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Before the Days of Dreaming · *Kathy Acker*

O:

“How can I do this? Begin.

“Begin what?

“The only thing in the world that’s worth beginning: the end of the world.”

O, being a whore, had to find the origin of whoredom.

Alexandra, one of Cleopatra’s friends, had loved Cleopatra so deeply that she had tried to persuade Anthony to be both kind and gentle to his paramour’s children.

In order to please Alexandra, the first princess, Herod the Great had made her seventeen-year-old son into a priest. The boy was beautiful. Herod drowned him.

Of this Alexandria, no longer anything remains.

O remembered the poet saying that Alexandria is replete with men who are sick, solitary, and prophetic. All those who have been deeply wounded in their sex. When O came to Alexandria, the air was as dry as the wings of insects. There were neither male solitaires nor male prophets. For such men are found only in the white world and that world has died.

Here, O thought, lies the center of all prostitution.

O began to dream that she was in the whorehouse for which she had been looking. She wasn’t anywhere yet. She had already passed by “The Brothel Of The Virgins.”

O:

“I entered the most famous whorehouse in Alexandria.

“These are the names of some of the whores:

“Whore #1, Ange, 21 years old, politically mature, a professional imagination, a sweetheart only when she comes into contact with children, or with anyone (men, women, or other categories, sedentary, semi-

sedentary, and nomadic) uninterested in money. Ange lucidly believes in the progress of this country.

“I HAVE NEVER FORGOTTEN HER.

“Two years ago, Ange was put into the prison of M____. There, though still lucid and generous, she was broken. I saw her bruises.

“Thus, in shit begins the new world.

“Whore #2, Barbara, in older days left Egypt for France in order to continue her studies. Classical ones. Some days off the ship in the harbor of Marseilles, to her consternation she learned that she would have to do whatever she would have to do in order to survive there, and so she returned to her activities of the night. What I am saying is that in order to earn the right to education in the western world, it was necessary for the whores who were not from the western world to be at war and to continue teaching themselves.

“ ‘You fuckers.’ Said Barbara. Finally sick of whoring; every morning, to earn her right to education, she got up at four, in order, for the rest of the day, to work her ass off in the shipyards of Midnight-by-the-Sea. A machine cut off her right foot; despite that or in despite, whenever possible from then on, she came to the aid, effectively and materially, of those whose social origin was named Misery. Misery due to exile. Exile, whose other name is Delayed Death, is the fate of all those who live in the realm of racism.

“Barbara, now known as St. Barbara, again inhabits an Alexandrian whorehouse.

“Whore #3. She sleeps all the time. Her name is Louise Vanaen de Voringhem. While she’s sleeping, her record player blares. Not that she’s got anything against music. But she has to sleep because she’s been so worn down by work.

“Some day Louise Vanaen will have to get up, and one day she did. Because her body wanted to wake. Immediately she walked toward the source of her music. Suddenly she was thrown to the ground and cut in her left eye. A neighbor, one of the many Algerians Armenians Bedouins Egyptians Vietnamese surrounding the brothel, hearing screams which he recognized as unusual, ran over to the house, gun in hand. In order to defend herself, with this neighbor’s help, she mortally wounded her attacker by cutting off his balls.

“For this reason, Sister Louise was inculpated of voluntary homicide. For this reason: she was Arab and her rapist was white. Since only her natal family was allowed to visit her there and they lived far away, Louise Vanaen dwelled in solitary for many years.

“Her family was poor.

“In her prison, the whore Louise Vanaen began to dream of a revolution, a revolution of whores, a revolution defined by all methods that exist as distant as far as is possible from profit.

“
“Louise wrote this to her sisters:

“ ‘These pages smell of women.

“ ‘I perceive more clearly during sex. All the lips, all the fists: it’s necessary to have the deepest discipline so that all these, so that everything, can be seen. In the brothel where women are talking, where the women are cooking, lips on lips, hands on hands, all the world is at peace.

“ ‘In these rooms of sleep and of dream,’ she continued in another of her letters which will become famous after history has gone to sleep, ‘we will walk around, brushing by each other, touching each other without actually touching, there we shall affirm everyone, even flesh that is bourgeois, the flesh that likes to be done but not to do, the flesh that is the object of desires.’

“From these letters, St. Barbara developed her political theory of religion: Every revolution starts in a church or in the place of the church because churches and brothels do not have windows that lead to what lies outside. And so are refuges to all the shipwrecked of the world.

“To you, Barbara, courage. Courage for all of you, the generosity that inhabits prostitution.”

“I’ve been so tired lately,” Lulu, another prostitute complained, “that nothing turns me on.”

Ange replied, “That’s the fate of all of us who are prostitutes.”

Lulu and Ange decided to masturbate so they could find a reason to live.

Lulu, starting to masturbate: “My mind’s all over the place so I can’t do this right now.”

After some time had passed, she said, “No. Not now.”

Ange, who was doing the same thing, muttered, “Me too.”

Lulu: “Now we’re entering the night.”

Entering the night resembled entering a room. Entering through the narrow doorways, the room could be glimpsed. The halls' walls were pale green (a lighter green than the color of the walls of most of childhood). Lulu: "Here's a toilet. No, I don't want a toilet. Now, turn the door's handle and walk in. It's necessary to sidle in sideways.

"Why did I just stop feeling anything? . . ."

In order to live, Lulu needed to be in the realm of sex.

Lulu:

"Body, talk.

"While I masturbate, my body says: Here's a rise. The whole surface, ocean, is rippling, a sheet that's metal, wave after wave. As it (what's this it?) moves toward the top, as if toward the neck of a vase, it crushes against itself moving inward and simultaneously it increases in sensitivity. The top of the vase, circular, is so sensitive that all feelings, now circling around and around, all that is moving, are now music.

"Music is my landscape.

"Deep down, at the bottom. Whatever is bottom is so deep that it is spreading away from its center. . . . Toward what? Opening up to whom? Opening up only to sensitive. Sensation is the lover.

"If I could move down there, down this rabbit's hole, I would never stop coming

"never never

"and I want to come and come and come

". . . why? . . .

"The middle ring or the ring around the middle of the shaft is doing most of the feeling, but now it's slipping downward. If this tunnel, which the ring's slipping down, becomes rigid, there won't be any more sensation. No sensation is nothing. If this tunnel becomes rigid, there'll be nothing. I must make my world out of nothing. Relaxation's opening the field, but I don't dare, I'm holding back, open to being a rose; a rose unfolds again and again until the nerves drive the flesh into pure nerves; they are; I'm closing again (becoming rigid): these are the rhythms of the labyrinth.

"The vibrations (pleasure) are taking over. Now any desire to stop . . . oh yes, there it goes; this disappearance of it causes laughter; laughter is a threshold that's soon reached.

“As soon as I went over this threshold, for the first time I began to play; I was opening and opening to the point that I could touch being pure nerves.

“In the realm of being pure nerves, to touch is to be touched: every part of mind, body, and feeling is relaxing so much that sensation has domain. When I came, the spasms traveled all the way down the funnel until its bottom where there was an opening. Then or there, everything disappeared; the world or everything became more sexual.

“My hole opened up into only opening; the vibrations intensified.

“Soon this world will be nothing but pleasure, the world in which we live and are nothing but desires for more intense and more intense joy.

“I want more now, I want every rose, all the major rows down there, but something is always going over. Again again. An animal. It would always come again: the animal claw.”

Thus Lulu entered the labyrinth.

She taught the whores to do this and all of them began to masturbate regularly.

Lulu said, “I want to talk about being a criminal because that’s the only thing that makes sense to me.”

Ange says to Lulu:

“Today I had to come by reading pornography.

“First, I took any book and just opened it. I was only going to read a few sentences until I became wet enough for my dildo to slip easily into my cunt. But the first sentence I read was about a woman who was beautiful and older seducing a very young boy who was just so hot for her that he would have come even if she had done nothing. This sentence turned me on to such an extent that I couldn’t remain at the edge of the text, I had to enter into the words and this entering, as I sat there with a dildo up my cunt, I think that that must look ugly, was a moving into the halls, with all their walls, there, of my rising sexual energies. I don’t think that this space which I was now in was my body . . .

“I wasn’t in a body, but in a place.

“In my cunt, there’s a little animal, a type of fish, but it’s a mammal. A weasel-cat. The weasel-cat, who’s hungry, is sticking out its tongue . . .

“And so I came without language.

“My whole cunt is now this animal who’s becoming hungrier: mouth opens more widely, the clit is a tongue which licks, laps, is tapping like a foot, tapping what’s outside as if a floor. Eyes lie above this tongue. All my sensations are a sky. I could no longer talk. As soon as I stopped talking, everything turned white and the waves that were approaching, slowly, steadily, and very strongly, solid, solid, transformed into my blood, then into my bones; whatever had been the rhythms of my body inside my body were now rhythms outside. This is the meaning of mantra. The final orgasm will occur when my brains are making mantra.”

Lulu says to Ange: “I would smear the whole world with sperm.”

Here finally are the days of the beginning of happiness when the heat and the yellow are dry. When the spine’s bottom rises up from its body:

“No,” says one whore, “I’m not going to masturbate today because inside my cunt, the well where all is bottomless, has come out so far, as if an animal is moving out of the hole, that I’m turning inside-out. I’m scared. I’m scared . . . that if that happens . . . god knows what might happen, I’ll never be able to stop coming so it’ll have to be a new kind of world . . .

“But I don’t know if I can give up the pleasure of masturbating even for a day.”

St. Barbara was the first callgirl to tell a client to go get fucked so that she could continue masturbating:

“Old-Filthy-Husband-Who-Kills-Off-Wives (this was a common term for ‘husband’ in Alexandria as in many of the third world cultures who lacked the benefits of contemporary civilization), Old-Scum-Tongue-Who-Can-Only-Lick-Off-Wives, under whose armpits lies pollen, Azzefonian, you’re just about to depart for the seas of Europe. Right?”

“Right,” Azzefonian answered.

“Well, those waters stink of the dead cunts of white women or the cunts of dead white women and other strange fish that cause diarrhea, whereas our cunts, O Legba Eleggua La Flambeau La Sirène, O Legba You who are truly us, our cunts are made from the sun and out of rubies. Cunts to whom we gave birth in the foyer of the end of the world. Our cunts are knives in our fists and the insides of our thighs are becoming darker.

“Come inside; come inside.”

Azzefonian, in love with white, went off to Europe.

Finally free of Johns, the whores, now alone, spewed out bits of ink, words in ink, sexual or filthy words, words that were formed by scars and wounds especially those of sexual abuse, those out of childhood. All the women bore their wounds as childhoods. Therefore, words apocalyptic and apostrophic, punctuations only as disjunctions, disjunctions or cuts into the different parts of the body or of the world, everything priced and priced until, finally, all the numbers disappeared and were displaced by the winds:

Ventre, vente, vent.

These were only some of the elements of whore writing: all will never be named, for both word and self (whore) are always being lost because it is the winds who screw them.

—end of the first whore-song

O now began to masturbate full-time, imagining every sailor, cock, hairs dripping from cock when wet, cats crawled out of the dark room, foetus. O:

“Now it’s starting again the sensation is deep down have to keep it there, deep down open, or else it (or all or I) will stop. The problem is the rigidity of everything and, above all, this must be prevented.

“A map of rigidities: the world has stopped. All feeling has gone. What did I do wrong or what went wrong?

“Feeling or sensation evaporates whenever the feeler (the subject here is the object) tries to perceive and understand a particular feeling or sensation.

“This doesn’t make sense anymore because I’m feeling too much. Any feeling is feeling too much.

“It is all over. The world has stopped. Then another round of feeling, like a wave, rises under the most recent, retreating wave. Each new wave is bigger and stronger.

“I think about him. Any thought or agitation which lies outside feeling, outside the (subject/object) mirror, causes cessation.

“oh yes baby starting to come too excited shaking eyes going (fading) regular spasms contraction mouth is smiling going yes yes wants no open

stay open I didn't expect to come and I am now squeezing all of legs and
thighs around wrist while inside, in there, all the shakes

"I'm going to come harder now, in there, no end in sight

"sailing, each series, starting with a high rise then swoop downward, each
one more violent, direct

"where is there an end to these convulsions?

"Being with someone would be more violent.

"I will turn, again, to dreams

"the ocean; all the fish go crazy; see them all orange

"now this final orgasm all stirred up: the walls become rigid and in between
there's burning

"today there's no end

"now I have to use my fingers to masturbate.

"Later the convulsions increased.

"After this, the whores accepted me as one of them."

—end of the second whore-song

THE ENTRANCE OF THE PUNK BOYS

Among a hundred brothers him I greet
Who ate my heart and I his heart did eat.

According to the first of the punk boys, the body is still in a process of being
forged.

Especially his body (his name was Antonin Artaud) which was thin nasty
sick mangled distorted ravaged by drugs and by desires which had been
repressed by thoughts.

The body, Artaud further said, has an infinite capacity for self-
transformation.

Artaud actually talked in a much more disgusting manner, just like the rest of his brethren, the dirty filthy boys.

All of the punk boys had fucked their mothers and were no longer colonized. They didn't care.

The growth of private property, one characteristic of the bourgeois industrial world, had died; private property, in the form of multi-national and ex-national capital, returned to the hands of the few. Economic, therefore political, power seemed centralized. The decrease, finally the disappearance, of private property was directly related to a movement away from, then to the disappearance of the memory of, patriarchy.

The punks were one beginning of a new world.

Though these punks were at the edges of a beginning of a new world, they had no idea how to relate to each other. For them, language wasn't a problem.

He was the proto-punk boy, but Artaud was the one whom the punk boys disavowed. He was continually fighting off drugs and so wanted to destroy everything. Like him, all of the punk boys wanted to destroy.

They disavowed history, but they were the direct descendants of Heliogabalus of Alexandria who had been made Emperor at fourteen years of age. Heliogabalus despised his government and was anarchistic. His reign was replete with murder, incest, and the lack of values.

The Alexandrian police cut apart Heliogabalus when he was eighteen years old, in the toilets of his own palace, and then threw his corpse outside on the dirt where two dogs happened to be pissing.

To be kissed by a punk boy was to be drawn to insanity or toward death. The last of the race of white men.

And to fuck one of them, said a girl who was doing just that, is to be drawn into murder.

Perhaps this was what happened to the prostitutes. They didn't commence their violent actions because they had started masturbating. As O had thought. They began because the punk boys came to town and the whores got touched by these boys.

The punks taught the whores: "We're not free because, at any moment, the sky could explode into shreds of flesh . . .

“Europe is far away . . . farther because the civilized West has disappeared . . . already shreds of flesh . . . without any explosion.”

The punks further said, “Terror is the answer for our times because we, whores and punks, cannot liberate ourselves by running away from horror, a horror that is nameless.”

“But,” O replied, “I’ve already lived through horror. I won’t know where prostitution came from until I get rid of it.

“My mother’s inside me. She wants me to suicide because she suicided. I could, to try to find a father so there would be no more mother, but there are no fathers around.”

All of the whores agreed with O: it was the end of the white world.

IN ORDER TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO STOP BEING A PROSTITUTE, O told her best friend, Ange, a story about St. Gall Bladder:

“Until the world of water, earth, air, and light begins, all there can be is desire for water, earth, air, and light.

“St. Gall Bladder was running in the mountains. He was traveling through forests. In the woods, the dew dripped out of the cedars; hard, stiff stalks vibrated in the scintillating light. St. Gall Bladder stood up to his knees in dead spiders, mosses, saliva; soon all was a clarity: gold light and liquid. The gold of the air was that of the water.

“Below the cedars, bits of insect wings were lying on the high-tension cables; around the poles, the grass was virgin.

“St. Gall Bladder fell asleep on what was virgin.

“When St. Gall Bladder woke out of his dream of loneliness, he decided that it was time for him to return to the human world. He felt that now it was time for him to become nothing, to give everything away, and to go down into blackness, that blackness which is called the world that is under.

“ ‘When I’m nothing,’ he added, ‘I’ll become human.’

“St. Gall Bladder went down and met some whores who were spread out on the ground. He walked up to them. During the Algerian war, a bullet had blown part of his left thigh into a hole. So when one of the two prostitutes raised her eyes to him, she just as quickly lowered them.

“He seated himself between the two. ‘I entreat you, my sisters, be true to the earth. Do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes.

“ ‘In times that were past, the soul looked contemptuously down at the body. This contempt was the supreme virtue.’

“As the saint was talking, the young girl took up one of the hands of her lover, whose name was Ange, and held it. Fingers which trembled while held down in that valley which felt like sand, where the sea began, then explosion after explosion made the world tremble.

“St. Gall Bladder’s eyes were gleaming with wet dreams; he watched everything carefully.

“The whores explained to the saint that they were voyaging to the end of the night.

“One of them placed her swollen membranes over the saint’s face and the other licked his cock. For there was no way to be a whore anymore.

“Then they told him about the origin of prostitution: ‘We, and all the other prostitutes, come from the city of KaWeDe where mothers eat their own children and afterwards fuck dogs. Now, it’s time for us to go back, for all whores to go back, for whores to return to their origins.

“ ‘Go to KaWeDe and tell them that Hell is coming to them. Inform them that we are coming. That we’re going back to the source of prostitution and that only a saint who has had his day can be our messenger.’ ”

St. Gall Bladder became the messenger of revolution and the women set the brothel on fire. Flames leapt from this building to nearby buildings to edifice after edifice. When there was nothing left that could burn in the city, the flames shifted toward the forest. Turning trees and air into black smoke, the fire touched the doves in their flight, the vultures, and threw them, as they lacked breath, against the sun. Fire ate at the feet of the animals who were racing, nostrils as wide open as mouths stuffed with living coals: the whole mountain was blazing.

Aware that he was beginning to suffocate, for Bladder was now journeying through this forest, he retired into the bathroom of the hut that was formerly his heritage. He picked up his own shit, rubbed it into his face, for he was a saint. Then Gall Bladder threw himself into the source of the river that ran through the woods. A gun, which had been left by a murderer, to his own eye.

“Enough blood. Enough hatred. Turn to water. Turn cocks into water.”

The moment that his face touched the water, the saint shot himself. Blood spurted out of the skin, reddening the river burning under the smoke; his head rolled ball-like through the underwater billows while above, lions, serpents, pigs, even vultures, all chased by heat and smoke, passed and were passed by each other.

The corpse of the father was turning into water:

The crayfish hid under the dead man’s armpits and orange fish nibbled at his lips . . .

The whores are drunk.

MOST OF THE WHORES LEFT THE CITY WHICH HAD BURNT DOWN. Ange, O’s friend, remained in this space which would soon no longer be human.

It was here that O dreamed her last dream about her self and her friend:

“John, finger-fuck O.” Said Ange. Ange was directing her first play, perhaps in what had been the brothel’s theatre. And John was O’s closest male Alexandrian friend’s boyfriend.

The boy slowly inserted one of his middle fingers between O’s thick outer labia. “Is this OK?”

“OK,” said O.

She was wearing a Kotex pad and the black cotton panties that she always had on whenever she had her period. These were the only panties O owned which didn’t disappear into the crack of her ass.

John screwed in his finger as far as he could. He knew how to do this so that a woman felt pleasure, pleasure as if every type of pleasure was coexisting yet separate from every other type in the same space.

Neither John nor O were upset by her blood.

John ordered O to suck his fingers which, having been up her cunt, were now soaked in blood. O couldn’t tell if these fingers were still up there. She didn’t mind licking them over and over again.

O drew away from John. Now she was conscious—if her mind was eyes, a veil had been drawn away from her eyes—that she was experiencing sexual delight in a public space and that this was wrong. One shouldn’t open up sexually, in public, to a man one didn’t know, when one was

bleeding. Nevertheless she was doing this. And adoring this. In other words: what was clearly happening, with her, couldn't possibly be happening.

Everything was happening, as it always does, sexually.

John bit down hard on the tips of her nipples and bit down hard again. O felt joy. She knew he was at the edge of fucking her. She didn't want him to fuck her because she was in a classroom and exposed to all the students and blood was showing everywhere but the outer strips of her thighs.

It was the beginning of the night when Ange asked her why she hadn't let herself be fucked. She knew that O wanted desperately to fuck.

O thought about this question. She decided that she must be a victim, though she had never before thought that she was a victim, a victim of her society's definition of women who were her age. These women, according to the society, were no longer sexually desirable to men, except perhaps as prostitutes, more important, they no longer possessed sexuality.

O realized that the women who were two or three generations younger than she were far more intelligent than the women her age.

Now night had come to the dead city and lay everywhere.

O found herself in the middle of one of its great streets. She was walking down the middle, as if she was a car or a motorcycle.

Somewhere in her O knew that it was dangerous for her to act like a motorcycle. She had thought that the middle lane, the one whose middle she was in, was going to disappear just as it did, so just as it became one of the other lanes, O swerved into the right lane.

Safely, she reached the bottom of the great thoroughfare. There Ange was waiting for her, though O hadn't expected to see her friend ever again. In the deserted city.

"Stay with me, O. Here."

There had been a previous arrangement between O and a man whose name she didn't know to meet, at this very hour, in the tenderloin district. O remained with Ange.

The two women were already walking. O was upset that she was missing her appointment with an older man, because she couldn't be worried about that, because she had to do something about the blood. She wasn't wearing anything so, at any moment, blood was going to seep through her clothes into the outside.

She remembered that there was a pharmacy on the corner, down the street from the department store where she had planned to meet ____.

Instead of walking toward this department store, Ange and O moved in the other direction, across the principal street that crossed the one down which O had been running. Into the darkest and most deserted part of the burnt-down city.

This was where the artists lived.

In the gigantic pharmacy that was situated in this district, O was looking up at a glass counter top that was far above her. She saw a pile of Tampax. The Tampax was Indian because it hadn't been boxed and because it was wrapped in only the thinnest and cheapest colorless paper. This covering, in spots, was torn.

Since O couldn't buy the Tampax because she thought that it might be diseased, she asked the woman behind the glass counter if the pharmacy had anything else for periods.

An emaciated blonde pointed to wood shelves which were so high that their tops and bottoms had disappeared. They stood behind O. On one of the higher shelves lay a jumbo box of Kotex. Pads so huge they must have been designed for elephants.

"You see, O," the salesgirl said, "you could have gotten fucked even though you had your period."

Everything about the restaurant to which the older man took O spoke of wealth and the upper classes. The man turned out to be a professor whom O had once met, one of the most respected teachers in the country and a novelist. Unlike the other ones who had fucked O, in the recent past, whom she could remember, this man treated her gently and with respect.

It was toward the end of their meal that he pulled her toward him, across a red leather couch on which they were still sitting.

The hands that were holding her head pushed her head down to where she saw a cock that wasn't human. That was small, very pointed at the end, a ring of flesh around its middle, white rather than red. Like a cat's. O put her mouth around it. She didn't think that anyone in the restaurant, especially their waiter, was noticing her disappearance or the head, beneath the white-cloth-covered table top, down in the realm that lay under.

When everything was over, she raised her head and saw that the man had changed: he was smiling angelically; the hair on his head, once scanty and

white, was now very thick, black, an Afro, like what white liberals once wore.

O was feeling sick. She realized that having had this sex during which she had never lost consciousness made her queasy. Such sex was immoral. Whereas the sex during the sex show had sent her over the edge, over every edge, over her self, flying, until all that was left was sky and blackness. During the loss of herself, 'she' had become scared. O realized that she wanted this sex, that she needed it, this sexuality that she had known when she had been a whore.

O, the Jew, told herself, I have to go back to my roots.