

The Garden

LOUIS ARMAND lives in Prague and lectures on literary theory & art history in the Philosophy Faculty of Charles University. His work has appeared widely in international journals including *Sulfur*, *Meanjin*, *Poetry Review* and *Stand*, as well as in numerous anthologies including *Infernal Cinders* (Kangaroo, 1993), *The Zone* (UNEASA, 1994) and *Calyx: 30 Contemporary Australian Poets* (Paper Bark Press, 2000). His publications include *Séances* (Twisted Spoon Press, 1998), *The Viconian Paramour* (x-poezie, 1998), *Anatomy Lessons* (x-poezie, 1999) and *Land Partition* (Textbase, 2001). He was awarded the Max Harris Prize for Poetry (Adelaide) in 1997 and the Nassau Review Prize (New York) in 2000. He is editor of *PLASTIC (SEMTEXT)*, a member of the editorial board of *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge and Strange Attractions* and is poetry editor of *The Prague Revue*.

The Garden

LOUIS ARMAND



PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 202, Applecross, Western Australia 6153
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB1 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Louis Armand, 2001

The right of Louis Armand to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published 2001

Printed and bound in the United States of America by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 10 / 14

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library
ISBN 1 876857 05 6 paperback

SP

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

The author wishes to acknowledge that parts of this text have previously appeared in print in the following publications: *Southerly, Westerly, One Eye Open / Jedním Okem*, 5 *Trope*, as well as in the anthology *Infernal Cinders*, eds. A.R. Roughley & L. L. James (Kangaroo, 1993). Parts of this text have also been broadcast in Australia on ABC Radio National.

The Garden

above all, do not mistake me for someone else

—NIETZSCHE

eyes lips dreams & then night goes first night
& then day & she must open her eyes & con-
front that other that intractable real of light
& solid objects but eyes need not be open for
this to be real eyes could be shut one could
still be able to sense to listen to recall impres-
sions this body this bed this room the words
speak themselves from somewhere further
on some external voice insisting upon the
unquestionable existence of things a voice by
itself spilling out of nowhere but who is
speaking she thought shaking off the sleep
haze of unconsciousness who or what & she
felt her body lying tense & silent hopeless &
beside her an other body she was listening to
its breathing there in the distance like wind
coursing through the street broken into an
echo of an echo only which hung now
suspended in silence & now called back aloud
to something forgotten during the night a
voice drawing her into the present time of its
own cadence but what was it saying with its
heavy consonants drifting one into another
like waves against a shoreline something
meaningless the same thing repeated over &
over terminating in a restless & frustrated
monotony obscuring her thoughts confusing
them she opened her mouth & tried to speak
a dull empty sound a knot in her throat in
her lungs she shuddered slightly & stiffened

against the ceiling a pale light flickered on & off casting a broken shadow across the side of her face her mouth was in darkness a dark cavity beneath the black rings of her eyes outside the sound of footsteps passing below the window the ticking of a clock obstinate murmur of language strangely entangled like hair after sleep on a passive face as someone watches but what could have happened for everything to be & remain incomprehensible forever beginning with a line & then the line faltering panic arc of a seabird the futile beating of imaginary wings there where the eye breaks off suddenly & falls towards the water the smell of leaves & wet earth mingling with the sharp smell of salt & she felt herself listening far off to an echo of an echo listening for the first disconnected syllables of day just before dawn actually breaks & strained to recall what it looked like when the sun rose on the blue lines of rooftops to imagine what type of sound it would make dragging itself over the dark cut of earth the ringing of granite in the desert the sudden intonations of the callers to prayer or whether or not the blind could believe in such a difference night & day day she murmured night as if either could mean something after all something real the way she tried to believe in a body her body this

body she felt a narrow band of perspiration about her wrist when one of these hands touches the other is it true that the things in question are my own these hands touch the same things because they are the hands of the one same body the things themselves the lived presence hearing oneself understanding speaking the sound of a typewriter entering from a different room the dissonance of keys struck at irregular intervals & each sound in fluid symphony persisting obscurely like a palimpsest of notes vibrating in air like a sheet of paper deeply indented & in places cut through the barely legible traces of other texts whose characters seem to branch off in unexpected directions spreading & overflowing punctuating her thoughts confusing them one instant opening to another suddenly & with no apparent connection or else she had already gone on ahead turning pages like somebody who has forgotten about the words & has begun to move unconsciously among their meanings a lucidity hidden in the void a spectre & you want to call out to address her there where she has already begun to disappear like a ghost passing through a locked door but like the doors in dreams it has no handle as if to say there was an imminence which took shape in her & which held you at bay indecision

keeping everything open as the ultimate rationale each of those fragments notes treacherous insights on the way to some occasion everything you sought to make her represent as if i have followed one by one all the steps of the route chosen going back to the start every time a doubt or suspicion directed me there in other words i have not been allowed i have not allowed myself to arrive at a single conclusion without having retraced all the thoughts that precede it but is that even possible chance when i seek it is beyond my reach i could have said it escapes me but it is not from me that it escapes since i have never had it in my grasp & in fact can barely conceive it & at the same time something resembling a memory breakdown sets in i begin to be afraid of forgetting as though unless i made a note of everything i would be unable to hold onto any part of it all of these extraneous elements which are perhaps nothing more than an elaborate arrangement of planes & facets & simultaneous aspects of so many generalised items if only to project a sense of volume in space something tangible enough to frame a presence independent of impressions but such deep complicity can't be expressed in words or else it is all that can be expressed in words & our intentions are merely a way of saying that

these things do not belong to us & even thought must pass away then afterwards driving through m in the back seat of a taxi it was a late summer he thought wiping the sweat from his forehead he hadn't slept outside everything flashed past unresolved this day he murmured at last to be delivered staring out at the white glare of heat a fume of hæmorrhaged faces the phrase pity never helped the dead mouthed itself over & over changing momentum with the harsh whirr of car tyres meaning is eclipsed he thought like the face beneath its death-mask & the self becomes the anti-self becomes an echo only a conjurer's cheap trick as if to say open sesame & there she was that pale wax figure lying in a box or gazing from a window of a hospital in m as though she had seen a ghost the way she might have expected someone her saviour like cortés to appear suddenly on the gravel driveway wearing flowers in his hair she might have run outside one day as if to greet him like a moth flying blindly into light & that was death had he not seen her in fact lying there still alive trying to touch his hand to speak to him promise me she'd said but he didn't know what to promise he could promise nothing he promised nothing but when did it end the hours of waiting outside the ward until finally they let him in & felt

as though he were being pushed downwards his head his whole body submerged as though their voices were coming to him underwater further & further down an illusion was it just an illusion on a platform of the gare saint-lazare a woman had stepped in front of him & instead of moving to the side he allowed his body to come into contact with hers upsetting her balance & when she touches him he resents her because her touch reminds him of his betrayals because even compassion belongs to cruelty the falsity of it the lies & contrivances that is what it will have been a vacant life turning & turning between the walls of a cell the incessant measuring of time an unresolved sentence that runs up continuously against the edges of the page strophe antistrophe filling the empty spaces of that *mise en scène* like an actor on stage rehearsing other sentiments than his own always saying what he is made to say & tormented by the words of others entering his body taking possession of it so that he can neither see nor think how many nights have passed like this not sleeping repeating the senseless tableau i can't go on you say & at the last minute he stretches out his hands to stop her from falling a reflex or an afterthought but never soon enough the faces of people crowding on the platform

& trains rushing past out of obscure darkness
shuddering stripping back the air & the
downwards motion of the body caught frame
by frame as though it could make a differ-
ence reaching the turning point one day after
another with your note written out & folded
in your pocket taking one last look in the
mirror before going outside but you don't
you take the key out of the lock instead & take
off your clothes again & lie down beside that
other & close your eyes again did you allow
yourself to be overcome by so little pain i'm
shaking she stammered lifting her hand to
her face with the gesture of a marionette i
can't stop shaking she pressed her eyes with
her knuckles & rocked the weight of her body
back & forth on the edge of the chair & there
were moments hours perhaps sometimes
days when she would stand by the window
compulsively shifting the curtain back &
forth looking down onto the street although
she knew there was no-one there looking
down onto that street where she could
imagine herself as another returning her
own gaze perhaps nothing more than a
glance an instant of recognition that would
cancel the oppressive weight of entrapment
the night sometimes i don't know if i want
to live or die sometimes it's painful not to die
at last to have been done with words to have

been able to resolve everything into a single continuous nothing car il y a tant de choses que je n'ose te dire tant de chose que tu ne me laisserais pas dire the flowerless stems hung in the glass bowl on the window sill now shadows rose & fell & lay flat where the sun touched on the leaf-coloured water now a figure stirred in the bed & the room separated into light & solid planes & things unhinged from nowhere in an infinitesimal fraction of a moment morning replaces dawn night into dawn into morning suspended in that single moment all moments interceding in one another & over the city the sky becomes a fire a burst ventricle bells & trucks & voices pealing in chorus she felt the light beat against her eyelids little by little a red disk filling the black screen & faint blue vertical or horizontal lines weaving a vague grid-like pattern that suggested the movements of concealed forms somewhere in the background a spectral acrostic in which geometrical designs spelt out entire sequences of words algebraic notations molecular structures of time & space merging in this intricate hieroglyph written between the membrane & the eye though it seemed impossible to distinguish what they were saying carried off on the endless stream of noise that flowed circulated & throbbed in

the city's veins feeding the vast entropic spiral at its heart the ceaseless tending towards an end a grey-brown opacity that seemed to pervade everything & to consume everything in its own time the struggle was writing itself out transcribing itself the words & phrases half-seen half-heard & failing as she herself was failing & she thought of all the people whose eyes would never meet across an empty intersection & all the disregarded phrases from foreign languages their fugitive existence how it both lured & repelled her like the music she had heard long ago in the bois de boulogne things unseen & unspoken that haunted through each moment the intermezzo that her own life seemed to represent suspended as though between two indistinguishable points of negation when everything & its opposite narrow to a single fragmentation an archway a door a windowpane & there was something awkward about the expectations of a room the way she felt its walls required something from her & always there was the sensation of a verbal thread created by their silence as though she were trying to hold onto something to stitch time to reweave the inevitable lacunæ of departure & absence as though trying to hold onto something by denying it by denying the loss of it & silence like a knot

gathering each fragment of her consciousness into a point of dark interiority an impossible silence closed off from the senses it was the same night that she always experienced over & over a recurrent dream though fleeting enough never to be remembered in the same way it was as though each time she glimpsed only one aspect of the reality in which she was suspended but which she couldn't seem to grasp hold of adrift on a sea with only the vague suggestion of landfall far in the distance she thought of all the false sightings the flocks of seabirds that might have suggested a shoreline luring her on hopelessly towards a bank of clouds arching over the horizon like a mountain range each night the pale flicker of zodiacs rising low in the east like campfires hidden deep in the mangroves of some dark estuary she moved inexorably towards them swimming through the air upwards & in all directions circling like an insect caught in a lunar trance a sense of inevitability surrounded each of her actions & yet not of their own accord i harbour no illusions she said i can't reach that point in my memory from which time seems to diverge something resembling a fold a warp in the layering of hours a suspended alien moment the opposite of a beginning as though it stood on the verge of