

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

Thomas Piekarski

Kiki Queen of Montparnasse

My father sold coal from a buggy playing
his trumpet as he rolled through the village
born Alice Prin in rural Burgundy
leading up to World War One
I led a simple life away from France's capital
a love child as five of my cousins we were
left in custody of a grandmother
continual chores in order
Sisters of Charity fed us broth
imposed bitter Christianity
but we scoffed at them found refuge
at the public school and I engaged
in crazy antics like walking tiptoe
along a limestone wall above the lake
father left my unwed mother
to herself so she found a job
as nurse in Paris meanwhile
I preferred the wide outdoors
after rains collected snails picked strawberries
and dandelion roots we made into tea
a bedraggled man I referred to as godfather
gathered refuse in his horse-led cart
and I would ride along with him
amid the bottles rags assorted junk
we'd stop by a bistro where he peddled liquor
I'd mount tabletops sing to the customers
then pass a hat and sneak sips of wine
twelve when mother sent for me in Paris
I stepped from the train raven-black hair
spilling out beneath a beret
with red pompom on top cried all the way
but from my very first exposure
to whistles horns and hooves clacking along

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elegant Gare de l'Est
I knew I'd never want to leave
sent to school on the Rue de Vaugirard I enjoyed
reading best particularly monthly publication
Fantomas about a master of crime
dodging an inspector Juve by means
of aliases and inventive disguises
at thirteen mother pulled me from school and so
began a succession of jobs at first
knitter's then bookbinder's apprentice where
I read wonderful novels and the Kama Sutra
in support of the raging Great War I worked
oiling dead soldiers' boots
sent back to the front as well
repaired fabric for combat balloons
and soldered damaged weapons
Sundays I'd help friends at an open-air
flower stall where I relished
irises and lilies that sent fresh
fragrances into crisp Paris air
mother secured me employment in a bakery
that paid more than what I'd been making
enough to afford rent on an apartment
above the owners' store so day by day I would
sift flour buy supplies sell bread
quite a drudgery but nights open
I'd peer out the window dreamt of meeting
poet painter perhaps actor felt something big
about to happen and so it did one day
I defined my eyebrows with charcoal
the baker's wife called me a slut
so I punched her right in the snout
fired on the spot I drifted staying
nights here and there with friends
no better than street urchin then

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a sculptor with silver-tipped cane
asked me to model for him
next day I strolled merrily
over to the Impasse Rosin colony
artist studios where often were heard
utterances of pigeons cats and roosters
never having posed nude I stood shivering
as much from fear as the cold but calmed
found that sitting standing or lying down
easier than those workers outside
people chopping meat packing crates
here I had only to be still
little did I know spies alerted my mother till
during the third session she came pounding
on his studio door saw I was naked
called me a miserable whore
so we parted ways estranged
for months after the terrible war Paris
shook from powerful forces as change
ushered a new age in the old one out since
war wrought only death and humiliation

to people gone well-nigh insane
millions killed uselessly and what rage
overwhelmed thinkers worldwide
many converged upon Montparnasse
leading the upheaval Dada
came first followed by Surrealism
and Abstract Expressionism
Cubism Fauvism Existentialism
in a mix with Freud Nietzsche Darwin
their ideas integrated in this Montparnasse
district we dubbed the Quarter
galaxy of artists embroiled
in creative frenzy including better ones

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who abandoned outmoded Montmartre
Impressionism no longer in vogue
understood Montparnasse had emerged
the most important
art citadel ever known
they competed for recognition in galleries
among private collectors visitors anyone
who could help them earn their keep
generate a minimal existence
in musty studios without heat
and I no better off had only to rely
on my wiles and alluring body
I'd tromp door to door solicit modeling jobs
most of which paid well enough
to purchase a piece of herring for supper
and glass of red wine
occasionally I'd get stiffed
by some bum who didn't pay
learned to shrug it off move on
I find laughable that Modigliani whose
paintings hang on museum walls used to
roll up his current canvases
and hawk them on the Quarter's corners
I'd been kissy with a few young men
but yearned for much more
lost my virginity under unusual conditions
egged on by a girlfriend to seduce
an elderly gent who lamentably
proved barely able to perform
a girl needs security warmth love
seeking them I moved in with Robert
bohemian whose paintings never sold
but he provided steady shelter
we lived in poverty survived
mainly on my meager income

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Robert could be cruel beat
and harangued me as no good
after I'd stayed three months
one day Robert announced
he was taking off on vacation with a pal
and I'd have to leave right away
then once again astray an inconvenient
sort of homelessness I'd never shake
nevertheless charity prevailed among
we neighbors who clawed our way
to fame and fortune if capable
of securing a reliable clientele
climb high enough up the ladder
to thrive in this frenzied race all of us one big
family assisting one another such as once
I sobbed on a park bench near starving
the grounds snow-cloaked I quivered
broke no place to rest my head
an old man approached and offered
three francs if I'd show him my breasts
reluctantly I agreed though he stunk
of garlic and alcohol that money spent
secured vital bread and cheese
though deprived I wouldn't get depressed
always felt I fit in
mingled shared secrets made friends
already a proven talent
one who attracted attention
I could sing dance draw portraits and act
loitered about but with purpose
among cafes bistros and cabarets the fondest
of these for up-and-coming painters
as well as seasoned veterans
Cafe de la Rotonde heartbeat of Montparnasse
place to see and be seen epicenter

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of literature philosophy fine arts
at any time you may encounter immigrants
from Vienna Stockholm Barcelona Toronto
where Sartre Miro Joyce Max Jacob de Chirico
and such innovators over two decades met
forging a new world order
I made valuable contacts at Rotonde foremost
sculptors singers and painters
blended seamlessly among them
set my sights on breaking into the back room
for which admission was tightly controlled
by affable owner Papa Libion
his permission necessary to enter
allowed only the most highly prized
Robert's buddy lent me his studio
but that arrangement didn't last long
so befriended a struggling painter
paid me enough as assistant
that I temporarily afforded rent
at a boardinghouse on Rue de Vaugirard
it smelled like moldy mushrooms
by and by I met a kind gentleman
allowed me shelter in his shed
in case I had nowhere else to go
would sleep there on a bed of sand
down a block from the train station
he'd wrap me in an overcoat
cold mornings otherwise I'd freeze
this vagabond lifestyle had to end
saw Rotonde as key to my ascent
gaining admission to that back room my aim
to mix among those who mattered most
tipped off that Libion didn't fancy
the way I dressed so with assorted fabrics
fashioned an acceptable wardrobe

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made my face like an opera star
then Papa granted me back room access
among his pets the Polish Menjizsky
first of those who would adore me
I fell for him moved in
cohabited quite a spell
we shared incredible sex
he painted me several times
in one I wore a fashionable green hat
white lace collar detailed
and my long sleek neck some maintained
made me resemble a gazelle
it was Menjizsky nicknamed me Kiki
which I'd thereafter be called
not the jealous type he permitted
continuance of the gypsy life I followed
prowling posing for clients
girlfriends and I made the rounds after dark
frequented a lot of hot spots
La Jungle L'Escale La Coupole Le Jockey
neon light flooded streets at night
more color than a double rainbow
generated galvanizing energy
and dynamic synergy that inspired
motley luminaries cobbled
in crowded cafes how they squabbled
over theoretical highly abstract
concepts while they'd debunk myths
crush idols and debate such unsolvable
issues as whether God encompasses
everything or nothing at all
Moise Kisling another fine Polish painter
took me for a prostitute at first
which prompted a heated exchange and yet
I wound up modeling for him

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Cocteau no less Picasso thought he would
 some day rank among the best
I traipsed around Kisling's studio
 with dirty bare feet
we looked like brother and sister
identical short haircuts with bangs
 his studio an open house
 big widows overlooking trees
 of splendid Luxembourg gardens
people would laugh pass the bottle and blare
 latest tunes on his gramophone at times
 someone brought a fiddle or accordion
 we'd sing and dance madly
 our hearts filled with contentment
 which drew a stream of beautiful women
 from all around the Quarter
 speaking of beautiful women
Marie Vassilieff native of Smolensk sponsored
 by Tsarina Alexandra emigrated to Paris
 accomplished and respected she founded
an art academy its adjoining canteen
 attracted painters from beginner
 to well-established professionals
Chagall Utrillo Soutine and Leger to name a few
 the universally admired Marie played
a role in what was to become treasured memory
 measure of my destiny when
 a girlfriend and I per usual met up
at one of the trendy outdoor venues
 our eyelids scarlet lips passionate pink
 hair done in bobs a style frowned upon
 forbidden in most cafes
you had to wear a hat or maybe taken
 for one of the local hookers
 but we always keen to buck convention

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thumbed our noses at such restrictions
the manager insisted we wear hats
or depart the premises but I jeered
swore I'd tattle over the whole neighborhood
about his hypocrisy since he allowed
American women to go with bare heads
then jumped onto a table danced a bawdy jig
which ended the dispute and caught attention
of Marie Vassilieff who motioned
for us to join her at their table
where sat a transformational figure Man Ray
he greeted me with casual grace
befitting his elevated taste
charmed by my ad-lib dance
although pretty raunchy
to his liking he an ordinary sort
save his silk scarf and sporty beret
Man Ray member of an elite circle
sculptors poets painters
novelists composers actors
who viewed all life as art regardless
of their specific discipline
Dada drew Man from across the pond
Paris a magnet reeled him in
where he connected with kingpins
Tristan Tzara Eluard Picabia Marcel Duchamp
I by then a budding personality
top model in demand Foujita
Breker Mayo Salazar Krohg Brancusi
and an abundance of others
drew sculpted painted me
I'd no way of knowing whether
Man was aware of my status
if so didn't show it treated
the four of us to a lovely dinner despite

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my continual chatter and to top it off
the cinema where obviously smitten
he couldn't resist holding my hand
Man Ray's paintings didn't sell too well
so pursued photography as means of survival
urged me to come and pose for him
but I hadn't the least interest
told him so however persistent
he claimed with clever effects
able to perform miracles promised a genuine
Kiki would result sure as any painting
won me over with finesse
though skeptical I greeted him
at his considerably cluttered studio
lights cameras piles of books and magazines
Man had a knack for making one comfortable
the backdrop a soft white fabric
he dressed my lower body
with a petticoat had me raise my right arm
rest it against the head left arm
curved across my belly its wrist conspicuous
gold bracelet casting a sheen
Man Ray knew practically everyone of rank
in the cosmopolitan art universe
as sculptor with Duchamp made a splash
producing what they termed readymades
random objects assembled together
incongruously that being the point
their purpose to confound perplex distress
the observer into an alternate reality
as photographer Man had no equal
experimented with multiple techniques
materials methods concepts
sought by notables in Paris
retained customers there as well outside

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among European and American periodicals
eager to include his latest projects
we hit it off big shared a comfortable
apartment on rue Campagne-Premiere
Man used the closet as darkroom
busy workaholic always involved
in one endeavor or another painted
constructed readymades and collages
wrote daily answered letters
couldn't get enough of posing me
his irresistible lover and muse
most artists struggle to obtain recognition
some like Man Ray reach distant stars
it's natural his talent should lend
itself to continual experimentation
extend this expanding genre photography
in ways no one had yet attempted
Man brought a novel approach to photograms
created camera-less pictures called rayographs
by shining light through or across objects
that made imprints directly onto film
additionally produced reversal prints
and optical distortions proved himself
visual wizard you might even say alchemist
Montparnasse as close to paradise
as those for whom the world revolved
around the arts could possibly fathom
Man and I would enjoy this luminous climate
together or separate depending on schedules
people from all over the globe came
some would never leave made the Quarter home
one big happy congregation
fresh-cheeked young students in wide trousers
hurrying to Watteau's or Colarossi's art school
glitzy cafe terraces models all about

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we frolicked with Foujita and his cute wife Youki
Derain told fantastical stories and Pascin
derby sunk over the ear recited poems
in high tones next came aperitifs and then
the gang decided what's for dinner
afterwards engaged a myriad of dance halls
I'd regularly make the rounds
Bal de la Horde Bal Russe Bal Suedois
oh how could I forget those rip-roaring parties
where Desnos spun records he purchased
at the flea market and we
reveled as he read his fiction then perhaps
the cinema 4 Colannes or Rue de la Gaité
sometimes they tried conning me to Montmartre
but no deserter I always refused
for years remained Man's principal model
in stills as well as film actress
between Dada and Surrealism Man Ray
showed no bias whatsoever as did others
remained true to personal visions
Dada combative and outrageous
renounced all former movements
blew up all the rules defied authority
manifestos continually announced
while Surrealism explored the subconscious
emphasized spontaneous expression
with meaning derived by integration
of waking and dream imagery
Man and I made Surrealist history
over six years of whirlwind output
one event greatly enhanced
our reputations extravaganza
concocted by master showman
Tristan Tzara consequence of which
scholars say resulted in de facto

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demise of his Dada ideology
 though he never would admit it
Tzara came calling on us one day to retain
 Man for his show taking place over the next
 two nights titled with intent to stir confusion
 Evening of the Bearded Heart
booked at Theater Michele near Opera Garnier
Tzara showed us the playbill music by Auric
 Milhaud Satie Stravinsky poems from
Cocteau and Soupault play written by Tzara
 also a Man Ray motion picture
 that is of course assuming his cooperation
who was hesitant since he'd only tinkered
 with moving film a mere novice
 but Tzara insisted and commissioned him
 an honor Man couldn't refuse
went to work using thumbtacks pins paper clips
 splicing individual rayograph stills
to short film footages he'd taken
 these randomly arranged glued together
in a two minute sequence that concluded
 with a closeup of my exposed torso
 industrious promoters Tzara's assistants
distributed handbills and posters
 that promised outrageous revelations
 the venue sold out audience eclectic
reflecting broad appeal
 Surrealism's czar Andre Breton
refused participation yet attended with an army
 of followers waging literary war
 on Tzara and the Dadaists that would boil over
during the course of this legendary program
 rival factions in attendance atmosphere charged
 though the evening began calmly enough
 mirthful music drew moderate applause

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however the mood turned ugly when
Pierre de Massot took the stage reciting
a supposed poem more list of names
called out by him as dead upon the field of honor
including Apollinaire Proust Picasso
Sarah Bernhardt Duchamp Picabia and others
some of them members of the audience
though unmentioned Breton took
personal offense stormed the stage
poets Desnos and Peret with novelist Crevel
followed not far behind at that time
Breton whacked Massot's arm with a walking stick
hard enough to break it whereupon Tzara
called cops in ejected those rabble-rousers
show resumed next up Tzara's bizarre play
The Gas Heart three-act drama featuring himself
as he pranced around like a gamecock
play with no discernable rhyme reason or theme
unable to control his annoyance Eluard
rushed at Tzara instigating a brawl
attempted to punch him in the face however swung
and missed balance lost stumbled off the stage
smashing several footlights on his way
order restored the projector hummed into motion
Man's montage began to click and flicker
George Antheil played cheerful piano as they
watched furious sunbursts nails scramble
thumbtacks swirl and pulse
spirals spin carousel whiz round
random strands of rope dangle
twisting cords fierce blizzard
clouds explode against a black background
single strand of hair swaying gently
egg box that twirled within confines
of some amorphous outline

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and then the finale a brief clip
my bare midsection striped
with piercing sunlight and stippled
by a window's reflected raindrops
this the film's only live form
senses overwhelmed the frazzled audience
erupted into fistfights
seats ripped apart slogans shouted
lewd songs glass broken loud chants
so Tzara nixed the second show
Dada dipped lower into the sunset
and Surrealism continued its ascent
on the domestic side Man and I mainly content
I loved him much managed our budget
shopped swept floors made the bed
cooked delicious Burgundian dishes
included sumptuous salads exotic cheeses
complimented by vintage wine
when we had guests I often sang folk songs
after dinner for those intimate groups
voice clear and strong oh amazing
the way fate and destiny can merge
in an outbreak of sheer coincidence
such the case one afternoon at Rotonde
I approached by a young woman
Therese Maure accompanying
a group of friends who
from chairs outside the cafe watched
me celebrate Bastille Day
I danced the Fox Trot
as best I could a little tipsy
down the boulevard held up traffic
my exhibition brought
joy and laughter from onlookers
Therese and I discovered we were almost

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the same age both enthralled by tarot
in short order bonded became
soul sisters inseparable besties
Therese went by Treize dynamic lady
taught women boxing and modern dance
gymnastics as well we'd go out carousing
during preparation once in a while
I painted triangles around her eyes
brows same color as the dress like one night
when after a Four Arts Ball
we held hands and leapt together
into the fountain at Place de la Concorde
Treize my guardian angel times
I drank too much out of control
no secret our bisexuality
shared the bed times Man Ray left town
Man and I immersed
in the Quarter's unique magic
gossiping sniping airing theories dogmatism
and interconnected collective projects
opportune artists like Cocteau
branched out Desnos engaged
radio broadcasts wrote reviews painted
had success at filmmaking
it's natural Man would be lured
by that gravity driven to explore
motion pictures further
dive headlong break new ground
as alternative to tedium of photography
I likewise enthusiastic
loved to sing paint and pose pursued
a myriad of opportunities
Man got hired to construct a strange film
titled Emak Bakia requisitioned
by an eccentric aristocrat willing to spend

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liberally for services rendered
by the so-called dandy Dadaist
using footage already in store
Man arranged strips in a general progression
sequences spliced into an ambiguous story
alternating footage taken on location
with predominantly unrelated subjects
spiraling floodlights estranged woman driving
aimlessly alone on a country road
assorted farm animals dilapidated buildings
man slowly removing a starched collar
and oscillating geometric shapes
my participation brief closeup
where a single closed eye flashes open
in suddenly awakened awareness
at another point the camera isolates
as my shiny glossed lips spring apart
to expose glistening snow-white teeth
while Man was away during final production
of this project I sought refuge
with Treize desired distance
from continual obligation of studios
social engagements domestic burdens
and bickering with Man over various matters
at liberty to concentrate on my painting
advanced beyond expectations
I depicted common subjects washerwoman
sailor in tavern street peddler farmhand
circus performer bountiful azure skies
gentle hills and bright green meadows
I employed joyful colors
and loose forms that made those paintings
appear very much like Matisse
my showing at gallery Au Sacre du Printemps
covered by the Paris Tribune

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patrons of all stripes arrived
from every arrondissement in the city
as word had spread that originals
rendered by the incomparable Kiki
would be on display for sale
all twenty-seven canvases sold
I couldn't have been more thrilled
scaled a highest peak
of accomplishment at last
delighted to pose for photos
in a full-length fur-trimmed coat
my smile beaming ear to ear
the press captivated by this unexpectedly
triumphant exhibit one giddy critic
declared it the season's sensation
when Le Jockey cabaret opened it proved
a mecca for the avant-garde
ordinary folk and tourists
not to mention intelligentsia
all gathered in order to partake
of outrageous live entertainment
open to anyone who cared to perform
no matter amateur or seasoned
Treize and I made Jockey our hangout
encouraged friends to patronize
wall-to-wall people crammed inside
and little room on the dancefloor
I knew no other place you could be yourself
nearly so well as at Jockey anyone from
the writing painting musical whoring
working or drinking world apt to arrive
on a given night Caribbean ballads or ragtime
Yiddish poetry French folk numbers jazz
no club in the world so diverse
the audience would call out for their favorites

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when I headlined typically about midnight
could be heard clanking dishes glasses broken
and a raucous impatient crowd
bellow Kiki Kiki we want Kiki
the songs admittedly risque
I'd lower my head sway it streaming
heartfelt lyrics about the grit and grime
of everyday living oh how they would
hoot holler and whistle when I sang Le Chat Noir
in throaty tones with such compassion
as to penetrate their very souls
afterwards Treize passed the hat at best collected
enough to support us a whole month
during this period I vacillated between
habitation with Treize and Man Ray
stretch in which an emergent Kiki
blossomed gained focus evolving
Queen of Montparnasse
meanwhile amid competitive hurly-burly
striving to cash in on the cinema business
numerous opportunists casted
Dadaist and Surrealist films shown mostly
as lead-ins or specialty premieres
in demand such actresses as fit their roles
and who better to oblige than me
over the course of about two years
I contributed to several experimental films
some roles minor others iconic
captivating titles they were L' Etoile de Mer
Lion of Moguls Cette Vielle Canaille
not least La Retour a la Raison
memorable among them the intentionally
esoteric Ballet Mecanique
brainchild of Fernand Leger
his response to Machine Age aesthetics

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investigation into fragmented subjects
shot at varying distances and speeds
 which opens with a Chaplin-like
marionette jerkily dancing then gives way
 to a procession of unrelated objects
 that scamper across the screen
 many blurred as to be unrecognizable
interspersed momentary clips of me
 my hair glistens as the head
 twists slowly and another take
where cupid lips pop open
 with a big broad welcoming smile
then the one wherein my eyes
 featuring long curved lashes
 flutter spasmodically
 there is also the frame reaped
by means of a kaleidoscopic lens
 my face fans like daisy petals
in triplicate exposure
 staring straight out at you
 I dare say my contribution
 to this film the lone human touch
 in an otherwise altogether
 ambiguous optical onslaught
cocaine my drug of choice shied away
 from opium and heroin
all available on the street
 my urge for cocaine initially depended
 on prevailing circumstances
pressured to perform before anxious fans
 it helped to take a few sniffs
 which always gave me a lift
 habit I wouldn't kick until my dying day
meantime the relationship with Man soured
 though we continued to collaborate

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attend screenings shoot photos appear
in public among valued peers
 we'd burst into violent arguments
due in large part to my excessive intoxication
 combined with cocaine that released
 an out-of-control libido
after performances I'd be swamped
 by lustful males wanting a roll in the hay
 with seductive siren Kiki
sometimes I'd take them up on offers
 leaving Man to wander home alone
fierce rivalry and jealousy made it worse
 further he wouldn't commit
to marriage or having a family never once
 said he loved me such frustration
 resulted in rows that alarmed gawkers
 our intolerable conflicts
 made a split inevitable
but I bounced like a rubber ball
into arms of promoter Henri Broca
 hard drinker dress resembled a banker
pinstripe suit fancy cane and handkerchief
 his periodical Paris-Montparnasse
 informed about upcoming concerts
films plays recordings publications
 myself highlighted in every issue
 tidbits about recent appearances
 drawings and photos of yours truly
with reviews that praised my efforts
 as singer actress dancer painter
originally encouraged by Man Ray I wrote
 on and off about my experiences
pollinator in a field of impresarios
 insurgent virtuosos
how I figured in their development

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Broca seized the opportunity
urged me to collect my writings
in a tell-all book likely hit that would
no doubt yield a tidy profit
just the spark that could render me
flush with cabaret engagements
as well as sell more paintings
we loaded that book full of drawings
special photos and portraits
by painters Krog Foujita Kisling
the text consisted of vignettes written
primarily about people I'd known
expressed my personal perspective
praised but called a spade a spade
we titled it Kiki Souvenirs
the book chronicles in detail
early rural life and the rise
rags to riches in a competitive society
what comes across is my insistence
on living an independent woman liberated
from inhibitions limitations encumbrances
and norms overlords impose in their quest
to make us unwitting prisoners
Hemingway no less
penned the introduction
his declaration engrained forever
in Montparnasse lore
stated I dominated my era
more than Queen Victoria did hers
the book launch a grand event
overwhelmingly attended
as special bonus along with signatures
I planted a wet kiss
on each purchaser's cheek
but alas shortly following this victory

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the proverbial roof collapsed
Broca's health failed terminally ill
the magazine forced to fold
 Broca went bust then I obliged
to fend for him also a dying mother
 took a job singing in Berlin
that paid rents for a while bought food
times were brutal but I slogged through
when Broca finally passed I once again
 cast adrift dog without a bone
funny how chance can intervene when
with pierced heart one goes rambling
 down a stark murky alley
no place home then someone appears
 out of thin air to rescue you
so it occurred with Andre Laroque
 at the bar one night I approached
mistaking him for film star Jean Gabin
 discovered he doubled as
tax inspector and crack accordionist
 he began to accompany me
we'd soon become a tandem performed
regularly and on occasion
got so booked Andre took time off
 from taxes we played all over
 cramped clubs private parties
 music halls on Champs-Elysees
Laroque and I shared a modest apartment
 above the tobacconist on Rue Brea
our relationship wide open so no
 commitments or strings attached
considering nothing lasts forever
 it shouldn't come as a surprise
that enthusiasm throughout Paris diminished
 as the Wall Street crash epitomized

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Le Jockey closed and shops shuttered
perhaps poetic justice for those who'd been
prancing around the rim of a volcano
my modeling jobs tapered off
only occasional photo sessions
painting activities minimized
I concentrated mostly on
publishing memoirs singing and recording
the show as they say must continue
I determined to not miss a beat
would serve the public no matter what
wouldn't let the Quarter's dip
dampen my spirits one bit
led by Americans hundreds still perused
Parisian streets inherently curious
about Montparnasse well known to comers
as epicenter of cultural exchange
art and entertainment some hoping
they'd bump into a celebrity perhaps
Lawrence Picasso Dali Gertrude Stein
seldom during my career
did I form such a close association as with
extraordinary Margot Vega
both employed at gay Cabaret des Fleurs
hit it off formed a first-class duo
called ourselves Les Vegas Sisters
I wore sexy bangs and skin-tight skirt
died my hair blond that matched hers
Anais Nin reported to the press
how fantastic we were humorous
and vivifying absolute dynamite
though painting activity waned I kept
in touch unable to relinquish the brush
produced what I consider my best
autobiographical *L'Acrobat*

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festival of movement and color depicting
a muscular woman in pink dress
braves a tightrope high above fairgrounds
head raised to keep from toppling
back rotated to the viewer she holds
a patterned parasol at attention
perfectly balanced tense
as people below wear expressions
ranging from happiness to awe
puzzlement and indifference
I also took writing seriously aware
posterity had much to gain
any number of publications dispensed
around the city anxious to print
latest scuttlebutt and I provided
copy that invariably satisfied
their readership's inquisitiveness
I worked hard to perfect phrasing
revise and supplement previous versions
the intrigue that always surrounded me
astonishing one revelatory article
I contributed to the magazine
Confessions expanded on my complicated
relationship with Man Ray reckoning
he'd be remembered as a great artist
but only because of photography
and I primary source of his gift
candidly took the lion's share of blame
for our breakup having instigated
anguished drama throughout years
of loving the good life too much
director Anders Wilhelm Sandberg
heard me sing at Le Boef Sur le Toit
concluded he simply must secure me
for his movie about a wayward sailor

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falsely accused of murder
I'm singer in a shady Marseille bar amid
drunkenness debauchery and insults
we carouse fling barbs at one another
loosey-goosey I seduce men
during sequences some may find
beyond the pale even disgraceful
I maintained life and limb those years
working the Parisian circuit
for one a saucy club called Jungle
backed by their jazz orchestra
also Concert Mayol that thrilled
customers with nude reviews
occasionally I'd scamper off
to enchanted Saint-Tropez
play the chic resort Jeanne Duc's
pleasant break from Paris
Polydor came knocking late in the game
contracted Andre and myself
to record two cabaret tunes
I reprised sweet melodies
Les Marins de Groix Le Retour du Marin
encouraged by their sales
Polydor issued two more recordings
my voice fine tuned nostalgic
as I crooned Sur les Marches du Palais
and La Volerie on one disc the other
crowd-pleasing La-haut Sur la Butte
and Le Long de la Tamise
the mortal body can't outlast time
I had no illusions mine would
substance abuse dogged me
constant black ghost hung
above my head wherever I went
extreme indulgence took

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its toll and surely showed
as I imbibed countless bottles of wine
constantly snorted cocaine
in order to help withstand the stress
marshal strength and maintain stamina
before discriminating audiences
consequences inevitable I sometimes
blanked out on song lines
slurred certain words and made
a spectacle of myself in public
developed a short fuse
apt to blow upon slight provocation
such condition no sudden development
for years dearest friends
begged me to ditch my dependence
or ultimately face demise
on and off I tried to quit
but the addiction had a hold
without that artificial fuel
practically unable to entertain
one can only skate the razor's edge so long
drugs and alcohol extract their pound
of flesh inevitably keep you captive
slave to captain of a leaky ship
that will eventually sink
unnerving spats multiply and relationships
snap like rubber bands
losing my cool really cost me
as when hanging with sailors at the Sprintz
a drunken scrub called me whore
I threw dishes at him kicked off
a donnybrook then cops tracked me down
at my hotel got arrested on grounds
of inciting a riot smacked
an accosting officer on his head

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with a compact taken to jail interrogated
roughed up something terrible tossed
 two months in an eerie little cell
 with not a sliver of light at night
enduring insanity suicide
 invaded my mind petrified
 by horrible nightmares
despite what may seem impossible odds
 I nevertheless carried on
 for powerful is the spirit gliding
 blithely across a horizon
 faculties still sufficiently functional
when Anatole Litvak contracted me to play
 gang leader in a woman's prison
for his film *Cette Vieille Canaille*
 natural roll in light of past experience
still in demand I was hired to run a nightclub
 Le Babel on Rue Vavin
upon opening of the World's Fair in Paris
 spot they coined Chez Kiki
 I presided there official hostess
 wore elegant white satin gloves
flaunted a lengthy cigarette holder
 bore feather boa black hair slick
nightly appeared with trusty Laroque
 or a jocular junkie pianist
 yet painfully as businesses will go
the club lost money compelled to close
 change is a constant society weathers
 styles unfold and depart
 trends once the rage fade
 wear out and what's marvelous
uproarious or spectacular eclipsed while
 alternative modes stoke populations
 enjoy their day in the sun

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overshadow what once was novel
accordingly by degrees my talents declined
understood I was working too hard
for pitifully little pay
as arch rival songbird Edith Piaf's
popularity surpassed mine
urged by Laroque and Desnos
I entered a hospital in Chatillon-sur-Seine
underwent detoxification
upon release Andre forbade me
to visit notorious abuser Margot
despite strain on his finances
wouldn't permit me to work
until I'd made sufficient recovery
rather encouraged my writing
for much remained to amplify or disclose
Andre would type as I dictated
stories streamed from memory intended
to inform future generations
remiss should I have failed to reflect
on two iconic photos taken by Man Ray
each smashing records at auction
the first due in part to Tzara
who brought African art to the fore
back during formative Dada days
at Cafe Voltaire Zurich when
with Hugo Ball he rallied expats
from across Europe and elsewhere
obliterated regulations instilled chaos
one particular African's poetry enlightened
those insubordinate misfits
they assimilated African motifs
integrated and expanded them
impacting Cubists especially Picasso
wily Man aware of this potential

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posed me head lain sideways on a table
arm arched fingertips holding
a wooden African mask

vertically in place

forming a forty-five degree angle
between the mask and my face

both of them tranquil ovals

eyes shut tight lips pursed we two
embrace suspended animation

black and white contrasted

we're fixed in a meditative state

contemplating creation

the second image I recounted

remains the most renown photograph

in annals of Surrealist canon

first exposed by Breton as cover

of his widely respected and circulated
publication Litterature

titled Le Violon d' Ingres

reference to the obscure fact

that rather than discuss

paintings to friends Ingres

played violin for them

times they visited him

I'm seated on a blanket nude

back turned toward the viewer

turban atop my head cocked left

upper buttocks exposed

earring dangling down to the chin

prominent nose profiled

not a stretch to perceive

me an elongated violin

Man captured this frame afterwards

superimposed f holes

rendered my entire body

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a living instrument
sparing no details from depths
of my captive imagination
I told Laroque about an extravaganza
variety show at smart Bobino
music hall on Rue de la Gaité
they watched in awe as a trapeze artist
launched from the balcony
next a dance troupe selected from best
club players dazzled the audience
followed by oddball Sam Grankowski
calling himself Cowboy of Montparnasse
dressed in ridiculous checked shirt
and ten gallon hat bellowed
American poems in a Hungarian accent
Fujita silly mime mingled as Marie
Vassiliev sang Russian folk songs and danced
with her usual aplomb one local boutique
put on a super-duper fashion show
Chiffon devoted darling of the Jockey
belted out heart-wrenching tunes
Treize myself and a contingent
Les Montparnasse Girls danced a cancan
the event's premium draw Kiki
final act came on solo
bathed in brilliant chromatic lights
flower tucked behind my ear I crooned
Les Filles de Camaret
moved about lightly like a cloud afloat
gestures reserved and soothing
when the gala ended attendees held
a ceremony assembled
from multiple arrondissements
took a vote and overwhelmingly
elected me Queen of Montparnasse

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afterwards friends and I
celebrated my title
in the dining room of lavish La Couple
paying homage to their queen
they showered me with purple roses
there among my chosen family
glasses filled toasts made congratulations
happiest I've ever been
those golden years fled much too quickly
the deplorable Second World War
put a damper on our beloved Quarter
Nazi occupation cast a pall
steel haze that stuck drearily
to the sky day by day like glue
Hitler hated everything we upheld
orderly disorder intransigence
modern thought nonconformist attitudes
Laroque having been sent to fight
Germans got released and returned
to his station at reopened Jockey
in his absence I sought safe haven
place to roost fell in with a plumber
we spent two years in the country
a bull between the sheets however
he beat me black and blue
despite blatant objections
from a newlywed wife Andre
installed me back in his upstairs suite
provided sustained support
throughout a down period
I got locked up for using forged
prescriptions in order to obtain
psychotropic substances
after a miserable month of detention
they released me on parole

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shooting stars burn up in the atmosphere
meteors can make large craters
careers ebb and flow prone to crash
when crippled by debilitating addiction
I'd gained weight lost much panache
yet remained courageous determined
Papa Libion passed away and I clashed
with the Jockey's obnoxious new owner
so struck it off my list
dropped in randomly at happening clubs
if inclined trilled a song or two
back to roots simple existence
still singing for my daily supper
the Quarter a shadow of its former identity
slim pickings although I settled
on a bar named Chez Adrien
after sets passed the hat as before
made enough that I never went hungry
inquisitive friends and ex lovers
searching for me once found
shocked at changes to my body and face
I drifted into fits of amnesia
stumbled held chairs to support myself
speech somewhat garbled
at worst incomprehensible
adding insult to injury
I'd sometimes forget what was just said
during this jittery period
I happened into Man Ray
returned from L.A. where he waited
the war out promoted his paintings
Man expressed no regrets
nor recognition of my condition
flung arms around his Kiki
invited me to join him for dinner

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I declined explained I was on my way
donating clothes to a charity
and must arrive there before it closes
clear from the expression on his face
he could see I'd entered my twilight
always generous fronted me money
tears in my eyes we parted
of late released from a psychiatric hospital
in front of our apartment at Rue Brea
I collapsed on the sidewalk expired
like a house afire word spread
Man hounded by the press
they sought photos letters post mortems
this incited anger in him
so refused to submit a thing
soon afterwards Life magazine ran a gallery
portraits of me preserved
on paper canvas and film
each titled according to mood
Somber Kiki Gay Kiki Clownish Kiki
Flapper Kiki Demure Kiki Delicate Kiki
animated ongoing work of art
I portrayed myself how I wished
independent undaunted unfettered free
forged an epoch together
with a galaxy of genius types shaping
a century on the move
to share drinks and cigarettes with Cocteau
engage Stein or Matisse at Le Dome
entertain Guggenheim Chanel Modigliani
Picasso and Ernest Hemingway
is to tread the highest ground
for this I'm profoundly grateful
should you ask how I'm able to tell
my story now that I'm deceased

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it's a valid question I'll answer
the best I can you see
I'll never vanish for to this day
books original film footage
and photographs distributed worldwide
speak for and embody my life
a few clicks of computer keys
within seconds anyone can access
a library of information
about those incredible times
virtually jump into bed with Kiki
so I'm pressed to comprehend
in what sense I suffer death
since I'm comfortably at repose
as close to immortality as one gets
on this zany whirling planet
once asked by a cub reporter
what it all amounted to
my response the only thing
I ever really needed
was a slice of fresh bread
and glass of French wine
anyone would offer me that much
thank my lucky stars I'm blessed
because they never failed to give