

In Which I Consider Myself A Possible Woman of Algiers

—after Eugene Delacroix's painting, "The Women of Algiers in their Apartment," Louvre, Paris 1834

Delacroix, like me, is charmed but deluded,
fascinated by their harem allure—
luscious flesh, bejeweled bodices,
vibrant costumes, figs.

Entering through swinging saloon doors,
I pose for them.
My magenta bloomers are brighter than theirs,
my cheeks burn violet energy.

They do not look my way,
I am disturbing the languor, familiar stupor.
Leaning on thick rugs, bolstered pillows,
these plump doyennes are adorned

with gold necklaces that sparkle against
nude chests, coyly covered by see-
through muslin blouses.
Turkish turned-up sandals,

thrown to the side, reveal
meaty feet, pudgy toes.
At times, our ladies shift positions
to ease a hip or elbow—discomfort

does not suit them.
Bored with the hookah,
they compare the men
they bedded last night:

a corpulent prince with lacquered hair;
sanctimonious merchant, smelling of musk;
odoriferous suitor, stale wine, spunk.

Spiritless, they wait uncounted hours,
tomorrow night will be a repeat.
Blue-black Algerian servant,
Samia, turns away from them,
she's heard it all before.

The mirror on the tiled wall above them
tilts forward, she has not bothered
to straighten it.

She stops abruptly when she sees me.
Am I a new consort?
She determines not,
we are kindred spirits she and I,

different kinds of gems.
We recognize this luxuriant space as dark,
light shines through a depressed window
but to no end.

It doesn't go anywhere,
only opens to the kitchen
where Samia is headed.
I believe it leads to Exodus,

we could run fast,
holding hands to escape this confinement.
As I attempt to find my way
across the circle of ladies,
a putrid smell rises—

moths in the drapes, cockroaches
in the corner, truth exhaling
from the rotten flesh of women
under those bloomers.

Dressed-up dolls dulled by men
who tell them they are well-taken care of,
they don't realize their pearl anklets,
endless hashish, servants-in-waiting keep them

captive for life.

I pick my way through an airless world
across plush carpets to follow brave Samia.
At least, Delacroix had foresight to render her

with fleet feet and shoes on.

The Underside of Color

—after Marc Chagall's "Paris Through the Window," Guggenheim Museum, NYC 1913

Chagall invites me to his house—he knows I love this painting

He leaves the front door open, I arrive early. Seated on the right side of the parlor,
loket in my palm, I wait

Chenille, nervous cat, emerald green tail, sits on the sill listening.
Shouts from the street are loud, one side of the window is open

Aromatic warm baguettes, clinking cups from the café below. Colors roar
across the sky

Swaths of vermillion, streaks of royal blue, icy white shafts illuminate
the sky, turning the Eiffel Tower shimmering white

The spire shares light with rows of dollhouse-size dwellings
and wraps a beam around the right side of my head

Et voilà! We're startled by the oncoming whoosh of Chagall's parachute rushing toward
us, plummeting down toward his floral-back chair. He lands, offers absinthe

He's happy, he's sad. He had a vision of his parents descending—miniature black
horizontal figures floating head to head, bickering in joyful Yiddish

They stay with him everywhere, wave as he passes. They know how he loves Paris,
beautiful Bella, why he paints his fish, fancy fiddlers, harlequin clowns

Behind buoyant colors, someone is saying Kaddish. Sadness seeps
from the city smoke stacks. We sip, melding into lament

Chenille jumps down, slinks to the kitchen, sniffing for herring. She knows
Chagall adores her, comes back to rub her neck up his trouser leg

He's laughing, he's sobbing. Fantasy and gravity counter-balance.
My two heads, two hearts weep with love and contradiction.