

Robert Gibbons

FOR 20 FRANCS

A cruel kind of day, innocuous, dispassionate, though revelatory in its own right. Squalid in meaninglessness. One writer writing he never loved, nor ever was, or Baudelaire at the full thrust of his genius writing to Nadar begging for 20 francs. A four page letter outlining the entire state of European culture, including the availability on the market, through an heir of Goya, of twin portraits of the same woman one clothed, one nude. He has to remind the photographer that the initial request for money is his main concern. He's broke, can't make a living, is also unloved, & one wonders if he does, at all, love anything but his habit for Art. Months before that he's working on "The Dance of Death," centering his gaze on the kind of woman trailing the then ubiquitous armies from Italy, Austria, France. He ponders the word *gouge* to describe the type of woman who followed the infantry. What he called the mobile rear-guard pleasure machine no priest nor soldier marched without.

TO A RED-HAIRED BEGGAR GIRL

Strange ending up in the little alcove of an urban academic library, where the claustrophobia of the reading room goes on unnoticed by five female students intent on projects & homework, psychology textbooks, computer printouts. The latest piercings around nostrils, tattoos at the smalls of backs just above elastic ridges of panties riding up over fashionable belts & jeans. Two skeletons, one hanging, the other stanchioned by a metal bar, populate a corner given over to the anatomy of Art. I want to attribute genders to them, too. More students arrive, & the librarian flashes concern at my leather bag & the copy of *Les Fleurs du Mal* I found in the stacks. Otherwise, unobtrusive, granting them their negligible presences equal to my own. All I can see now is Baudelaire's red-haired beggar girl in the alley of the kitchen door of the Paris bistro pleading silently for scraps, whose rags are riches caressing her nakedness.

PUTTING DOWN BAUDELAIRE'S *SELECTED LETTERS*

It's noon exactly. Pour the black wine of France on the white time of America. I hate finishing Baudelaire's *Selected Letters*. I want them to continue on, as immortal as he is. Irony runs like a gene throughout, & his intellectual courage storms forth like a steady stream of sperm cured of its syphilitic scourge. He quite knowingly brands his antagonists by naming them, each otherwise lost to posterity. He knows his own greatness, & that of his work. Sells the rights to *Flowers of Evil*, & *The Spleen of Paris*, out of the hands of the publisher/pornographer, Auguste Poulet-Malassis, at the same time going for days without eating. He's difficult. His perversions actually chaste. When he looks at his friend Nadar's camera (Chimera?) lens he's already staring confidently back, beyond the grave.