

LES  
FLEURS  
DU MAL

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

*the complete text of THE FLOWERS OF EVIL  
in a new translation by RICHARD HOWARD*

*illustrated with nine original monotypes  
by MICHAEL MAZUR*



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## TO THE READER

Stupidity, delusion, selfishness and lust  
torment our bodies and possess our minds,  
and we sustain our affable remorse  
the way a beggar nourishes his lice.

Our sins are stubborn, our contrition lame;  
we want our scruples to be worth our while –  
how cheerfully we crawl back to the mire:  
a few cheap tears will wash our stains away!

Satan Trismegistus subtly rocks  
our ravished spirits on his wicked bed  
until the precious metal of our will  
is leached out by this cunning alchemist:

the Devil's hand directs our every move –  
the things we loathed become the things we love;  
day by day we drop through stinking shades  
quite undeterred on our descent to Hell.

Like a poor profligate who sucks and bites  
the withered breast of some well-seasoned trull,  
we snatch in passing at clandestine joys  
and squeeze the oldest orange harder yet.

Wriggling in our brains like a million worms,  
a demon demos holds its revels there,  
and when we breathe, the Lethe in our lungs  
trickles sighing on its secret course.

If rape and arson, poison and the knife  
have not yet stitched their ludicrous designs  
onto the banal buckram of our fates,  
it is because our souls lack enterprise!

But here among the scorpions and the hounds,  
the jackals, apes and vultures, snakes and wolves,  
monsters that howl and growl and squeal and crawl,  
in all the squalid zoo of vices, one

is even uglier and fouler than the rest,  
although the least flamboyant of the lot;  
this beast would gladly undermine the earth  
and swallow all creation in a yawn;

I speak of Boredom which with ready tears  
dreams of hangings as it puffs its pipe.  
Reader, you know this squeamish monster well,  
– hypocrite reader, – my alias, – my twin!

that best and purest essence which prepares  
the strong in spirit for divine delights!

I know the Poet has a place apart  
among the holy legions' blessed ranks;  
You will invite him to the eternal feast  
of Dominations, Virtues, Thrones and Powers:

I know that pain is the one nobility  
upon which Hell itself cannot encroach;  
that if I am to weave my mystic crown  
I must braid into it all time, all space . . .

But even the lost gems of ancient Palmyra,  
metals sunk in the earth, pearls in the sea,  
set by Your hand, could not approximate  
the brightness of this perfect diadem!

for it will be made of nothing but pure light  
drawn from the hallowed hearth of primal rays,  
of which our mortal eyes, for all their might,  
are only a mournful mirror, a darkened glass.'

2 ✻ THE ALBATROSS

Often, to pass the time on board, the crew  
will catch an albatross, one of those big birds  
which nonchalantly chaperone a ship  
across the bitter fathoms of the sea.

Tied to the deck, this sovereign of space,  
as if embarrassed by its clumsiness,  
pitiably lets its great white wings  
drag at its sides like a pair of unshipped oars.

How weak and awkward, even comical  
this traveller but lately so adroit –  
one deckhand sticks a pipestem in its beak,  
another mocks the cripple that once flew!

The Poet is like this monarch of the clouds  
riding the storm above the marksman's range;  
exiled on the ground, hooted and jeered,  
he cannot walk because of his great wings.

3 ELEVATION

Above the lake in the valley and the grove  
along the hillside, high over the sea  
and the passing clouds, and even past the sun!  
to the farthest confines of the starry vault

mount my spirit, wander at your ease  
and range exultant through transparent space  
like a rugged swimmer revelling in the waves  
with an unutterable mate delight.

Ascend beyond the sickly atmosphere  
to a higher plane, and purify yourself  
by drinking as if it were ambrosia  
the fire that fills and fuels Emptiness.

Free from the futile strivings and the cares  
which dim existence to a realm of mist,  
happy is he who wings an upward way  
on mighty pinions to the fields of light;

whose thoughts like larks spontaneously rise  
into the morning sky; whose flight, unchecked,  
outreaches life and readily comprehends  
the language of flowers and of all mute things.

4 ✦ CORRESPONDENCES

The pillars of Nature's temple are alive  
and sometimes yield perplexing messages;  
forests of symbols between us and the shrine  
remark our passage with accustomed eyes.

Like long-held echoes, blending somewhere else  
into one deep and shadowy unison  
as limitless as darkness and as day,  
the sounds, the scents, the colors correspond.

There are odors succulent as young flesh,  
sweet as flutes, and green as any grass,  
while others – rich, corrupt and masterful –


possess the power of such infinite things  
as incense, amber, benjamin and musk,  
to praise the senses' raptures and the mind's.

5 ✦ 'I PRIZE THE MEMORY . . .'

I prize the memory of naked ages when  
Apollo relished gilding marble limbs  
whose agile-fleshed originals achieved  
their ecstasy with neither fraud nor fear  
and, nursed by that companionable sky,  
enjoyed the health of a sublime machine.  
Cybele then, abundant in her yield,  
did not regard her sons as burdensome,  
but, tender-hearted she-wolf, graciously  
suckled the universe at her brown dugs.  
Lithe and powerful, a man deserved  
his pride in beauties who called him their king –  
flawless fruit engendered without shame,  
whose ripened flesh asked only to be tried!

Today the poet eager to recall  
 such human splendor, visiting the sites  
 where men and women show their nakedness,  
 must feel a cold revulsion in his soul  
 at the display of flesh he contemplates.  
 How these deformities cry out for clothes!  
 – wretched bodies, regular grotesques,  
 runty, paunchy, flabby, scrawny, lame,  
 brats whom Utility, a pitiless god,  
 has swaddled in his brazen diapers!  
 Look at the women – pale as tallow, gnawed  
 and nourished by debauch – the girls who bear  
 the burden of their mothers' vice or wear  
 the hideous stigmas of fecundity!

True, in our corruption we possess  
 beauties unrevealed to ancient times:  
 countenances cankered by the heart  
 and, so to speak, the charm of listlessness;  
 but subtle though they are, such artifacts  
 of a belated muse will never keep  
 our sickly race from offering to youth  
 its truest homage; youth we worship still,  
 its frank expression, its untroubled brow,  
 its eyes as bright as water; sacred youth  
 that shares – unconscious as a singing bird,  
 a flower, or the blue sky's radiance –  
 its song, its scent, its irresistible warmth!

6  GUIDING LIGHTS

*Rubens*

Garden of Sloth, Lethe's fountainhead,  
 pillow of flesh where no dream is of love  
 but where life seethes and surges endlessly  
 like wind in heaven, sea within the sea;

*Leonardo*

A mirror somber in its distances  
where charming angels with a mysterious  
gentle smile appear beneath the shade  
of pines and glaciers which enclose their realm;

*Rembrandt*

Sorry hospital echoing with sighs,  
adorned by one enormous crucifix,  
where tearful prayers rise from excrement  
and a sudden ray of winter sunlight falls;

*Michelangelo*

No man's land where every Hercules  
becomes a Christ, where mighty phantoms rise  
bolt upright from their graves and in the gloom  
rend their shrouds by reaching out their hands;

*Puget*

Faun's impudence and a prize-fighter's rage,  
jaundiced and weak, your great heart gorged with pride  
that you could find the beauty in their crimes –  
you, the convicts' melancholy emperor;

*Watteau*

Festivities where many famous hearts  
flutter like moths as they go up in flame,  
the chandeliers in this enchanted glade  
cast a madness on the minuet;

*Goya*

Nightmare crammed with unfathomable things,  
witches roasting foetuses in a pan,  
crones at a mirror served by naked girls  
who straighten stockings to entice the Fiend;



*Delacroix*

Evil angels haunt this lake of blood  
darkened by the green shade of the firs,  
where under a stricken sky the trumpet-calls  
like a fanfare by Weber fade away . . .

These blasphemies, these ecstasies, these cries,  
these groans and curses, tears and *Te Deums*,  
re-echo through a thousand labyrinths –  
a holy opium for mortal hearts!

A thousand sentries pass the order on,  
a cry repeated by a thousand messengers;  
hunters shout it, lost in the deep woods;  
the beacon flares on a thousand citadels!

This, O Lord, is the best evidence  
that we can offer of our dignity,  
this sob that swells from age to age and dies  
out on the shore of Your eternity!

7 THE SICK MUSE

Good morning, Muse – what's wrong? Something you  
last night is left in your hollow eyes; [saw  
your color's bad, your cheeks are cold  
with horror, with madness! – and you don't say a word.

Are you silenced by the love and fear dispensed  
by greenish vampires, rosy ghouls? –  
Or sunk in some legendary bog,  
held under by nightmare's unrelenting fist?

Not like this . . . I want you safe and sound,  
thinking fit thoughts, breathing deep,  
your Christian bloodstream coursing strong

My habitation for eternity  
is standing bare, the tomb that is my soul —  
I haunt the naked walls of this sad place . . .

O slothful cenobite! When shall I make  
the living pageant of my misery  
into the work of my hands and the love of my eyes?

10 ✻ THE ENEMY

My youth was nothing but a lowering storm  
occasionally lanced by sudden suns;  
torrential rains have done their work so well  
that no fruit ripens in my garden now.

Already the autumn of ideas has come,  
and I must dig and rake and dig again  
if I am to reclaim the flooded soil  
collapsing into holes the size of graves.

I dream of new flowers, but who can tell  
if this eroded swamp of mine affords  
the mystic nourishment on which they thrive . . .

Time consumes existence pain by pain,  
and the hidden enemy that gnaws our heart  
feeds on the blood we lose, and flourishes!

11 ✻ ARTIST UNKNOWN

Flesh is willing, but the Soul requires  
Sisyphean patience for its song.  
Time, Hippocrates remarked, is short  
and Art is long.

No illustrious tombstones ornament  
the lonely churchyard where I often go  
to hear my heart, a muffled drum, parade  
incognito.

'Many a gem,' the poet mourns, abides  
forgotten in the dust,  
unnoticed there;

'many a rose' regretfully confides  
the secret of its scent  
to empty air.

12 ❦ PREVIOUS EXISTENCE

I lived a long time under vast porticoes  
whose splendors altered with the sea all day;  
by evening their majestic pillars turned,  
row after row, into tall basalt caves.

Solemn and magical the waves rolled in  
bearing images of heaven on the swell,  
blending the sovereign music that they made  
with sunset colors mirrored in my eyes.

There I lived, in a rapture of repose,  
amid the glories of that sky, that sea,  
and I had naked slaves, perfumed with musk,

to fan me by the hour with rustling fronds,  
and their one study was to diagnose  
the secret torment which had sickened me.

one of the greatest Doctors of the Church,  
 having wakened many slumbering hearts  
 and plumbed them to their pandemonic depths,  
 having risen to celestial heights  
 by ways unheard-of, even to himself,  
 where only the Pure in Spirit can have climbed —  
 this man, as one above himself and moved  
 to panic by Satanic pride, exclaimed:  
 'Little Jesus! I have raised Thee up;  
 yet had I sought to pierce Thy armor's chink,  
 Thy shame would be the equal of Thy fame,  
 and Thou no more than a vile homunculus!'

Upon the instant, Reason's light went out  
 and darkness shrouded this once-searching mind;  
 Chaos made her shrine within a skull  
 which once had been a living temple filled  
 with opulence and ceremonial speech!  
 Night and silence were its tenants now,  
 as in a cellar when the key is lost.  
 Henceforth he was no more than an animal,  
 knowing neither season, day, nor hour,  
 and when he stumbled blindly through the fields,  
 filthy and futile as a worn-out thing,  
 the children laughed and chased him, throwing stones.

17 ✻ BEAUTY

Conceive me as a dream of stone:  
 my breast, where mortals come to grief,  
 is made to prompt all poets' love,  
 mute and noble as matter itself.

With snow for flesh, with ice for heart,  
 I sit on high, an unguessed sphinx

begrudging acts that alter forms;  
I never laugh – and never weep.

In studious awe the poets brood  
before my monumental pose  
aped from the proudest pedestal,

and to bind these docile lovers fast  
I freeze the world in a perfect mirror:  
the timeless light of my wide eyes.

18 ❧ THE IDEAL

My heart is closed to belles in curlicues,  
those worshipped beauties of a shopworn age  
when fingers were for spinets and when feet  
wore out six pairs of silver-buckled shoes.

I leave to Gavarni, anemia's laureate,  
his twittering flock of insubstantial girls –  
in all those sallow blossoms who could find  
one rose to reconcile my red ideal?

This heart is cavernous and it requires  
Lady Macbeth and an aptitude for crime,  
some Aeschylean flower of the South,

or Michelangelo's great daughter, Night,  
who slumbrously contorts the marble charms  
he carved to satiate a titan's mouth.

19 ❧ GIANTESS

Had I been there when primal Nature teemed  
with monstrous progeny, I would have tried

around a face whose every feature speaks,  
not just the parted lips too shy to boast:  
'When Lust commands me, even Love obeys!'  
Look how the languor in her posture adds  
a sweet submission to such majesty;  
come closer – walk around her loveliness . . .

What blasphemy of art is this! Upon  
a body made to offer every bliss  
appear . . . two heads! Some kind of monster? No –

one is merely a mask – a grinning cheat  
this smile articulated so cunningly!  
Look there: contorted in her misery,  
the actual head, the woman's countenance  
lost in the shadow of the lying mask . . .  
Pathos of true beauty! the bright tears  
trickle into my astonished heart;  
your lie intoxicates me, and my soul  
slakes its passion in your brimming eyes!

– Why is she weeping? Surely such a face  
would put all mankind, vanquished, at her feet!  
What secret evil feeds on her firm flesh?

– She weeps, you fool, for having lived! and for  
living – yet what she laments the most,  
what makes her body tremble head to toe,  
is that tomorrow she will have to live,  
and all tomorrows after – like ourselves!

22 ✂--- HYMN TO BEAUTY

Do you come from on high or out of the abyss,  
O Beauty? Godless yet divine, your gaze  
indifferently showers favor and shame,  
and therefore some have likened you to wine.

Your eyes reflect the sunset and the dawn;  
you scatter perfumes like a windy night;  
your kisses are a drug, your mouth the urn  
dispensing fear to heroes, fervor to boys.

Whether spawned by hell or sprung from the stars,  
Fate like a spaniel follows at your heel;  
you sow haphazard fortune and despair,  
ruling all things, responsible for none.

You walk on corpses, Beauty, undismayed,  
and Horror coruscates among your gems;  
Murder, one of your dearest trinkets, throbs  
on your shameless belly: make it dance!

Dazzled, the dayfly flutters round your wick,  
crackles, flares, and cries: I bless this torch!  
The pining lover for his lady swoons  
like a dying man adoring his own tomb.

Who cares if you come from paradise or hell,  
appalling Beauty, artless and monstrous scourge,  
if only your eyes, your smile or your foot reveal  
the Infinite I love and have never known?

Come from Satan, come from God – who cares,  
Angel or Siren, rhythm, fragrance, light,  
provided you transform – O my one queen!  
this hideous universe, this heavy hour?

23 BY ASSOCIATION

These warm fall nights I breathe, eyes closed, the scent  
of your welcoming breasts, and thereupon appears  
the coast of maybe Malabar – some paradise  
besotted by the sun's monotonous fire;

Seal them, those sooty holes from which your soul  
rains hellfire too, relentless sorceress!  
I am no Styx, to cradle you nine times,

alas! and cannot with some Fury's lust,  
to break your spirit and your heart, become  
in your bed's inferno . . . Persephone!

28 ✻— 'EVEN WHEN SHE WALKS . . .'

Even when she walks she seems to dance!  
Her garments writhe and glisten like long snakes  
obedient to the rhythm of the wands  
by which a fakir wakens them to grace.

Like both the desert and the desert sky  
insensible to human suffering,  
and like the ocean's endless labyrinth  
she shows her body with indifference.

Precious minerals form her polished eyes,  
and in her strange symbolic nature where  
angel and sphinx unite, where diamond,

gold, and steel dissolve into one light,  
shines forever, useless as a star,  
the sterile woman's icy majesty.

29 ✻— AS IF A SERPENT DANCED

Dear indolent! I love to see  
with every move you make  
the iridescence of your skin  
gleam like watered silk.



as if the sky had liquefied  
and strewn my heart with stars!

30 ✻ CARRION

Remember, my soul, the thing we saw  
that lovely summer day?  
On a pile of stones where the path turned off,  
the hideous carrion –

legs in the air, like a whore – displayed,  
indifferent to the last,  
a belly slick with lethal sweat  
and swollen with foul gas.

The sun lit up that rottenness  
as though to roast it through,  
restoring to Nature a hundredfold  
what she had here made one.

And heaven watched the splendid corpse  
like a flower open wide –  
you nearly fainted dead away  
at the perfume it gave off.

Flies kept humming over the guts  
from which a gleaming clot  
of maggots poured to finish off  
what scraps of flesh remained.

The tide of trembling vermin sank,  
then bubbled up afresh  
as if the carcass, drawing breath,  
by *their* lives lived again

and made a curious music there –  
like running water, or wind,

On your resilient head of hair,  
    unfathomable sea  
of acrid curls that veer from brown  
    to blue inconstancies,

my dreamy soul weighs anchor, sails  
    for undiscovered skies  
like a galleon in the morning watch  
    under a freshening wind.

Cruel? Kind? Your eyes reveal  
    nothing but themselves:  
cold as a pair of brooches made  
    of gold inlaid with steel.

And when you walk to cadences  
    of sinuous nonchalance,  
it looks as if a serpent danced  
    in rhythm to a wand.

Under the burden of your sloth,  
    your head – just like a child's –  
lolls with all the wobbly grace  
    of a baby elephant;

your body lists and rights itself  
    like a clipper in high seas,  
rolling from side to side until  
    the spray has soaked its spars.

And like a current swollen by  
    the melt of clashing ice,  
when the saliva in your mouth  
    surges through your teeth,

I seem to drink a devil's brew,  
    salt and sovereign,

for beauty languorous as yours recurs  
only in your loved body, your loving heart:  
I know the art of conjuring up delight.

Those endless kisses, promises, perfumes:  
is it forbidden to have them back again  
out of the dark, like the sun rising new  
out of its purgation in the sea?  
O endless kisses, promises, perfumes!

39 ✻ POSSESSED

The sun is in mourning. Be like the sun,  
moon of my life, swathe yourself in crepe,  
sleep, smoke, whatever – be still or glum,  
plummet to the depths of boredom's pit –

I love you there. But if now your whim –  
like the moon leaving her eclipse behind –  
is to strut in the places where Folly throngs,  
so be it! Lovely dagger, leave your sheath!

Light your eyes in the gaslamps' glow,  
light others' with their lust for you . . .  
Anything goes: sullen or submissive,

be what you will, black night, red dawn –  
each nerve of my trembling body cries:  
'Dear Demon, with this I thee worship!'

40 ✻ A PHANTOM

I  
THE SHADOWS

Dejection has its catacombs  
to which Fate has abandoned me;

no light comes, and I am left  
with Night, a sullen cell-mate –

as if a scoffing God had forced  
my hand to fresco . . . silhouettes!  
Here with grisly appetite  
I grill and devour my heart,

but then a shape looms, shining,  
and as it moves it modifies:  
a lovely . . . something – is there not

all the East in its easy way?  
I know my visitor! *She* comes,  
black – yet how that blackness glows!

2

THE PERFUME

Reader, you know how a church can reek  
from one grain of incense you inhale  
with careful greed – remember the smell?  
Or the stubborn musk of an old sachet?

The spell is cast, the magic works,  
and the present is the past – restored!  
So a lover from beloved flesh  
plucks subtle flowers of memory . . .

In bed her heavy resilient hair  
– a living censer, like a sachet –  
released its animal perfume,

and from discarded underclothes  
still fervent with her sacred body's  
form, there rose a scent of fur.

3

THE FRAME

As the fine frame completes a canvas  
(even one from a master's hand),  
adding an indefinable magic  
by dividing art from mere nature,

so jewels, mirrors, metals, gold  
invariably suited her loveliness –  
none violated the lustre she had,  
and each thing seemed to set her off.

You might have said, sometimes, she thought  
objects longed to make love to her,  
so greedily she slaked her nakedness

on the kisses of linen sheets and silk,  
revealing with each movement all  
the unstudied grace of a marmoset.

4

THE PORTRAIT

Look what Death and Disease have made  
of our old flame: a heap of ashes.  
My god, how horrible! What's left  
of eyes so soft yet so intense,

of kisses stronger than any drug,  
of a mouth that used to drown my heart,  
of all our glowing exaltation?  
Precious little – barely a sketch

fading in a solitude like mine,  
erased a little more each day  
by disrespectful Time that wipes

out Life and Art; yet even Time  
cannot force me to forget Her  
who was my glory and my Joy!

41 ✻ 'SUPPOSE MY NAME . . .'

Suppose my name were favored by the winds,  
my voyage prospered, and the future read  
all that I wrote, and marvelled . . . Love, they're yours!  
I give you poems to make your memory

echo the way archaic legends do,  
so that by some incantatory spell,  
haunting the reader like a psaltery,  
you will be caught within my cadences;

who now, from Pit to Empyrean scorned  
by all but me, have simply walked away  
and left no trace but shadows as you pass,

staring in mute composure at a world  
that stupidly reviles your unconcern,  
my jet-eyed statue, angel with brazen brows!

42 ✻ SEMPER EADEM

'You're like some rock the sea is swallowing -  
what is it that brings on these moods of yours?'  
Nothing mysterious: the ordinary pain  
of being alive. You wouldn't understand,

though it's as obvious as that smile of yours:  
an open secret. Nothing ever grows,  
once the heart is harvested . . . You ask  
too many questions. No more talking now,

To fallen man, who suffers and dreams on,  
the Empyrean's inaccessible blue  
presents the fascination of the Void.  
Beloved Goddess, so it is with you –

above the wreck of stupid revelry  
your lucid image rises, brighter still,  
shimmering yet fixed before my eyes.

The sun has turned the smoking torches black;  
so it is with you, resplendent soul –  
your phantom triumphs like the immortal sun!

50 ✻ EVENING HARMONY

Now comes the time when swaying on its stem  
each flower offers incense to the night;  
phrases and fragrances circle in the dark –  
languorous waltz that casts a lingering spell!

Each flower offers incense to the night;  
the violin trembles like a heart betrayed –  
languorous waltz that casts a lingering spell!  
A mournful altar ornaments the sky.

The violin trembles like a heart betrayed,  
a tender heart unnerved by nothingness!  
A mournful altar ornaments the sky;  
the sun has smothered in its clotting blood.

A tender heart unnerved by nothingness  
hoards every fragment of the radiant past.  
The sun has smothered in its clotting blood.  
In me your image – like a monst'rance – glows.

51 ❁ THE FLASK

Some scents can permeate all substances —  
even glass seems porous to their power.  
Opening an Oriental chest  
once the reluctant locks are pried apart,

or an armoire in some abandoned house  
acid with the dust of time itself,  
may yield a musty flask that keeps the faith:  
out of it leaps a returning soul — alive!

Like chrysalids, a thousand memories  
that slept among the silent shadows now  
unfold their wings and soar into the light,  
rising azure laced with rose and gold;

among them one intoxicating thought  
hovers brightest; eyes close; Vertigo  
grips the beaten soul which it impels  
to an abyss obscured by human wraiths,

crushing it on the brink of that age-old pit  
where, like a fetid Lazarus rending his shroud,  
the corpse of an old passion stirs and wakes,  
spectral and rancid, charnel and charming still!

So it will be with me when I lie lost  
to living memory, a used-up flask  
tossed in a grim armoire, tarnished and cracked,  
forgotten, filthy, a decrepit thing:

I shall be your coffin, darling doom,  
and testify to how your virulence —  
the poison angels brewed — became in me  
the consummation of a heart consumed!



## DISCUSSIONS OF BAUDELAIRE SIGNIFICANT TO THE TRANSLATION

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