

S A R A H S H U N - L I E N B Y N U M

m a d e l e i n e i s
s l e e p i n g

H A R C O U R T , I N C .

Orlando Austin New York San Diego Toronto London

Copyright © 2004 by Sarah Shun-lien Bynum

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Requests for permission to make copies of any part of the work should be mailed to the following address: Permissions Department, Harcourt, Inc., 6277 Sea Harbor Drive, Orlando, Florida 32887-6777.

www.HarcourtBooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

TK

ISBN: 0-15-101059-5

Text set in Adobe Garamond
Designed by Linda Lockowitz

Printed in the United States of America

First edition

A C E G I K J H F D B

Dedication tk

madeleine is
sleeping

hush

HUSH, MOTHER SAYS. Madeleine is sleeping. She is so beautiful when she sleeps, I do not want to wake her.

The small sisters and brothers creep about the bed, their gestures of silence becoming magnified and languorous, fingers floating to pursed lips, tip toes rising and descending as if weightless. Circling about her bed, their frantic activity slows; they are like tiny insects suspended in sap, kicking dreamily before they crystallize into amber. Together they inhale softly and the room fills with one endless exhalation of breath: Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

madeleine dreams

A GROTESQUELY FAT WOMAN lives in the farthest corner of the village. Her name is Matilde. When she walks to market, she must gather up her fat just as another woman gathers up her skirts, daintily pinching it between her fingers and hooking it over her wrists. Matilde's fat moves about her gracefully, sighing and rustling with her every gesture. She walks as if enveloped by a dense storm cloud, from which the real, sylph-like Matilde is waiting to emerge, blinding as a sunbeam.

mme. cochon

ON MARKET DAY, children linger in their doorways. They hide tight, bulging fists behind their backs and underneath their aprons. When Matilde sweeps by, trailing her luxurious rolls of fat behind her, the children shower her. They fling bits of lard, the buttery residue scraped from inside a mother's churn, the gristle from Sunday dinner's lamb. The small fistfuls have grown warm and slippery from the children's kneading, and the air is rich with a comforting, slightly rancid smell.

Madame Cochon, are you hungry? they whisper as she glides by.

Matilde thinks she hears curiosity in their voices. She smiles mildly as she continues on, dodging the dogs that have run out onto the street, snuffling at the scraps. It feels, somehow, like a parade. It feels like a celebration.

surprise

ONCE, AS MATILDE made her way through the falling fat, she was startled by a peculiar, but not unpleasant throb, which originated in her left shoulder but soon travelled clockwise to the three other corners of her broad back. She wondered if the children were now hurling soup bones, and made an effort to move more swiftly, but suddenly the joyous barrage slowed to a halt. The children stood absolutely still, lips parted, yellow butter dripping onto their shoes. They stared at her with a curiosity Matilde did not recognize.

Hearing a restless fluttering behind her, she twisted about and glimpsed the frayed edges of an iridescent wing. With great caution, she flexed her meaty shoulder blades and to her delight, the wing flapped gaily in response. Matilde had, indeed, fledged two pairs of flimsy wings, the lower pair, folded sleekly about the base of her spine, serving as auxiliary to the grander ones above.

flight

LEAPING CLUMSILY, all four wings flapping, her fat, like sandbags, threatening to ground her, Matilde greets the air with arms spread wide open. A puff of wind lifts the hem of her skirts, seems to tickle her feet, and Matilde demands, Up, up, up! With a groan, the wind harnesses Matilde's impressive buttocks and dangles her above the cobblestones, above the hungry dogs, above the dirty children with fat melting in their fists.

stirring

MADELEINE STIRS in her sleep.

hush

WHEN MADELEINE SLEEPS, Mother says, the cows give double their milk. Pansies sprout up between the floorboards. Your father loves me, but I remain slender and childless. I can hear the tumult of pears and apples falling from the trees like rain.

Smooth your sister's coverlet. Arrange her hair on the pillowcase. Be silent as saints. We do not wish to wake her.

menses

ONCE DETHRONED, Marguerite is bitter.

A vocal absurdity, she sniffs. He is nothing but a caged nightingale!

But the composer remains unmoved. He has made his decision. The dark-hued female alto, fragrant and soiled, is not the voice of a hero. But Senesino! Such purity. Such extraordinary range. Lily-white, crystalline, without stain.

The stain, Marguerite grumbles, of my menstrual blood.

adieu

AS SHE BIDS HER FAREWELLS from the stage, Marguerite curtsies to the gelding. She reprises a couplet that a poet of great celebrity has penned for the occasion:

*But let old charmers yield to new;
Happy soil, adieu! adieu!*

The audience murmurs at her pretty sportsmanship. They crane to examine the castrato, who is perched in the composer's private box, shielding his smile with a gloved and demure hand. He whispers in the composer's ear, promising, Together we will delight them.

The composer, prompted, flatters the castrato, but he is interrupted: My timbre is flawless, yes. But it is the cruelty of my condition that will afford them such unbearable pleasures.

Marguerite, suddenly immodest, makes a rude gesture from the stage. She grabs her genitals lovingly. She flicks her hand from beneath her chin. Her wrist snaps in the air with wonderful elasticity.

success

MOTHER IS FLUSHED with business. Her preserves fetch an admirable price. Visitors arrive from long distances, grown ravenous and dissatisfied from the stories they have heard. I will not be happy, a dying girl says, if I cannot taste those heavenly preserves. In the city, Mother is told, the rich have made a habit of spreading it on their morning rolls.

Mother is always distracted, floured, clotted with fruit meat. She bobs up from her cauldron, dabs her upper lip and asks the small children: Is Madeleine too hot?

They flank the bed and roll up their sleeves as they have seen the midwife do. Small hands press expertly against her throat, her cheeks, her eyelids. Madeleine is snowy beneath their fingertips. But is she perhaps a little warm right here, by her left temple? We had better feel once more. To be safe.

prince

A HANDSOME MAN appears at the door, wearing a bristling moustache. He is not craving preserves. He is asking for Madeleine.

Claude says, She is sleeping.

The handsome man answers, I have come to awaken her.

Claude asks, How are you going to do that?

I am going to kiss her mouth.

Wait a minute.

Claude shuts the door.

beatific

THE WIDOW SAYS: I, too, feel sympathy for M. Pujol.

Madeleine studies her toast. There are three raisins remaining, clustered like a birthmark, and the crust, which isn't burnt.

The widow says, So you must not think that I am unfriendly.

Is it better to take many small bites, that taste almost of nothing, or to devour it all at once, and feel regret?

The widow persists, I might even understand why you won't do as I ask.

Crunch. Then no more.

Is it perhaps because, the widow ventures, you have fallen—

The crust catches on its way down. Madeleine turns colors, throws her fist against her chest.

He reminds me of my favorite saint, she gasps.

Who is your favorite? the widow asks. Let me guess, she adds, leaning closer: Sebastian.

Saint Michel, Madeleine says, recovered. In the cathedral, in my town, there is a picture of him in the window. M. Pujol looks exactly like him, except M. Pujol wears a moustache.

And remembering what they taught her at the convent, she folds her paddles neatly in her lap.

But unlike Michel, the widow says, M. Pujol has not been restored to his former beauty and perfection. He remains wretched.

So the widow is familiar with the excesses of the saints.

And for that reason, she murmurs, you wish to spare him.

Madeleine nods. She believes herself saved.

For the widow has turned her back to Madeleine, as though in deference to her argument, and is now fingering the small figures on her mantelpiece. From her stool, Madeleine contemplates her own piety.

Very softly, the widow says: You are mistaken.

And whispering to the tiny circus, she says: He moans like a man in pain. But what you must understand is that you comfort him with your blows.

Turning towards Madeleine, she hands her the lion-tamer in his tight scarlet trousers. Madeleine grips him unsafely in her mitts and discovers it is true: his arms move, as do his well-shaped legs, and his head; all of him moves, with terrible pliancy. Even his wrist, flicking his tiny lash, twists on an invisible screw.

You are attending to his wounds, the widow murmurs. You are ministering, with your maimed hands, to his every suffering.

Inside Madeleine something trembles, then falls into place with a thud.

Like the Abbot at Rievaulx, she says dully.

The plash of water in a bowl, the wringing of cloths—

Exactly, says the widow, who again offers her lovely smile, and places her hand lightly upon Madeleine's head: You are filled with kindness.

in the candlelight

CRACK! IS THE SOUND of an ivory fan meeting the furred curve of a child's ear.

unclean

BRUISES BEGIN TO RISE upon the skin of the sleeping girl. All over her body bloom patches of lavender and gold and lichen green. Beatrice conducts a concerned examination: What could be the cause of this?

Mother hunkers over her cauldron, saying nothing. She thinks, Sometimes I grow clumsy with the handle of the broom. But is it my fault, that she takes up so much space?

The preserves seethe about the neck of her spoon. Drops of sweat tremble on her brow. She frowns down, protectively, at the mess she has concocted: she must devise a defense. Her business, which she has nurtured so very tenderly, now finds itself under attack.

The other women of the village, who until this point have been her stalwart companions, her confederates, her sisters-in-arms, have risen up against her. The reason? Covetousness, simply, which is certainly a sin. They begrudge her the success that has struck her house, swift and unbidden as the lightning bolt that set the mayor's roof on fire. The new fur muff in her lap, the lustrous flanks of her new horse, the rattle of the jam jars atop the postman's cart: it all feeds their fury. Sabotage is their only recourse, and soon rumors of unwholesomeness and sorcery are set roaming about the streets.

Shattered crocks appear on her doorstep; the stone wall is speckled with jam. One day, on her way to market, she sees that a shrill placard has been erected along the road:

IF THE FLESH IS UNCLEAN THEN SO IS THE FOOD
BEWARE THE PRODUCTS OF AN UNHOLY HOME!

She turns abruptly and stomps her way home. There, she surveys the girl spread before her, dewy and white and unruffled: You are the source of all this trouble, Mother says.

deal

M. PUJOL CAN SEE the girl and the photographer, quarrelling once more behind the shrubbery. A flurry of fingers rises up above the privet hedge. If he stood his travelling case on one end, and climbed on top, he could wave his arms; he could cry out, Adrien! and maybe the photographer would turn around and slowly smile. But instead he drives a bargain with himself: I will not call out his name, as long as —above him an arbiter rustles, presents itself— that leaf does not fall from that tree.

He repeats the terms. They seem fair. And trusting in the impartial justice of the universe, he sits down on his travelling case.

The voices continue, passing from reproach to lament to something he cannot quite recognize. Please. His face. Cannot. I saw you. The words sift over and stain him like pollen: Your hands. I cannot. But then a wind rises and the leaves stir and the voices are carried in the opposite direction, away from him. Remembering his leaf, he is sent into a panic: so many of them! All rustling, shifting, silvering; made unrecognizable in their commotion. But eventually the wind subsides and the leaves are stilled and once more it is revealed: his leaf, the one not as green as the others; looking, in fact, somewhat sickly. It trembles on its stem. It twists fretfully against the sky. When the wind lifts again, so do the flatulent man's hopes.

But the leaf is more firmly attached to the tree than, by all appearances, it should be.

M. Pujol searches for other signs: If that crow takes flight, he tells himself. That thistle bursts. That handsaw, in the distance, ceases.

Then I will not have to go.

hunter

FROM HER WINDOW, high above the world, the widow spots them, the child and her photographer, entangled in the shadows of the shrubbery. And as she watches them, she feels the briefest flicker, like the singe of a match tip's flame: quickly, now, before it's gone! She tugs upon the bell rope that dangles beside her: a photograph must be taken; the moment must not be lost. Yes, here is the hind of her nighttime hunts; she has tracked it down at last.

Then she laughs at herself, at the futility of her agitated summons. For how can he take the picture, when he is the picture? All of her efforts, if she is to be truthful, are marked by this same sense of impossibility. The more furiously she pursues, the more surely it recedes, this fugitive scene, visible only when glimpsed askance, out of the corner of her rheumy eye. Her latest project has been a failure; she had hoped that this marvelous invention, this alchemy of chemicals and light, would assist her in her pursuits, but now, as her eyes graze over the photographs, she discovers that they offer her nothing. And if they do, it is only by accident: in one picture, the fringe of the carpet is caught between the man's toes; in another, the child's mouth is open, as if she is about to speak: these are the details that prick her. But they are scarce among this series of tableaux, lovingly arranged, though ultimately of no poignance or excitement to her.

Once she had been interviewed by a scientist, who was anxious to include a grandmother in his study of libertines, already several volumes long. He had amused her with the exacting nature of his

questions, and his demands that she should include even the most scabrous details in her accounts. She had teased him, she couldn't help it, so strenuous were his attempts to manage her perversions, to render them immobile. What you must finally recognize, she said, what you must understand about my predilections (the scientist leans forward: at long last, the secret!) is that my desire does not take; it turns, as milk does.

For that reason, she feels only a little sad when she finds, slipped beneath her door, a note written in an elegant hand:

Please forgive me. I have left in search of a Faculty of Medicine who might take interest in my unusual condition. I plan to donate my body to Science, so that I can say my life has been of some use to Humankind.

stain

THE BARN IS SILENT. All eyes are fixed upon the sleeping girl. She lies there, indifferent to their gaze: inert, dreaming, blank, detached. Innocence, some might take it for, the audience seeing her as if for the first time, as if she has been restored, through sleep, to her proper dimensions; she is only a girl, asleep, her hands folded neatly on her chest. She looks small. Her monstrous hands look small as well. The people of her town cannot stop gazing at them, at how quietly they lie. They watch her hands with the absorption of a poet, who cannot bear to look away from his mark on the page, the word he has left there.

hush

FROM BEHIND the curtain comes a fluttering, and Mme. Cochon steps out onto the stage. Her hair is dishevelled, her wings are askew, but it is with a beautiful degree of poise that she extracts her diary from deep between her breasts. When she opens the book, its pages fan out like a peacock's tail. The audience sighs at this disturbance, as if she were a noisy member in their midst. But she will not be silenced. She says to them:

You know me as a woman of science. For months you have seen me at work on this volume, in which I've recorded many small and mysterious signs. Now, at last, I wish to share with you my findings.

Holding her book in one hand, gathering up her fat in the other, Mme. Cochon sweeps past the half-wit, and like a dainty lady forced to navigate a puddle, she frowns at the girl lying asleep on the stage, and finally steps over her, as though she were of little matter.

From the first page of her book, the woman reads:

Hush.

And together, the neighbors, the brothers and sisters, together they inhale softly and the barn fills with one endless exhalation of breath: Shhhhhhhhhhhhh.

It is all about to begin.

notes

REFERENCE IS MADE to the following authors and works:

- She dreams* (22): Andrew Porter, Handel: *Arias for Durastanti* (Harmonia Mundi, 1992), liner notes.
- Imposter*: Sir Bart Satcheverell Sitwell, *Baroque and Rococo* (New York, 1967).
- Adieus*: Alexander Pope, in Handel: *Arias for Durastanti* (Harmonia Mundi, 1992).
- She dreams* (39): Ludwig Bemelmans, *Madeline and the Gypsies* (New York, 1959).
- Performance*: Jean Nohain and F. Caradec, *Le Petomane 1857-1945* (Los Angeles, 1967).
- Abasement*: Ibid.
- Rectitude*: Ibid.
- Metamorphosis*: George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London, 1872).
- Hunter*: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York, 1981).
- Insane*: Ibid.
- House of the Sleeping Beauties*: Yasunari Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories* (New York, 1969).