

SARAH CLOWES

Chocolat Religieuse

Claes Oldenburg.
Pastry Case I.
Enamel paint on nine
plaster sculptures in glass
showcase, 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{8}$ x
14 $\frac{3}{4}$ in., 1961–1962.
The Museum of Modern
Art, New York, New York.
The Sidney and Harriet
Janis Collection. Digital
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I THOUGHT I HAD GONE TO PARIS to see the *Mona Lisa* or stroll along the Champs Elysées; in truth, I went for the pastry. I didn't realize my desire until the flakey pastry was in my mouth—melting. It was much the same way one discovers the meaning of having a body, suddenly and by surprise, in the presence of a lover. In Paris, I spent many little minutes of delicious days, concocting in my imagination the exact texture of the tartine of my dreams: ratios among crème, chocolate, and delicate pastry. When I wasn't counting metro stops, I plotted my next fresh moments of consummation—which patisserie, which tart, and when. As it turned out, the same day I had the pleas-

ure of consuming the most perfect confection of my life—the “chocolat religieuse,” the voluptuous older cousin of the chocolate éclair from a little patisserie in the thirteenth arrondissement—was the day I was shocked into awareness of my own mortality.

BEFORE THE PASTRY, I VISITED THE CATACOMBS. I was with Jeanne, my teacher friend. At first, the subterranean sepulcher felt like a well-done haunted house at a fair—we shrieked and giggled, but the preponderance of death sobered us: it was bones, bones, bones and more bones—six million skulls and skeletons taken from medieval cemeteries and arranged into 4-foot walls that went on and on and on. In some places, the heads made the shape of crosses. Although I didn’t overtly cringe, I made sure I didn’t lean against the bones or brush my hand across them as I passed. Trying to activate our rationality, we translated the stone placards. Many were reassurances of life after death. Some were ominous, like the one that said, “Death is a blind monster who will eventually kill all.”

Surrounded by skulls and skeletons, my own mortality blew through me like a wind through cotton. As all who have worn a mortal coil, I too would shuffle off my flesh, my bones. It occurred to me, as a student of Buddhism, that perhaps my soul had once worn those very bones in some medieval incarnation . . . I thought of the dead wishing for a tart au fraises, a chocolate, a sweet kiss on the lips, soft, sincere, the breath of a lover’s voice in their ear. Here, their desires seemed absurd. Those desires kept us locked in the catacombs of this earth, reincarnating again and again to eat, drink, fornicate, and chase chimeras until once again our bones became dust.

I hadn’t realized how tense I was until we emerged from the tunnels into the sunlight, and I relaxed my shoulders again.

“I have to say, that was kind of disturbing,” admitted Jeanne.

We walked silently for half a block.

“Where to now?” Jeanne asked.

“Why don’t we find some pastries?” I suggested.

Here Jeanne scrunched up her forehead. “I’m focusing on homeless people and the pastries, the crêpes—it’s just too much.”

The summer before, Jeanne had taken me on an expedition in a dugout canoe to visit a remote indigenous tribe in Nicaragua. There, the children had stomachs bloated from malnutrition. As a result of the hurricane, the tribe crammed eighteen people into each makeshift bamboo hut. We brought them Tylenol, Pepto Bismal, pencils, and Bic pens, plus a little money for more supplies. The children picked up the broken pencil leads that fell on the ground thinking they were seeds. Nicaragua was Jeanne’s choice; Paris, mine. In Paris, Jeanne empathized with the homeless and struggled with my hedo-

nistic obsession with pastries and Nutella crêpes. That day on the street after we emerged from the catacombs, she said she would take a walk by herself: she needed to be alone. That would be better for both of us.

I went on a quest for the perfect pastry. At the moment, I had little interest in bothering myself with homelessness or *Hurricane Mitch*. Eating pastries would not obliterate world hunger or make me immortal—I knew this. I was just thankful to have a body coursing with life. Each tartine was an invitation to revel in that life.

I could tell by the name, *chocolat religieuse*, that the pastry I found was exactly what I was looking for. The people in the patisserie put it in a white paper bag, which I carried until I came to a park that was sufficiently lovely, with trees and a fountain. Before I ate the pastry, I photographed it. I am not sure if I have ever been as present during the consumption of a dessert as I was during the *chocolat religieuse*. The sun sparkled on the water in the fountain. The crême was elevated, the chocolate authoritative yet subtle and eminently satisfying. I thought: I am too romantic to be unhappy. Certainly, I am not unflawed, but I am also not unholy. If I wrote romance novels, they would be embarrassing—too extravagant. That is the way I love to live—swimming in large, embarrassing, delicious pools of happiness.

Later, that evening, I went to a café and thought. The waiter who brought me the café au lait asked if I was thinking about him. Of course, I said, but thought about bones and watched the streetlights reflect in puddles outside. . . . As it boasted, the monster of death would indeed claim all, but we also would escape because we are more than just bones. We are not mere tongues and bowels. We are *l'esprit eternal*. We are *Winged Victory*, like the statue at the Louvre. Why, by the way, does she have no head? Arms, legs, breasts, wings and a heart—perhaps a brain is the treacherous organ which pledges to satisfy but instead gives numbers, words, plans and does not fulfill its promises of truth, good, or beauty. We are more than mere brains. Zen Buddhists know this because, after all, the sound of one hand clapping is the hush one hears when one is still and knows God. When the body is dust, a spark remains. With some gray hair and a few wrinkles, I felt sexy—ready to be tossed and lost and broken by the fearful joy that spins universes in and out of existence. I craved sweets, men, God—I knew that I would find them all, eventually, in this life or the next. In fact, I had already found a most ideal pastry.

SARAH CLOWES lives in Minneapolis with her husband and teaches reading at Minneapolis Community and Technical College. She enjoys meditation and pastry.