war on the way.”

He pointed to a scene in the street nearby. Two men were waltzing on a balcony overhead. On a rooftop, a figure dressed in black, and sporting a turban, was swinging a scimitar and bellowing obscenities at the revellers below. A prostitute tossed rose petals from an open window. Men and women, painted like demons, were beckoning from doorways, to music from a tattered Arabian band. Women undulated through the crowd, fruitbaskets balanced atop their shaved heads. A green Insect King loomed down the street on stilts; several ladies followed, clutching his silken train.

I was happy when the donkey and I reached the mountain road, where one rarely meets a human being apart from the odd roving bandit.

But he was waiting for me at the usual place. I almost took him for a tree; he leered as I passed and extended a crooked, grey hand, but I slapped it away.

“You don't scare me, you monster,” I said. “Go back to the convent where you belong.”

He jumped into the middle of the path, and stood there, grinning up at me. “Have you heard?” he said. “There’s a new form of Mind Training for women.”

“How very interesting,” I replied, urging the donkey forward. G. was trotting along beside.

“Yes, he said. “It starts with a radical haircut. Then you get raped by Huns. Afterwards, they let you crawl around on all fours for a while. . .

“Oh really?” I said. “What is the name of this Training?”

“Some call it Love, some Marriage. “He was panting by now, face distorted with the exertion. “Would you care to sign up?”

The donkey chose that moment to break into a run. I heard a noise like weeping behind me on the road. Then it sounded like hysterical laughter. But I think it was only G. gasping for breath.

Like a beggar he stands in wait for the traveller, flowering for the peasants who pass him in fear. His shoulders gently stooped, he spreads his long-fingered arms and undertakes a cautious modesty. Like a deformed giant, his face shines, he seems at home in exile. At his feet, the stream runs safely, and children play, forgetful, never thinking to look up at him. If they could see his worm-eaten face, his cracked grin, or how he gropes for them in the great night of his loneliness.

Once he took me to a wooden place where blackberries grew thick. He tied me between two small trees on a high ridge. Birds flew low to investigate our noises. Below, on the other shore peasants were working with heavy scythes. I could hear them: swish, crack. Down went the corn. Closer and closer. Any second they would break through the last row and find us like this. Naked and joined. Swish, crack. The terrible scythes slicing the air. "Don't look," he said. "Be quiet." And he covered my eyes with his hand.

He was standing at the window in his bathrobe, unshaven, staring up at the overcast sky.

He looked exactly like a patient in a hospital. His hair was unwashed, his jaw hung open. At his feet a black and white cat, a half-starved stray, was lapping up milk from a bowl.

“See that cat?” he said. “He's hungrier for love than he is for food.”

G. was depressed. He had aged. For the first time I noticed his jowls.

He said, “I want a wife. I want lots of children. I think I'm ready for that. But I need a woman who has energy, a woman who can give all her attention to our work.”

He crawled under the bed and pulled out the box of old photographs. The record of previous loves. It was all stained with cat feces. One by one, he lifted them out, studying each one carefully. After he had looked them all over (the naked women, the women posing in chapel doorways, the women of the fields, the snake women too old to be beautiful) he said he did not feel like making love anymore. He stretched himself on the bed, with his hands folded across his chest, like a man awaiting burial. The room grew very cold.

“Don't be stupid , I said. “I was a virgin when I first slept with I you and a virgin I have remained.”

“Exactly,” said God. “And that's the trouble.”  
He was watching a well-dressed woman stroll past the gate. I sensed his boredom with convent life. I knew he was making preparations to leave us. “Tomorrow's the day,” he kept repeating, as though I were too stupid to understand. He loves to make these threats, but this time it appeared that he would really go.

We don't rule out the possibility that he wants an inferior. If I this "love" derives after all from the certainty of superiority, then you can't call it love, with the woman left abject, something that crawls along the ground and begs to be taken up. A grotesque mystery harlot excluded from the court of male divinity. A serving girl, a desired pariah, a gigantic, shapeless mother. We resent this subtle ostracism. We will be cold to his advances. We will not be impressed by the painfully composed image at the window, near the table with the candle, as we come in through the door. The carefully adjusted angle of the hatbrim, the three-quarter profile, the erect posture. He expects us to crash like a wave against this armour, but we are not water, we are ice. We have been outside too long. We've been drifting in outer space (where he tossed us the last time). We've caught our death of cold. This pose is not quite good enough. Let him cook up another.

Down in the vineyards, the women were singing some ancient serenade.

“Isn't it nice the way women like to sing about love,” he said,  
“although not one of them really believes in it.”

But I do.  
I do I do

I do.

It was a tiny, naked wedding.  
No guests, and no ceremony.  
It was the way I had always wanted it.  
A cantorial voice sang out.

Now Death has the spotlight.  
Now Death grinds its contagious powders.  
Now the Bride stands unveiled.  
Looking like the wrath of God.

He forced me to speak German.  
It was German, or stone silence.  
It was German, or death.  
I chose German.

The snake, he said, the snake  
is a hazard in your world.

I did not like being married to God.

Often I came home and found him occupied with something absurd: hammering little nails into strips of tin. Nothing on the stove. Facing him there in the kitchen, I was frightened by the emptiness, the cold, his oppressive hunger, my own emptiness and inadequacy.

Sitting there in the evenings I saw his apathy and hostility, saw how quickly I had turned into a meaningless object, a spot on his retina, something he had taught himself not to see.

The dead routines, the grim self-consciousness, the shortlived relief of laughter subsiding into another painful silence. The crushing weight of his constant presence. A weird Hell that only he could have invented.

For a moment he assumes the pose of what he might have become. He wears a 4-directional cross on his head like a pair of antlers.

But it's impossible that this buffoon should be the One! Not this bungler. Not this pathetic has been.

Look how he cringes in the far corner of the room. Look how he chews his fingers and repeats his futile imprecations. Look into what worm of a body his spirit has shrivelled. All of creation has pinned its hopes on this creature. Now the world hovers over him like a mantis and demands a resurrection. It is obvious he cannot even achieve an erection anymore. He's a dead letter, a burnt-out case, no longer able to reward our interest.

Let us abandon him now in his darkest hour. Why don't we slam the book shut on his humiliation and pick up the story elsewhere?

Still we cannot forget how he has appeared to us sometimes as a much less degraded thing. Coated with the filth of his captivity, stained, dripping, reeking with it. And yet greater and brighter than anyone we have met wearing shining holy robes. At those moments, we realized an enormous falseness in ourselves, which almost choked us. We felt a desire to vomit and crawl on the ground.

And now in his house we sense again a presence, a vague but stern command, and fall to our knees. Our cheeks are slippery with tears when we raise our hands to them, and prayer slips from our half-open mouths.

Just at the corner where you turn to go to the village, there is a large stone house with shuttered windows. Its north side faces the street of shops, and above one of the windows there is a plaster relief of a skull and crossbones, and an inscription in Greek, worn illegible by the centuries.

It was here, climbing the steps, that I met a cat with no eyes. It had lost most of its fur and its body was stiff with arthritis. It was feeling its way down the steps, very slowly. When it heard me it hesitated and sniffed in my direction, as if it still could see something through its empty sockets, though not of course what we see.

I went looking for the cat this morning, with a basket of food. Some crusts of bread and a few cheese rinds. G. had told me its home was high on the hill, that it had lived all these years on the compassion of the local women. Perhaps, then, it was still alive.

But my real thought was to kill it and put it out of its misery.

This time I ran into G. at the corner.

“Dry your tears, “ he said, out of the side of his mouth. “The cat's all right.”

By that I think he meant that the corpse had already been removed.

After the meal he laughed and went upstairs to turn off the lights. Then he came down and blew out the kitchen lamp and went to the toilet to pee. When he returned he said, "I think the kitten has run away. " I said no, it was probably just at the next house. He went into the bedroom and held open the door for me. The room smelled of cat and talcum powder. He took off his pants and climbed into bed. I said, "You've put yourself to bed and now I suppose you're going to sleep. " He laughed and pulled the covers up around his chin. Within seconds he was unconscious. He was breathing fast. His hand was on his genitals. He was having some kind of dream. But when I turned my head and put my finger and thumb together he woke instantly and said in surprise, "*Jesus Christo.*" He blinked his blue eyes. "What did I dream? *Panagia*, we were all in it!"

The war broke out that week. Cities levelled. Germany a glowing boneyard. The sky black for days.

The night the lights went out he put on his coat and went out to check the fuse box. It was only a gesture. He wanted to look heroic. He waved to me and went out whistling, hands in pockets. Minutes later he came back and began rummaging for candles. "It's not this house he said. "It must be the neighbourhood."

That night we burned candle after candle, and sat by the radio. It did not occur to us at first that the war was the result of our marriage. Or that we had now perfected our love. We imagined there really was a world, and a war going on in it. We imagined the war was as real as the stream of words that poured from the radio. We listened to the voices of the leaders; we leaned close to catch the songs. The songs were of love, death and parting. The speeches of the leaders were filled with sobbing apologies, and we were touched. But we waited in vain for news. There was no longer any news.

We imagined this was temporary, that soon events would resume. For some days we waited for the sense of time to return. But the blackout went on, and we were forced to acknowledge that the voices were thinning out. Soon there were no more voices. Yet the radio did not stop, it simply blasted out static, and we began to imagine strange new messages, things we had never heard before. Mounted there on the table between us, the radio grew louder and more domineering, and we were afraid to turn it off and be alone. It had taken the place of our aborted child.