

**STEP-MOTHERS**

The bums are, we have been informed, on their farewell tour of selected cities of the European continent. They have said goodbye to Prague and so long to Vienna. In Madrid, they uttered the same sad farewell they uttered the last time they were banished. There was no reason to bid adieu to Warsaw so they left nakedly. Today we find them in Berlin of all places. In, of all places, the Botanical Gardens.

In the Gardens, the old men have come upon a presentation of pansies, a special display of pansies, thousands of tiny faces, living souls of the dead, their colors intense under indirect artificial light, a violent intensity in the blossoms and in the air itself, as if ghost petals extended limitlessly, superblack extension of the fragile velvety petals, the whole vibrating under a huge hand-painted sign in old High Gothic script:

*STIEFMÜTTERCHEN*

Then something happens.

## STEMMOTHERS/2

Something happens that we can only approximate, that we can only suggest.

It happens like this.

One of the bums suddenly turned to the other, asking if he remembered a visit they made to a botanical garden in another city, years and years ago.

The other bum replied that he did remember that visit. In fact, he remembered clearly that it was a display of easter lilies that attracted their attention then, huge white trumpets, and a smell, almost sickening ...

The first bum closed his eyes and asked the other bum to lead him through the field of **stiefmütterchen**, the delicate glowing banks of **step-mothers**, as they are known to us English speaking folks.

The blind man put out his hand, the other knowing to guide it toward a blossom. The blind man feeling the blossom, the tender stalk, the fragile hardy insistence of the plant.

**Close your eyes too, and feel.** But he needn't have commanded his friend who was himself resting his palm on a cool bed of peat moss.

**My mother had no place for bedding plants in the little courtyard in front of our house, said the blind man, but I'll bet she imagined flowers like these ... strange they are called step-mothers.**

**Why, said the other man, equally absorbed, do I think we had a blind gardener?**

**Everything died with her when she was ... all her beds of flowers, her forsythia, her roses, her tulips, her iris, her gladioli ...**

**Then the first blind man said, we were in Kyoto, remember, trying to find this place we had heard of where you could get a good whole body massage, a delicious massage, better than a fuck, we were in Kyoto, we were the occupying forces, you know, and we were stumbling about the place looking for this special massage parlor, when we entered a part of the city, a restricted zone, a zone of blind folk, all wearing white cotton kimonos, a zone of survivors who had been blinded by the radiation blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a zone of blind people stumbling along trying to make their way through the narrow streets of their ghetto. So many sightless folk in those flowing white cotton kimonos ...**

**Why am I telling you this? We didn't want a massage any more. We went back to the base.**

**Yes, I remember. And soon after that you lost your mother,** said the other bum.

Thus relocated in such a steep absence, the old men opened their eyes, for an instant the light and the bright colors of the pansies made their eyes water, and now they were ready to bid farewell to another city they would probably never see again.