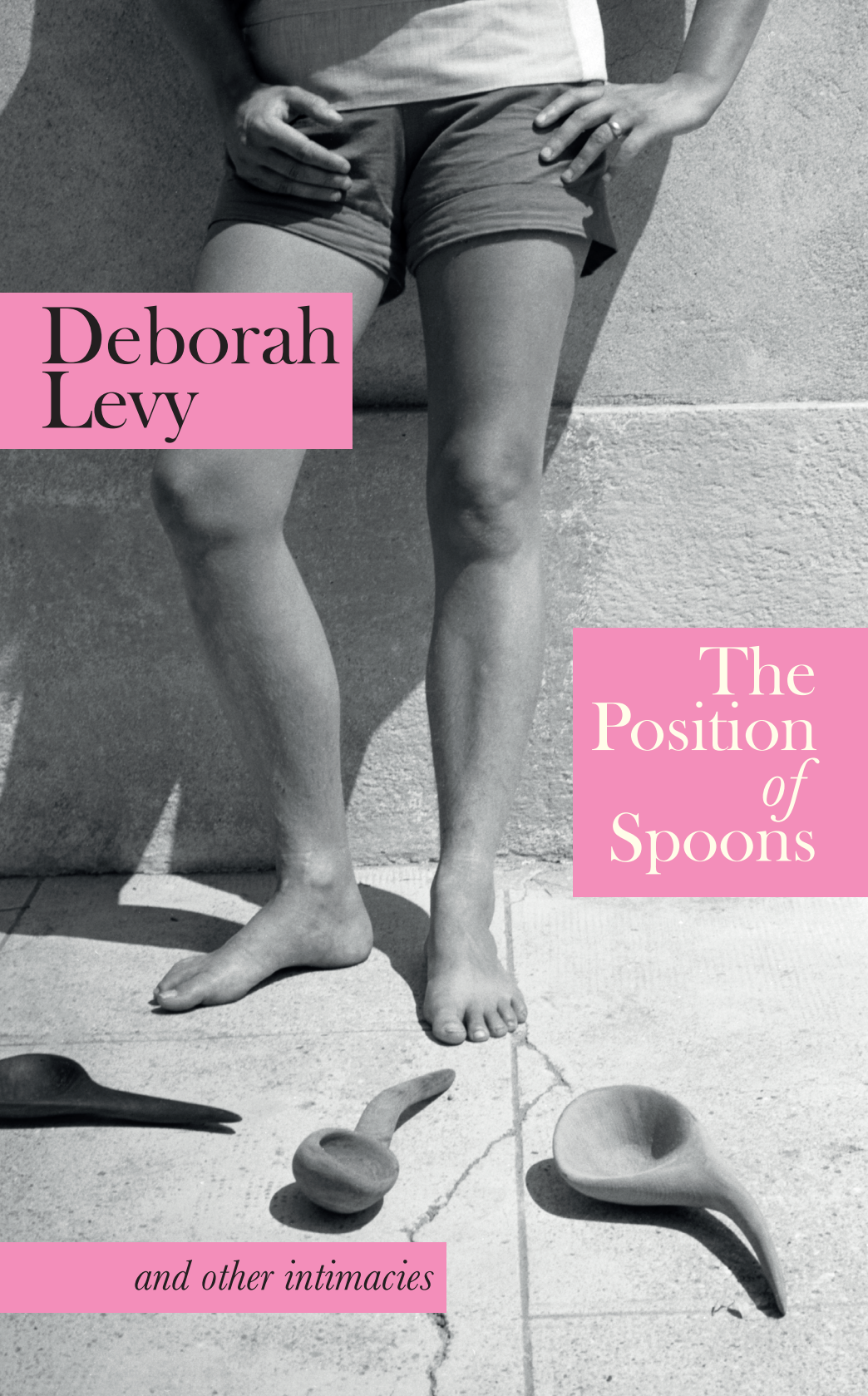

Deborah
Levy
The
Position
of
Spoons
and other intimacies

THE POSITION OF SPOONS

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Bathed in an Arc of French Light

Colette



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I fell in love with her before I read any of her books.

To my teenage eyes smeared in the black kohl I believed made me look nihilistic and wasted (it was the era of punk after all and we were all in mourning for the future), Colette had a self-possessed kind of beauty that I felt she owned and hired to the photographer.

Even better as far as I was concerned, living as I did in the suburbs of London where everyone looked the same and even called their dogs the same name (there were three dogs called Spot in my street alone), Colette was a writer who looked like a movie star.

I looked nothing like her. Her dog was called Toby-Chien.

I don't know how I chanced upon this photograph. I do know it was a freezing December in 1973 and the central heating had broken down in our family house.

The doorbell rang and my mother shouted at me to let in the man who had arrived to fix the heating. He poked around in the cupboard where the boiler was and said, 'I officially

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condemn this boiler. The law says you've got to buy a new one.' Then he winked at me and switched it on. The pipes in the house started to whirr and clank like an old tractor. When I at last returned to my bedroom, I had to fight my way through the black smoke coiling out of my radiator.

Despite it being a very posed image, there was something about the way Colette had contrived its artifice that connected with me. She was a working writer who had a purpose in life. I could see immediately that she was enjoying the theatre of inventing herself to portray this purpose. This was of particular interest in that phase of my own life.

I was born in South Africa and grew up in Britain. When I glimpsed this photo at thirteen years old, I had lived in Britain for four years, not quite long enough to feel that I was English. Colette was presenting herself in a way that appealed to my teenage idea of what a European female writer might be like. Glamorous, serious, intellectual, playful – with a mean, sleek cat sitting on her writing desk amongst the

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flowers, all of them bathed in a glowing arc of French light.

When I started to read her books, all that was transgressive and sensuous in her writing blew like a wind from Burgundy, Paris and the South of France into the damp suburban gardens of London. Her affairs with women and her three marriages (the first to a perverse and corrupt bon viveur who signed her early novels as his own) meant she had one foot in and one foot out of the bourgeois life of her era. She became arthritic in middle age and often wore mannish open sandals with her elegant dresses, much to the agony of her more conventional second husband.

I knew none of this when I first glimpsed the photograph, yet somehow I intuited she'd had an experimental life.

What is the point of having any other sort of life, I thought to myself. Outside I could hear one of the dogs called Spot barking at a cat called Snowy. Twenty years later, when I read *The Vagabond*, I had cause to agree with her light but

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slyly deep assertion, 'I want nothing from love, in short, but love.'

Yes, what else is it we would want from love, apart from love?

Too many things, as it happens.

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Marguerite Duras

The purpose of language for Duras is to nail a catastrophe to the page.

She thinks as deeply as it is possible to think without dying of pain. It is all or nothing for Duras. She puts everything into language. The more she puts in, the fewer words she uses. Words can be nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

It is what we do not do with language that gives it value, makes it necessary. Dull and dulling language is successful. Every writer knows this, makes a choice about what to do with that knowledge.

It's hard, sometimes even absurd, to know things, even harder to feel things – that's what Duras is always telling us. Her films are

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novelistic – voice-over, interior monologue – her fiction is cinematic: she understands that an image is not a 'setting' and that 'it has to hold everything the reader needs to know.' Duras is never begging with words but she is working very hard and calmly for us. Her trick is to make it all seem effortless.

Translated European literature was once shockingly hard to find in Britain. I was twenty-nine when I first read Marguerite Duras's 1984 masterpiece, *The Lover*, translated from the French by Barbara Bray. A revelation and a confrontation in equal measure, it was as if I had burst out of an oak-panelled nineteenth-century gentleman's club into something exhilarating, sexy, melancholy, truthful, modern and female.

If its cool, spare prose and flawless narrative design were somehow representative of the *nouveau roman*, largely associated with Alain Robbe-Grillet, it was clear to me that its major difference was that Duras did not distrust emotion. To write *The Lover* she drew on her early years living in Saigon with her impoverished

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mother and belligerent brothers. Structured as a kind of memoir, it is about a teenage girl living a peculiar colonial existence in French Indochina in the 1930s with her genteel but 'beggar family'.

She decides to make something happen and starts to wear a man's fedora hat and gold lamé shoes. In so doing, she suddenly sees herself 'as another'. It's a magic trick to separate from her deadening mother, and it works.

An elegant, wealthy Chinese man, twelve years her senior, is watching her on the ferry bus that crosses the Mekong River. When he risks offering her a cigarette, she notices that his hand is unsteady. 'There's the difference of race, he's not white, he has to get the better of it, that's why he's trembling.'

She wants to make him 'less afraid' so that he can do to her 'what he usually does with women' and, perhaps in return, he might sometimes buy her brothers and mother a meal? In one of the most devastating and brutally truthful seductions ever written, the Chinese financier who, she discovers, owns all the working-class

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housing in the colony, drives her in his 'funereal' limousine to his apartment on the edge of the city.

She undresses him, notices she desires him, panics, tells him he must never love her. Then she cries – about her mother's poverty and because she often hates her. *The Lover* does not just portray a forbidden sexual encounter of mind-blowing passion and intensity; it is also an essay on memory, death, desire and how colonialism messes up everyone.

I'm not convinced a book as incandescent as *The Lover*, more existential than feminist, would be published today. Not in Britain, anyway. Questions would arise. Are the characters likeable (not exactly), is it experimental or mainstream (neither), is it a novel or a novella? Fortunately for Duras, it didn't matter to her readers. It sold a million copies in forty-three languages, won the Prix Goncourt and was made into a commercial film.

Marguerite Duras was a reckless thinker, an egomaniac, a bit preposterous really. I believe she had to be. When she walks her bold but

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'puny' female subject in her gold lamé shoes into the arms of her Chinese millionaire, Duras never covertly apologizes for the moral or psychological way that she exists in the world.

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My Beautiful Brothel Creepers

When I was seventeen and bought my first pair of brothel creepers from Shellys, a high-street shoe store in London, I gazed at their two inches of thick black crêpe sole and knew I would never wear them with socks. It has always been very clear to me that men and women who wear shoes without socks are destined to become my friends and lovers. These sockless people have a kind of abandon in their body. They walk with zip. At the same time they manage to look both nonchalant and excitable. To not wear socks is to be alert but not hearty. To not wear socks is to not pretend that love is for ever.

If it's any consolation, people who do wear socks are probably better adjusted than their sockless brothers and sisters. They face up to

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things and always carry an umbrella when it rains.

The sockless are godless. So are brothel creepers, also known as 'Teddy-boy shoes'. To walk down the street in my very first pair made me feel like I was wearing a tattoo that marked me out for a meaningful life. I have bought many versions of them since, but twenty years later that first pair still lie intact on the top shelf of my shoe rack. Like jazz musicians they have improved with age. Not quite winkle-pickers, their leopard-skin tongue (V-shaped) is still seductive, ready to pounce and growl. To slip my naked foot into these shoes was to literally walk on air. My brothel creepers were beauty and truth, genius personified, never mind they were rock and bop, that was not the point, they were the metropolis, a ticket out of suburbia.

My brothel creepers made me feel sexy, serious, frivolous, confident. I wore them with tight black clinging dresses and I wore them with jeans. I wore them with pencil skirts and pinstriped trousers and I wore them to take out the garbage.

There is something in the brothel-creeper

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design that seemed to put the world in perspective. Their pointy black toes tapped to the beat of rebellion; the shoes my mother would never have worn, the shoes my father would never have worn, in fact the shoes not many girls wore but the ones who did were gorgeous. My narcissism was confirmed when, one afternoon, faint with hunger, I found myself waiting on the platform of a station somewhere in the sleepy shires. When I heard the train was going to be eleven minutes late, I ran over the bridge (in my beloved brothel creepers) to find something to eat at the local supermarket.

Everyone was old and if they weren't old, they looked like they were. Except for the checkout girl in her checked overalls staring dreamily into the white strobes on the ceiling. Three minutes to go and her till roll runs out. As she stands up to get another one, I see she is wearing brothel creepers, too. Except hers are electric-blue suede and have even more attitude than my own. As I run for my train, I know she will get out of that village. Her shoes are a sign that she is making plans for a life elsewhere.

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Walking Out of the Frame



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