

LBRIS

We know
books

THE UNWORTHY

AGUSTINA BAZTERRICA

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY

SARAH MOSES

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Someone is screaming in the dark. I hope it's Lourdes.

I put cockroaches in her pillow and sewed up the slip, so they struggle to get out, so they crawl under her head or over her face (and into her ears, I hope, nesting there, the nymphs damaging her brain). I left small gaps between the stitches so the cockroaches would escape slowly, with difficulty, like when I trap them (imprison them) in my hands. Some of them bite. They have flexible skeletons, they can flatten themselves and fit through tiny spaces, live without heads for days, survive underwater for a long time. They're fascinating. I like to experiment with them. Cut off their antennae. Their legs. Stick needles in them. I squash them with a glass so I can linger over their primitive, brutal frames.

I boil them.

I burn them.

I kill them.

I write with a small, sharp quill I keep close, in the hem of my white nightgown, with the ink I store under the wooden floorboards. On the pages I hide next to my skin, held by the strip of fabric I use for this purpose. There are times I need them on me, close to my heart, under my grey tunic, which was worn by the men who used to live here. We believe they were priests, monks, men of religion. Austere men who chose to live as though they were in the Middle Ages. They're dead, but some of the women say they see them out of the corners of their eyes in the dark. It's rumoured that when He and the Superior Sister arrived from the ravaged earth, the collapsed world, they found neither mobiles nor computers.

Three of the Chosen entered the Chapel of Ascension. They were Minor Saints being brought to the altar, their hands resting on the shoulders of the servants guiding them. They were beautiful, as only those brushed by God can be. The air was imbued with a sweet and fresh scent. The smell of mysticism.

The sun lit up the stained glass and the Chapel of Ascension filled with small, translucent gems, forming an ephemeral mosaic.

A cloud covered the sky and the transparent colours dissolved. But we still saw, with absolute clarity, a thread of blood run down one of the Minor Saint's cheeks, staining her white tunic. We all knew who had done such a poor job of sewing her eyes shut before the ceremony. Mariel. Useless, helpless Mariel, wiping the palms of her hands on her grey tunic, her eyes shining as she gave us an afflicted look. I wonder what Mariel's name used to be.

The Superior Sister stood in the dark on one side of the altar. We saw her strike the light wood floor silently with one of her boots. War boots, like her trousers, black, military, a soldier's. We couldn't tell if the whip hung next to her other foot. It was too dark to see it. We knew He was also at the altar, behind the chancel screen, the frame of three wood panels that prevents us from seeing Him. (Only the Chosen and Enlightened have this privilege.) He spoke. He told us that to be Enlightened we would have to relinquish our origin, the erroneous God, the false son, the negative mother, the trivial ideas, the nocturnal filth that drags itself slowly and invisibly through our blood.

I looked at the veins in my wrists and brought my finger to one of the blue lines.

To purify.

He called us unworthy, like He always does, like He does whenever we gather in the Chapel of Ascension, after three days, or nine. (We never know exactly when we'll be summoned.) He uttered the word 'unworthy' again and it

reverberated against the walls, as though His voice had the power to mobilize the inert stone.

The Minor Saints sang the Primary Hymn, the original hymn and one of the most important, the one that confirms the brush of divinity. We don't understand it; the hymns are sung in a language known only by the Chosen. He explained the hymn to us again, said it speaks to how our God protects us from contamination through the Enlightened, and proclaims that 'without faith, there is no refuge'.

After a dramatic silence, the Minor Saints resumed their song. I saw thousands of white petals leave their mouths, filling the air, lily petals that glimmered until they disappeared. Their voices can reach the universal notes, vibrate with the light of the stars. (That's why their eyes are sewn shut, so they're not distracted by the mundane, so they capture the reverberations of our God.) Sacred crystals hang from their necks as a symbol and assurance of their holiness. Quartzes of purity, transparent gems. The Minor Saints' tunics were bright white, stainless. We listened to their voices in silence, ecstatic and relieved, the a cappella music distancing us from the chirping of the crickets, a sound like rage that lulls you to sleep.

The three Minor Saints resumed the Primary Hymn until they began to bleed in unison. Mariel stifled a scream and pulled out a tuft of hair. We all looked at her, our eyes lingering on her head, which was nearly bald. When she'd arrived, her hair had been thick and she had been free of

contamination. That's why she wasn't relegated to being a servant. We didn't understand why she insisted on disfiguring herself. Some of us smiled with pleasure because we knew Mariel would receive an exemplary punishment. Others hid their faces in their hands, feigning prayer to mask their delight.

The Minor Saints resumed their song at the altar, but we were distracted by thoughts of who among us would be chosen to clean the blood off the floor, who would have to spend the night treating and sewing the Minor Saints' eyes and who would punish Mariel. I'd had an exemplary punishment in mind for some time. I brought my hands together and pleaded that I'd be chosen to implement it.

One of the Minor Saints fainted, and the servants dragged her by the arms to the Chosen's quarters. The Superior Sister stood up in the middle of the altar and motioned to us. It was time to go. He remained behind the chancel screen, or so we assumed, because we never see Him leave. We don't know what He's like. Some say He's so beautiful it's painful to look at Him; others that His eyes are like downward spirals, disturbed. But these are all just guesses because we unworthy have never seen Him.

We rose in silence, holding in our anger, hiding our rage, because it's not every day we get to hear the Minor Saints sing. They're fragile, some can't tolerate the weight of the holy words they chant (words that ensure the bond with our God is not broken). They can't endure the sight of the sacred glimmer in the dark.

I was chosen to clean the floor and not to decide on Mariel's exemplary punishment. It's rumoured she'll have to strip naked, that Lourdes is going to stick a needle somewhere in her body. A good lesson. Simple and elegant. I wish I'd thought of it, but Lourdes comes up with the best punishments. They always pick hers.

Cleaning the Chosen's blood was the offering and sacrifice demanded of me by the Superior Sister.

The Chapel of Ascension was gloomy, though I had lit a few candles so I could see the red stains on the floor. The flames moved and the light they projected cast shapes on the stones, drawings that danced in the dark.

The Minor Saints' blood (like that of all the Chosen) is purer, that's why the servants can't clean it. I touched it slowly, trying to sense the lightness, the joy of being part of our Sacred Sisterhood, and the improper, subterranean thoughts being removed, those thoughts that remain of the fading earth we come from. I brought my bloodstained finger to my tongue and tasted winged insects and nocturnal howls. I understood that one of the Minor Saints was going to die. I was glad, because the most beautiful funerals are held when the Chosen pass. This time I'd have to get them to pick me.

While I was cleaning, a Full Aura seemed to float in, and she sat down on a pew. She didn't see me kneeling on the floor. I knew she couldn't hear me, but I kept still. I was ecstatic because I'd never seen one. I recognized her by the marks on her hands and feet, the transparent quartz hanging on her chest (the Chosen's quartz) and her white,

translucent tunic. Her long hair covered her useless ears, their perforated drums. Noise cannot be allowed to distract them. I've heard that few exist. She moved her hands, touching something in the air.

Full Auras can discern the divine signals, the hidden signs He sends us in the Chapel of Ascension. That's why they have those marks. Understanding God's messages leaves traces on their bodies (wounds on their fragile skin, sores that never heal) so they don't forget his presence. She seemed to radiate a light capable of invoking the angels. I squinted and, in the gloom, I could make out the aura that crowned her. It was perfectly radiant, lances of fire surrounded her head, vibrating of their own free will. I closed my eyes, dazzled, and felt she must live in an immaculate time when pain did not exist.

She began to orate. Her voice had the resonance of crystal shattering. I couldn't understand the disquieting, fractured language. The Superior Sister entered the Chapel of Ascension quickly, her steps like strikes, and took the Full Aura by the arm. The Chosen (~~the mutilated~~) live behind the Chapel of Ascension in quarters we can't access. Only He and the Superior Sister can, and the servants who attend them. Someone had left the door open and the Full Aura had escaped, but the Superior Sister was gentle because a Full Aura can't be disturbed while she's orating. The thread that connects them to our reality can snap, leaving them trapped in the intangible dimension, a place beyond the air. It's only happened twice. Those Full Auras were never seen again.

Some servant is going to be punished for leaving the door open. The Superior Sister will ensure she's made to scream.

She looked at me furiously, but I lowered my head as is expected in her presence, before her magnitude. I didn't want to meet her eyes. They hide an ice storm.

I finished cleaning and left for my cell, but first I walked through the hallways and took a detour to see the carved black door. No one was around so I went over to touch the wood. Beyond it is the Refuge of the Enlightened. They don't live with the Chosen because they're the Sacred Sisterhood's most valued treasure (~~that's why they're not mutilated like the three orders of the Chosen: the Minor Saints, the Diaphanous Spirits and the Full Auras~~). The door is in the centre of a long hallway and it's far from the cells where we unworthy sleep. The hallway is lit by candles the servants replace every night. There are empty cells on either side of the door that only the Enlightened can open.

I knew I didn't have much time, that it was risky, but I ran my fingers over the wings of the angel carrying its pyx, the lily petals, the nightingale feathers. As I imagined the day I'd be consecrated as Enlightened (~~and not as Chosen, I don't want to be Chosen~~), the day I'd be given the sacred crystal and the door would open for me, I heard a cry that was like a wail, and then a smothered scream, a scream like a growl, a growl like the silent lament of an animal lying in wait. I moved away from the door and ran.

I can't tell anybody I saw a Full Aura. If I do, the unworthy will accuse me of things I haven't done because they didn't witness the miracle, because I dared to speak of the marvel. The Superior Sister will send me to the Tower of Silence, near the Cloister of Purification. The Tower of Silence (that place we fear) was built of stone, along part of the wall (we believe the monks used it as an observation post), with small, paneless windows, in a circle that rises high, so high you have to crane your neck to see where it ends, the eighty-eight steps of cold stone forming a spiral staircase.

I know they would abandon me there, at the top of the Tower of Silence, with no food or water, alone, under the open sky, the crickets chirping, the sound hypnotic, ethereal, frightening. Far from the House of the Sacred Sisterhood.

In the company of bones that shine in the dark.

I write in my windowless cell, by the light of candles that burn too fast. With a knife I stole from the kitchen,

little by little, I chip at a small crack in the wall for air and light.

I hide these pages in the bed sheets, or under the wooden floorboards. When I want to save the ink left by the monks, I prick myself with needles and use blood. That's why some of the blotches are darker, a mineral red. Sometimes, I make ink out of charcoal or from the plants and flowers I gather, though it's dangerous to do so. Just like it's dangerous to be writing this, at this time, in this place, but I do it anyway, to remember who I was before I came to the House of the Sacred Sisterhood. What did I do, where did I come from, how did I survive? I don't know. Something has broken in my memory, and I can't recall much of my past.

I burned many pages, the forbidden pages that spoke of her, of she who is buried with the insurgents, the disobedient women: Helena.

The haze is from the ravaged lands, the destroyed world. It's a cold haze with a sticky consistency, like a spiderweb that comes apart between our fingers. Some have had skin reactions, burning, severe pain. The skin of one of the servants changed colour. We haven't seen her since.

It's hard for us to breathe.

The unworthy have been making more sacrifices for days now. The Chosen have interpreted God's signs, as they always do, and the Enlightened have announced that 'without faith, there is no refuge'. The Enlightened anticipate catastrophe. They're the only ones who know God's name. The rest of us can't pronounce it, because the secret language must be learnt, and it hides from us like a white snake devouring itself. To speak it is to be torn apart; it's like music composed of splinters, a mouthful of scorpions.

The haze makes it hard for us to move, but we carry out our sacrifices to reduce its damage. Some torment themselves by fasting; others walk on their knees. Lourdes offered to afflict herself by sitting on shards of glass.

The sun seems eclipsed. Its light doesn't shine, its rays give no illumination or warmth. It's as though we were living in perpetual night.

Without faith, there is no refuge.

The Enlightened said we had to keep making sacrifices, otherwise the air would become petrified and we'd die like fossils in the haze. We trust their messages because they possess all three of the Chosen's virtues. They're emissaries of the light; that's why they have the Minor Saints' ethereal