

## A COMPENDIUM OF PHOTOGRAPHS: L'INCONNUE DE LA SEINE

1. Stock photograph of unidentified death mask, Paris  
Date & source unknown

*facing viewer, direct. light from stage-left creates movement in shadows at eyes, chin;  
illusion of slight head-cock, blush in cheeks. no notes or identifying marks on print.*

These are the first days, when recollection is meaningless –  
when everything is a new lesson; before  
the sidelong glance, before suspicion.

There is so much you still want to believe. Does it  
damage you more to learn  
you are mortal, or not to?

The most primal act  
begins in the face: to face something. Responsibility.  
She turns; she is turned.

The self doesn't have a face – the body does.

2. "L'Inconnue de la Seine" from *Undying Faces: A Collection of Death Masks*  
Ernst Benkard; 1927

*slight remove. distance from lens creates appearance of smallness. light source overhead,  
dim; forehead & nose framed in glare. behind, a clean, unbroken black.*

Now she is named: Unknown of the Seine. It happens here.

L'Inconnue, a stranger. From *connu*— as *cognition*. & its lack.

Dispossessed, even in name; remembered as forgotten.

It's Benkard who coins it – imagining her *feeble shoulders, burned wings*.

Last face in his roll – after Newton, Napoleon, Wagner, Lenin.

*L'Inconnue*; say it like *ingénue* (stock character –  
innocent, wholesome, doe-eyed girl).

*Butterfly at a flame*, he calls her. Then simply, *unknown*.

3. "La Vierge inconnue, du canal de l'Ourcq"

Albert Rudomine; 1927

*sharp light. visible bulb of eye or saw-dust beneath lids. high cheekbones, demure smile.  
proximity creates intimacy; gray shading on lower lip almost suggests color.*

*Anonymous Virgin* is a game of language – sex, yes; also

*Holy Mother Unknown.*

Rudomine knew. Knew light on the body, anyway.

His others, his nudes, always in extremis – lightplay on muscle –  
often without faces (heads turned away,  
shadow obscuring) – the body as itself,  
as movement in space, struggle contained. Never  
a narrative – just object, surface, reflection  
of light. By now she is famous –  
bodiless starlet, a romance. This is the shot they'll remember her for.

4. "Roger & Marcel Lorenzi, Workshop at Rue Racine"  
Lorenzi Moulder Archive; 1960

*two men at worktable; clay splotches, blur of shelves. masks in various states of completion, one not yet cut from block. l'Inconnue in fore, nearly lost in lamplare.*

To be hidden in plain sight. To be exposed. We know  
she's a mask. This is no secret.  
This is *where*. This is *how*. This room, these hands.  
There is nothing behind the fantasy  
& so nothing lost. It only hides the void,  
the nothing, the lack in the viewer.

5. Untitled portrait of Ewa Lazlo, rumored to have been *l'Inconnue*  
photographer unknown; c.1890s?

*pale-skinned woman in elaborate formal dress (feather hat, corsages, parasol). resemblance  
to mask evident. open eyes seem preoccupied. she knows something.*

Fame is also a story we tell ourselves: to be loved  
is to be loved. Hungarian showgirl, some said was the face –  
played Paris, then murdered touring Chile.

Another self that won't answer, won't correct. In London, this year,  
they're staging it; Ewa Lazlo the star, the unknown. Every bit of it, turns out,  
false. Admitted. *Made it all up*. Possibility  
is another romance. So familiar  
as to be nearly unrecognized.

6. Cover sequence: *Aurélien* (novel by Louis Aragon)

Man Ray; 1944

*mask faces mirror, one inch (no more) from own reflection. double image somehow projects agency, intention. appears to be humming or trying to remember something.*

Mirrors are a way to trick a body

that has lost a part of itself – a phantom limb that aches,  
that twitches, that burns. A confusion of the mind:  
you see vacancy, a space you no longer occupy.

You understand this, but memory persists, insists  
it knows where the body ends. It is wrong. So: the mirror.

The mind sees two; the pain recedes.  
Not all illusions are lies; not all lies are empty.

7. Cover sequence: *Aurélien* (novel by Louis Aragon)  
Man Ray; 1944

*eyes. superimposed in narrow band, searching past viewer. concerned, skeptical. black lace veil suggests clothing, body. smile is changed. beginnings of grimace, lip-bite.*

Creation, in most cases, is more rearrangement. At core  
we're still the same cocktail of metals & gases – the human body,  
the coffee-mug, the stars. It's boxer's wisdom  
that you can't hold someone's eye without punching or kissing –  
the two edges of defense; how we learn  
who's in charge. It's not from seeing or being seen, but the electricity –  
the eyes & the eyes & what's created between them.

8. "L'Inconnue de la Seine, 94euro" inventory image  
Lorenzi Moulders; 2012

*white mask hooked to clapboard wall. bright, indoor light. a product for sale. in low-wattage lighting, chin appears fuller; face, younger. caption tells nothing of story.*

One way to understand the cold: absence of heat.

Not a condition; a default. Everything is cold  
until heat intrudes. Which is also to say, nothing.

There are states of rest, irreducible, that would endure  
without contingency (that is, without addition  
of heat, of color, of narrative arc).

To purchase an object is to invite alteration, to pursue it.

On a wall or laid flat on a table,  
she is just plaster, textured to ridges & shape. White is color  
& the absence of color; snow or the hottest stars.

\*Originally appeared in *Best New Poets 2012*