

IRONY IS NOT ENOUGH: ESSAY ON MY LIFE
AS CATHERINE DENEUVE (2nd draft)

saison qui chante saison rapide

je commence

Beginnings are hard. Sappho put it simply. Speaking of a young girl Sappho said, *You burn me*. Deneuve usually begins with herself and a girl together in a hotel room. This is mental. Meanwhile the body persists. Sweater buttoned almost to the neck, she sits at the head of the seminar table expounding aspects of Athenian monetary reform. It was Solon who introduced into Athens a coinage which had a forced currency. Citizens had to accept issues called drachmas, didrachmas, obols, etc. although these did not contain silver of that value. Token coinages. Money that lies about itself. Seminar students are writing everything down carefully, one is asleep, Deneuve continues to talk about money and surfaces. Little blues, little whites, little hotel taffetas. This is mental. Bell rings to mark the end of class. *He has a foreskin but for fear of wearing it out he uses another man's when he copulates, is what Solon's enemies liked to say of him*, Deneuve concludes. *Fiscal metaphor*. She buttons her top button and the seminar is over.

jours

If you asked her Deneuve would say *Take these days away and pour them out on the ground in another country.*

parts

Seminar meets MonWedFri. Parts of time fall on her and snow wanders slowly through the other afternoons. Deneuve sits in her office looking at the word *irony* on a page. Half-burnt. You have to wonder. Sappho, Sokrates, is it all mental? These people seem bathed in goodness, yet here come the beautiful dangerous white rapids beating onto them. Knife of boy. Knife of girl. Knife of the little knower. Where is the ironic work that picks threads back from that surface into another design underneath, holding rapids in place? Evening fills the room. Deneuve buttons her coat and closes the office door behind her. Staircase is dim and filthy, small dirty deposits on each step. She heads for the Metro. What would Sokrates say. Name the parts. Define each name. Deneuve is turning names and parts over in her mind when she realizes she has ridden the train four stops in the wrong direction. Climbs back up from the platform, stairs are filthy here too, must be a punishment. Hip slams hard into the metal arm of the turnstile. Red sign pasted on it says NO EXIT. Sound is far away. All around her strange lamps burn brightly and human tongues press the night.

weekends

Weekends are long and white. Snow drifts against the door. Distant threads from the piano downstairs. Deneuve washes her glassware. Dries it. Hours slide. In the hotel room it is dusk, a girl turns, *I have to confess something*. This is mental. Two parallel red lines of different lengths inch forward, not touching.

téléphones

Shame is a rusty edge that Deneuve sits on as she pages through lecture notes in her Monday office. Outside a flag shreds itself in the icy wind. Telephone rings. Jagged pause. Girl's voice, which she has never heard before on the telephone, is animal. Claws lope through her and turn at the wall. *Not coming to seminar today. Thought you should know.* Girl stops. Deneuve waits. And then, *Do you care?* with a laugh—drops away—dangling, Deneuve grabs for an answer to that. Yes. No. No answer. Wrong answer. Wrong question. Trick question! Spins, they grapple, slip off, hold. *I plan to come Wednesday,* girl says. *Do that,* Deneuve answers. Dial tone. World sags and swings back against the void at the middle of MonWedFri. Fifty-three hours.

neiges

Snows all night, snows all day. Still snowing in midafternoon when Deneuve looks up from her papers to see a girl's ears bright red, eyebrows snowplastered. She leans in the doorway and holds up her glasses by one broken earpiece. Deneuve offers mending tape. Girl mends the earpiece, drops her coat on the floor, sits beside it. Takes out her Greek book and begins to translate, as if it had been prearranged. Had it? Deneuve feels a force of life coming at her too strong to think what parts this has or why it should happen. The victim of an ironic situation is typically innocent. Gradually twilight soaks the room, now it is almost too dark to read. Girl is lifting her coat, poised in the doorway, gone. *Thanks,* floats back along the hall. Looking down Deneuve sees her feet are naked. *Moi je comprends pas ça,* she whispers to them.

pipes

Deneuve tells the truth every Friday, it's a rule (Sokrates did too). Girl arrives at her office early, knocks over a chair and starts to cry. Trouble with her boyfriend in Paris. *Most important thing in my life.* Deneuve turns to stare out the window at a raw March morning. Do you know how diamonds get to us? Three hundred miles underground are heats and pressures that crush carbon into sparkling shapes, driven for months or days or hours along hotel corridors called diamond pipes until they erupt in a pile of taffeta and chocolate some moonlit afternoon, an event no human has ever witnessed. This is mental. *Merde alors.* Deneuve looks at the girl's red eyes.

What do you want?

Want to be in the same room with him.

I admire your clarity.

Gottago.

After the door closes Deneuve moves all the books on one side of her desk to the other side. Then back. Smell of girl in the room fades slowly.

hommes

Sokrates died in jail. Sappho died in a leap off the white rock of Leukas (for love) so they say. Sokrates is ironical about two things. His beauty (which he calls ugliness) and his knowledge (ignorance). For Sappho irony is a verb. It places her in a certain relation to her own life. How very interesting (Deneuve thinks) to watch myself construct this silk and bitter relation. Latin rhetoricians translate the Greek word *eironia* as *dissimulatio* which means "mask." After all why study the past? Because you may wish to repeat it. And in time (Sappho notes) one's mask becomes one's face. Just before going to jail Sokrates had a conversation with his prosecutors about irony, for this was the real source of

their unease, and as he spoke they saw a miniature smoke of grief climb his throat to escape into the room, turning dark now and sulfurous in the confused ash of evening, in the drifting ash alone. *You're a real man Sokrates*, says Deneuve. Closes her notebook. Pulls on her coat and buttons it. *But then so am I.*

je tourne

Poor idea this girl fantasy, Deneuve is thinking as she packs up after the Friday seminar. Girl has missed the last three assignments, will certainly fail the midterm. Deneuve is ducking out the main door onto the street when unexpectedness stumbles in. Girl thrusts some pages at her chest. *Glad I caught you*, she says. Deneuve pulls away. Folds the pages twice. Pushes them down in her briefcase. They circle one another in the doorway. Girl is looking at her oddly.

Never saw you in this state before.

What state is that?

Tonguetied, the girl grins.

Deneuve has a sense of being flicked on a hook. Girl starts to talk about her love in Paris. Who thinks her too dependent. *You?* Deneuve says, hitting the bottom of a volcanic pipe at top speed, all her diamonds going the wrong way. *Toujours comme ça*. Beauty departs. Later at home Deneuve sits by a window. Smell of night so different than smell of day. Frozen darkness like old tin. Like cold cats. Like the word *pauvre*.

nuits

Questions are not all tricks, are they? Deneuve gives a dinner party for the seminar students. She cooks all day. Aubergines shine on the counter. Lettuce fills the sink. Meats drip. Little whites, little blues, the hotel

room now replaced by a secluded avenue of the Bois de Bologne. *I know this is hardly your world, are you bored. No I'm not bored.* A girl looks up, blows smoke, grins. This is mental. Night comes. Students arrive. Pile up plates of food. Pour glasses of wine and sit on the floor and say miraculous things. She watches each one. She waits. She sips. Night moves on its way. Food is all over the room, then gradually disappears. Students gather and separate in different doorways, they too gradually disappear. It is almost 2 a.m. when she closes the door, switches off the porchlight, returns slowly along the hall. Out the window she can see snow flying diagonally under a yellow streetlamp. God's punishment, no probably not. Funny it hadn't occurred to her the girl just wouldn't show up. Deneuve drains a wineglass and wipes her mouth. Begins picking up cups and plates and odd bits of food. Puts away chairs. Lines up bottles beside the door. Loads the dishwasher and sits down to watch the rest of the night go by. Hotel room is blowing with moonlight, streaming with moonlight. *What's that you've got there a scar?*

guerres

Weaponry is the topic on Monday. Girl flashes into the seminar twenty minutes late and sits on her left, shirt half tucked in and half out. Deneuve is discussing hoplite armor. Class is sleepy. Text is a poem from the seventh century B.C. about a big room where men store arms. Plumes nod mutely from helmets nailed to roofbeams. Greaves glitter on pegs on the wall. Tunics and hollow shields lie heaped on the floor beside breastplates and belts and Chalcidian swords. *Why is the poet telling us this?* Deneuve asks. No one answers. Not a bee buzzes. Haunted old phrases stare up at them from the book. *What*—she begins but the girl interrupts. *It's about a war not happening.* Deneuve turns. *That's right, she*

says. *Nothing is happening.* Bell rings. She leaves the room without looking back.

détails

All the same there are some small questions one would like to put to Sokrates. Or better still Sappho. *Avec tes mains brûlées.*

je traduis

New light is flooding the office when Deneuve arrives Friday. A note is stuck under her door. From a boy who can't come to seminar today *But can I see you at 5 p.m.* scrawled on a page torn out of *Der Spiegel*. Here is Ingeborg Bachmann playing chess. Deneuve studies Ingeborg Bachmann whose clear gaze falls straight down on the little knight at the center of her gameboard, whose shiny bangs are swept by hand to the left. Due to strengthening thoughts of Ingeborg Bachmann's bangs, Deneuve is able to conduct an allusive and slightly sarcastic seminar at top speed on one of her favorite lyric fragments—from the sixth century B.C., a poem about wetness and dryness, about male desire and female desire and how they differ. Imagine a springtime garden of watered boughs and uncut girls. Time holds them deep in its amorous pinch, soaked buds of pure use as female clockwork goes. But what is this black thing that comes parching down like lightning from Thrace with no season or reason—male desire is gears gone mad anywhere anytime without warning or water it shatters the poor poet's lungs! Deneuve pauses. Looks around. No one is asleep. She reads the last verse of the poem aloud. "Lungs" stands in manly exposure as its final word—she repeats this word. Ancient Greek *phrenes*. Usually rendered as "heart" in mod-

ern translations because we don't understand very much about how love works. To breathe is to love. She adds a short summary of ancient respiratory theory, avoiding the gaze of the girl who today is seated directly across the table from her, wearing a new earring. *Thank you*, she says after the girl translates a Greek phrase with extreme vulgarity, making the others laugh. Bell rings. Girl leaves abruptly. Deneuve sits quiet as the room empties. Then puts her head down on the table and laughs. How lungs work. As Sappho says:

To stop breathing is bad.

So the gods judge.

For they do not stop breathing.

Later Deneuve goes back down the hall. Inside her office the light is bluing, old ice of April unlacing its fast. She turns at the sound of the five o'clock bell. Comes a knock at the door.