

Young Writers Award - 1999 winner

Eight Parts of Anka by Rebekah Scott

I SURFACES

When a certain kind of earth is put into a mortar and ground into fine powder, a pigment is produced. The colour may vary, depending on the earth, from mustard to brownish-red. If a blue flame is placed under certain types of clay or sand ochre, the mixture turns red by degrees. By mixing with linseed oil, paint is formed. Using a small sponge, this paint may be applied to skin, or to other surfaces.

II COSTUME JEWELLERY, OR,

WHY NO-ONE EVER KNOCKED ON HER DOOR

There's a row of coloured jars standing on a shelf in what was once her bedroom. A shaman's hoard, different powders contained in each jar. The smell of each one gives this away, for the room is cave-dark. At first glance it seems that spiders dangle from the lampshade, but the spiders slowly become earrings hooked onto the many tassels. A string of pearls swoons over the arm of a chair. As you enter the doorway and walk across the rough wooden boards to the dressing table, the room tinkles and clinks.

As though you were stepping through a glass-bead curtain.

This was where she prepared herself. Where she took a paper-thin face and gave it layers of expression. She heaved characters out of the bareness of this room, scooping an intricate smirk or scowl out of a handful of coloured dust. This was where she prepared herself, though when on the road, when shifting her characters from town to town, trailing them after her as tails on a kite, she worked mostly out of a toolbox.

Now the room is emptied of her. She has shelled herself from it, but its shape remains. Only a little hunched.

Turn to leave the room and the jars slide the way ice slides around an empty drink.

III THE CROWD FELL SILENT

"The first time I saw Anka play was on the street outside what used to be this whorehouse - down in the old part of town. Sure, I'd seen her in plays before - but I'd never seen her do any of her own stuff.

"She was wearing this short pink skirt with black fur on it ... and a black lacy top. She had feathers round her neck too - I think. But it's her face I really remember. She had this sorta black V painted on her forehead ... and a real thin black line running down her chin. Yeah. And I remember thinking it made her face look like two half-moons - or something. Yeah. And her eyes seemed real big, too - like her face was all eyes. She didn't say a thing. Not a thing. Only her eyes roved round like this wildcat ... Like a big trapped cat."

"Was she in character?"

"Yeah, she was there as Daiquiri Dolly. I didn't recognise her at first - like I said, I was kinda caught by her eyes. And she looked at me like - Hey honey, wanna get yaself a doll to play with - and I turned my head like to say - No thanks lady, I've got someone to meet - and then I realised it was her.

She knew it was me all along. We grew up in the same street. So she just screamed with laughter and those two half-moons nearly split and she danced on the spot at her joke. Shaking that face from side to side."

"Who was Daiquiri Dolly supposed to be?"

"Aw, she was just some girl Anka had seen walking up and down. Stitched up in frills and made up real heavy like she was some wax-faced doll stinking of perfume and rum - a bit rowdy, a bit sad and kinda sexy at the same time."

"Would anyone actually stop and pay Anka for this routine?"

"Shit no - she was just trying people out. This was just rehearsal."

IV ITEMS OF PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION

The few things left in her room are hardly worth noticing. A dressing table and chair, a mirror, some costume jewels, a cluster of glass jars, a teapot. Yet her hands are all over these things. Her fingertips have collided in the powder spilt on their surfaces, minute dance steps recorded here and there on wood. The swift application of tints: of blush, of eye shadow, of white mask. Peering into the mirror, her fingerprints, pale as smoke, clasp the face seen there.

She has bequeathed these things to the room.

a white glove made of kidskin laid suggestively on a shoulder in Kjeld Abell's *Vetsera Doesn't Bloom for Everyone*

a piece of black-bordered gauze thrown over a face as a shroud in Strindberg's *A Dream Play*

a cowbell, suspended from twine, struck by a spoon to announce dinner conversation in P. Lagerkvist's *The Philosopher's Stone*

a pair of blue silk pantaloons worn by the clown 'Kaspar' as he is hounded by words in Handke's play of the same name

an ecstatic note struck by the nasal voice of Valenska Gert as 'The Whore' in her macabre cabaret pantomime, *The Girl from the Mummie's Cellar*

a throat hollowed out by air so that lips mouth HELP in *Die Zeit und das Zimmer* (The Time and the Room), a play by Botho Strauss

the ability to drain an emotion up through the body as though it were a siphon, as laid out by nienne Decroux

the sculpted sinews of an arm greased black in a Tomaszewski mime

VI CLOWN'S CACHE, OR,

A RECORDED MESSAGE

Anka had a lot of space in her house. She hoarded many things, of course. Fabric, shoes, earrings, even teapots - but all of these things you can hide out of the way. Or shelve.

Anka liked to pitch herself at things, at ideas. She liked to throw herself around a room, get a feel for the space. There was never clutter. Everything she had was kept at a height.

We'd spend a lot of time together while we were at work [serious at first]. We'd rent out strange films and sit on packing cases or a heap of cushions, eating olives and pickles and stinky cheese, tearing off huge chunks of frenchstick, slinging around a bladder of wine [chuckles].

All the time we'd be performing. Trying out each other's masks. Splitting ourselves with laughter [becomes grandiose], slipping words into each other's mouths like they were pearls, or else mincing them like they meant nothing at all to us. Or we'd tease each other, strike each other, stick pins in each other [jokes].

Sex naturally played a part - not a large part. It wasn't a lead performance. It took more of a cameo role, I would say [smirks]. But it was essential to our knowing each other. [See Berkoff's director's notes to *The Fall of the House of Usher*: 'so utterly sensitive are these two characters, sharing each other's pleasures and pains, that the actors playing them should preferably be lovers, or are about to be at some time during the rehearsal, or have at least tasted the pleasure of each other's bodies'.]

This was how it was with us. While we were performing we shared a total physical commitment. Total, in the sense that we could read each other's emotions by feeling for the ridges and plains in our bodies, or in the way we moved.

Going on the road together was really the most energetic time we had [grins]. This was when we'd usually perform her own material. She had this 'dirty closet' [makes a face], as she called it, full of characters she'd pull out: Cabaret Leopard, Daiquiri Dolly, Iris the Asylum Escapee, Rita the Refo...

Her cabaret act was the real crowd-pleaser. Anka got the idea from a German cabaret dancer who staged these grotesque pantomimes in a couple of bars she owned in West Berlin, the Hexenk?nd the Ziegenstall - The Witch's Kitchen and The Goat Pen. Anyway, she later emigrated to New York with her act. Anka felt a certain resonance with that, I think.

Hers were solo performances, of course. That was how she wanted it ... to an extent. I had no part in them except as make-up artist, working from a toolbox - a clown's cache, I called it [grins again]. Sometimes I'd give her a line to throw into the performance. But her shows would be constantly evolving, anyway, taking in new bits of dialogue, new phrases of facial expression. Then she'd lay these new maps of movement, of gesture, over the old.

These other acts, her 'persona shows', weren't so popular with the crowd [becomes defensive]. Not so that they would say, 'I really connected with this, or that, character'... They were designed to shock. Anka would set out to create a spectacle ... Something to shy away from or to react violently against. Actually, this was a ploy to bring people into her performance ... To use the audience for what it's best at being - a shifting, distrusting, and sometimes (I think it's fair to say) a pretty volatile part of the act. So that the show would be sort of shaded a different tone each time it was done.

Often Anka would take her acts where they weren't wanted ... Gallery showings, orchestral premieres, the local playhouse, the supermarket, other families' funerals, even [amused]. I attended a funeral with her once. She was there as the refugee, Rita. She was, of course, convulsed with grief and fell into this elegy for those lost in the genocide of entire villages. She made a superb spectacle. Even her exit was spectacular, leaving as she did, on the arms of sympathisers. [A pause, where he parodies the scene.]

Then we'd take off, pick up a loop in one of the folk or fringe festival circuits. And Anka'd drive fast enough for no-one ever to catch up with us. Including the police.

[In a gruff voice] 'What's in the back?' a small-town cop asks her this time, nodding at the caravan. She glances over her shoulder. She runs her eyes past all the racks of coats, silks and furs. Then the trains of feathers and galleries of rubber face masks, down to the back where there's this row of mannequins ready to be used in a Poe story we were taking to an outback cemetery.

With an ironic curl of lip, she replies, 'A rack full of stiffs, officer.' [Deep-throated laughter follows for some time.] And then she takes off, practically enshrouding him in this black veil of exhaust!

She was anarchic. Our city wasn't big enough for her. There wasn't enough space. She took hold of my hands and I whirled her round and she swung and reeled so the colours of the world bled from top to toe and then she knocked things over [wistful now].

We were moving in and out of space like brushstrokes, swimming through shapes and colour and sound. Performing things in huge cages, frantically spinning like crazy mice in giant running-wheels. Or else we'd be acting on some enormous set of scales. We'd stage things in jails or rubbish dumps or carparks or on top of water-towers. The kind of event where a handful of people would show up to see something that would make the way they see all things change from that moment onwards. Seasons that lasted ten epic days then spiralled away like the smoke of a dying candle. [His eyes mist.]

Then she turned to mime. You could never pin Anka down.

And then she left for Helsinki. Or Berlin, someone told me. Doing cabaret again? I can't believe it, but then we did lose touch.

[At this point he loses interest in the questions.]

VII METAMORPHOSIS

She stands under the yellow spray of a streetlamp. Venus risen. She is poised, wearing black, panther-like. Here she waits for the crowd to gather momentum, her heart swinging in syncopated beats. Her mind moves over those in the street, steps over the personalities, sweeps them up. Things roam before her eyes and her loose thoughts range and lunge.

Which mask to wear? Which act to follow?

Now a shock of energy thrills through her limbs. Her whole body goes rigid before she eases herself into action, her features cascading into movement from the top of her down-turned head, downwards. She slides over small rocks then falls, spilling into the wider pool of mirror-images, of character, of acting ... of acting...

VIII ANKA PRESENTS...

... acting gives me the creeps. People scare me half to death. I might be just walking down the street looking for a place to set up - or maybe I'll be just standing there on the spot - when someone comes up and grabs me and pulls my scarf tightly round my neck so I can't scream for help - so I can't even breathe - and I cross myself like this is it, this is the end of walking around from place to place, finding people to copy, making people watch - and I panic. I don't want to be stopped. Made to be that still.

People are always expecting things from me. Some mornings I wanna just roll out of bed and not even bend to pick up the paper from the grass. Or I could get the paper and sit on the verandah with it right there in my lap, you know, and sip coffee - not drain the cup or anything, just sip it while it's still hot - and listen to the parrots in the umbrella tree.

I wouldn't even go back inside the house.

I wouldn't even have to go inside.

I'm tired of getting inside people. It makes me nervous. I don't know who I am sometimes. It kills me. I have real trouble learning lines. I do it in the tub. That way I can float somewhere that's full - but empty at the same time, see?

People are so boring, anyway. That's the real problem. Why try to hide it? Why disguise it with disguises? People don't wanna see things differently. They just want a laugh. That's it. A laugh.

So I've given up seeing. I'm not looking for people anymore. I'm going someplace where people come to me. Fuck them - I'm tired. My eyes are tired. You know, I have to blink too much to stay awake. Might as well bat my eyes at seedy pricks who spill their drinks ... You know the sort. Men whose teeth sparkle out of those dark pockets of some dark bar. Might as well jerk my hips and shoot my arms up and down like arrows for someone who's gonna pay me for it.

I can dive between tables and lick the sweat off my top lip and stuff notes between my breasts and sing as easily as speak.

Auf Wiedersehen

So long.