

LUI ET ELLE

She is large and matronly  
And rather dirty,  
A little sardonic-looking, as if domesticity had  
driven her to it.

Though what she does, except lay four eggs at  
random in the garden once a year  
And put up with her husband,  
I don't know.

She likes to eat.

She hurries up, striding reared on long uncanny  
legs,  
When food is going.  
Oh yes, she can make haste when she likes.

She snaps the soft bread from my hand in great  
mouthfuls,  
Opening her rather pretty wedge of an iron,  
pristine face  
Into an enormously wide-beaked mouth  
Like sudden curved scissors,

And gulping at more than she can swallow, and  
    working her thick, soft tongue,  
And having the bread hanging over her chin.

O Mistress, Mistress,  
Reptile mistress,  
Your eye is very dark, very bright,  
And it never softens  
Although you watch.

She knows,  
She knows well enough to come for food,  
Yet she sees me not;  
Her bright eye sees, but not me, not anything,  
Sightful, sightless, seeing and visionless,  
Reptile mistress.

Taking bread in her curved, gaping, toothless  
    mouth,  
She has no qualm when she catches my finger in  
    her steel overlapping gums,  
But she hangs on, and my shout and my shrinking  
    are nothing to her,  
She does not even know she is nipping me with  
    her curved beak.  
Snake-like she draws at my finger, while I drag

it in horror away.

Mistress, reptile mistress,  
You are almost too large, I am almost frightened.  
He is much smaller,  
Dapper beside her,  
And ridiculously small.

Her laconic eye has an earthy, materialistic look,  
His, poor darling, is almost fiery.

His wimple, his blunt-prowed face,  
His low forehead, his skinny neck, his long,  
    scaled, striving legs,  
So striving, striving,  
Are all more delicate than she,  
And he has a cruel scar on his shell.

Poor darling, biting at her feet,  
Running beside her like a dog, biting her earthy,  
    splay feet,  
Nipping her ankles,  
Which she drags apathetic away, though without  
    retreating into her shell.

Agelessly silent,

And with a grim, reptile determination,  
Cold, voiceless age-after-age behind him,  
    serpents' long obstinacy  
Of horizontal persistence.

Little old man  
Scuffling beside her, bending down, catching his  
    opportunity,  
Parting his steel-trap face, so suddenly, and  
    seizing her scaly ankle,  
And hanging grimly on,  
Letting go at last as she drags away,  
And closing his steel-trap face.

His steel-trap, stoic, ageless, handsome face.  
Alas, what a fool he looks in this scuffle.

And how he feels it!

The lonely rambler, the stoic, dignified stalker  
through chaos,  
The immune, the animate,  
Enveloped in isolation,  
Forerunner.  
Now look at him!

Alas, the spear is through the side of his isolation.  
His adolescence saw him crucified into sex,  
Doomed, in the long crucifixion of desire, to seek  
    his consummation beyond himself.  
Divided into passionate duality,  
He, so finished and immune, now broken into  
    desirous fragmentariness,  
Doomed to make an intolerable fool of himself  
In his effort toward completion again.

Poor little earthy house-inhabiting Osiris,  
The mysterious bull tore him at adolescence into  
    pieces,  
And he must struggle after reconstruction,  
    ignominiously.

And so behold him following the tail  
Of that mud-hovel of his slowly-rambling spouse,  
Like some unhappy bull at the tail of a cow,  
But with more than bovine, grim, earth-dank  
    persistence,  
Suddenly seizing the ugly ankle as she stretches  
    out to walk,  
Roaming over the sods,  
Or, if it happen to show, at her pointed, heavy tail  
Beneath the low-dropping back-board of her shell.

Their two shells like doomed boats bumping,  
Hers huge, his small;  
Their splay feet rambling and rowing like  
paddles,  
And stumbling mixed up in one another,  
In the race of love--  
Two tortoises,  
She huge, he small.

She seems earthily apathetic,  
And he has a reptile's awful persistence.

I heard a woman pitying her, pitying the Mère  
Tortue.

While I, I pity Monsieur.

"He pesters her and torments her," said the  
woman.

How much more is he pestered and tormented,  
say I.

What can he do?

He is dumb, he is visionless,  
Conceptionless.

His black, sad-lidded eye sees but beholds not

As her earthen mound moves on,  
But he catches the folds of vulnerable, leathery  
skin,  
Nail-studded, that shake beneath her shell,  
And drags at these with his beak,  
Drags and drags and bites,  
While she pulls herself free, and rows her dull  
mound along.