

*Booth*

*Bodice*

*Boudoir*

*Button*

*Comb*

*Couch*

*Drawers*

*Feather*

*Frock*

*Handkerchief*

*Honey*

*Jar*

*Kimono*

*Lips*

*Mirror*

*Mood*

*Perfume*

*Petticoats*

*Pillows*

*Satin*

*Scarf*

*Stockings*

*Towel*

# INTIMATE APPAREL

## A Dictionary of the Senses



Karen Elizabeth Gordon

G · H · I · J · K · L ·

# *Intimate Apparel*

A DICTIONARY OF THE SENSES

*Karen Elizabeth  
Gordon*

Times BOOKS

T · U · V · W · X · Y · Z

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First Edition

*Other Books by*  
KAREN ELIZABETH GORDON

THE TRANSITIVE VAMPIRE

THE WELL-TEMPERED SENTENCE

## Introduction

Ah, nothing in this world we live and dream is only what it seems. Here you have a dictionary that is *really* a story-book without a proper ending—just a provocatively improper one. The stories in this unrectilinear volume do not so much break off as they become attached to one another, while you form attachments to them, and to the characters whose stories they are: the hapless hypochondriac with his faulty kneecap and bar of anodyne soap; Bedruthan with *his* knees knocking in fear at the ocean's frothy edge, and the deadpan, deadly sensuous mermaid he seeks, to return a lost tortoiseshell comb; Yolanta expatriating on the Continent with her *langue maternelle*, her passport—and a bookmark between her legs; a sassy Cinderella, lost in reveries, breaking glasses in the dishwater, and unmasking social form and ceremony in her unabashed dealings with the prince; and many, many others, weaving in and out of each other while the two seamstresses, Elsbeth of the North and Anja of the South, stitch together their tattered tales and scattered lives into a fabrication they can *all* wear at once upon a time. And so can you. Baffled, perhaps, at first, you will find that you are slipping, slowly but silkily, into something more comfortable the further you read, the more familiar you become. Because this is an affectionate book that wants to be held, like any woman within it, and will hold your attention and call it back again to fulfill this most natural desire.

Fabric, fabrication—such is the stuff of these lost chronicles come together here. Swinging their hatboxes, swaying their hips, chapters with torn slips wander in on high heels and blistered feet. A wedding dress is being cut out and sewn by the same two seamstresses who are handstitching all these pieces into place, with time and

meaning layered like the ultimate wedding cake.\* A cloth of many colors unravels, interwoven as it is of the simply real, the fabulously real, and the purely imaginary, and the threads, of various lengths and glis-tenings—well, some are invisible, so a nearsighted *couturière* bent over them has declared. A cloth of ecstatic flannel, narrative handkerchief, and wrinkled linen moods; fur hands, satin of solitude, handled-with-care-lessness glass shoes. Out of a tailor's dummy's muslin epidermis is the flesh made word.

Words themselves are the intimate attire of thoughts and feelings. Here they are turned inside-out to see what's going on beneath the surface of everyday pres-ences, garments, and forms. And if a book can wear a jacket, the notion of a book can be turned inside-out, too—for much of the *story* here is in the notes, and not in the body of the text . . . the very body we find on the final undulation: nude with sunbeam for zipper. Facing things in this manner, we watch estrangements disap-pear. Death, whose name we avoid pronouncing, is just the girl next door.

Like a diaphanous nightgown, language both hides and reveals. There is no way of getting at the naked truth, even if it's wearing the Emperor's New Clothes, or the Empress's New Clothos. We follow our Mother Tongue into her boudoir, anyway, hoping for a glimpse of something never yet beheld—and come face to face with our own reflections in her most private mirror, veiled meanings in a gossamer heap on the floor. And still there are enough words left in the old girl's voice to sing us to sleep once again. "I've got *you* uncovered," she says.

\* There are lots of cakes, being created and consumed, and cookie crumbs on the sheets of the alphabed. In *The Gingerbread Varia-tions*, the cake itself is a consumer of lost little souls, the sweet tooth of childhood zigzagging them through the woods.

# Full House

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# *Closet Drama*

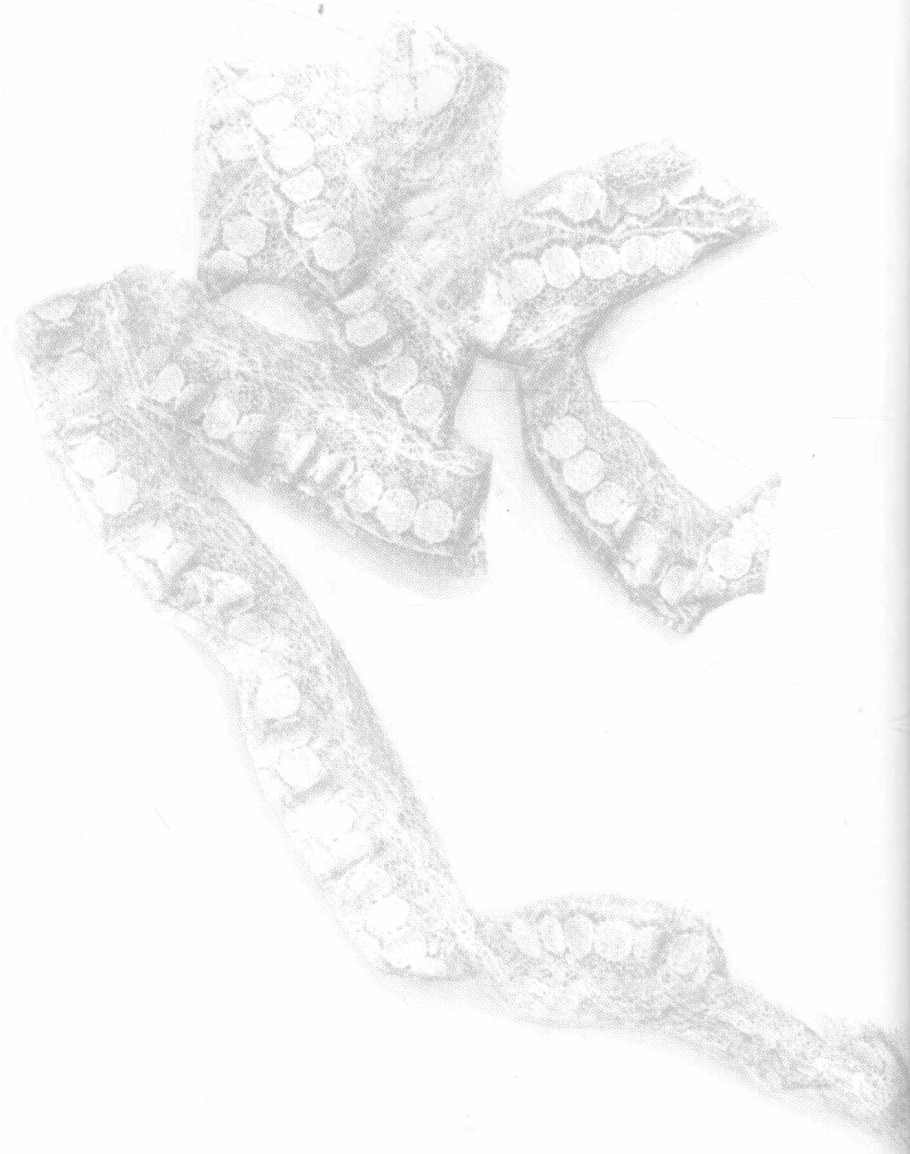
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G · H · I · J · K · L ·

# Full House

T · U · V · W · X · Y · Z



# Absinthe

She drenched him with an absinthe regard.

A B S I N T H E

See DUSK; LIPS.

Well, you don't have to. I'll tell you right now that she proceeded to let out a wild shrill hiccup, and when he kept questioning her about the parchment enwrapping her salmon, and the lost Albanian, she excused herself to the powder room "and galloped off in a chorus of evasive whispers."

But you'll find yourself in their company again soon enough, wondering if dessert will *ever* arrive so he can lean across the table to ask, "Don't you want the rest of your clafouti?" and rend its remains with his fork.

# Act

It was a meaningless act, but we knew its implications.

A C T

*"a meaningless act"*

One of the propositions subjected to philosophic inquiry in *Carnal Knowledge*. "The closeness that comes in handfuls" eludes one's grasp when "the metaphysical stuff gets out of hand."

## Beast

(from *Life in the Forest Sauvage*)

Down the alley slouched a beast  
en route to the Apocalypse.

## B E A S T

Not all that rough a beast, this one. He had shaved that morning, and his swagging carriage made alluring ripples in the silk T-shirt on his back.

## Books

The beautiful bones of Notre Dame crouch and soar in the light flooding stone and I shove myself through the door of Shakespeare and Company to read about Madame de Pompadour's love potions and the many-colored solitudes of Emily Dickinson. A swarthy English-speaking type approaches me, in unctuous wonder first at where we've met before, then why I could possibly like to read, arriving at his own inspired conclusion that "it must be something psychological," with which I can only agree. I ensconce myself in a chair but am soon to be lifted out of this attitude by an invitation to the library above. "I must lie down where all the ladders start in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" points the way up a rough red stairway which is to be crawled, not walked, into a dimly lit affable claustrophobia of old books, ghosts, and somnambulists, big chairs in corners of sunken, slumbering structure, and a bed against one wall, covered in blue velvet and summoning up all the bibliophiles who must have sated their lusts in this room. I lean back and gratify some of my own, in a rapid succession of imaginary lovers who dematerialize after having their way with me and stealing a few books.

## B O O K S

From Yolanta's PARIS column for *Exquisite Corpse*, that first "crossed legs in closed winter" year of exile and uncertainty, adventure and thwarted love. Expatriate translator, writer, and drifter, and Jacob's\* Neoplatonic other, Yolanta is the eventual author of these motley collected works:

*The Scarlet Slippers*

*The Read Letter*

*Maps and Tatters*

*Life in the Forest Sauvage: A Girlhood in Cosmopolis*

*A Crusty Baguette, a Cup of Beaujolais*

*You Darling Manflower: A Bestiary*

*Crossed Legs and Closet Winters*

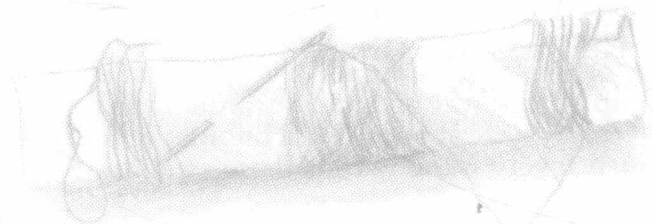
\* Jacob Other: a would-be Renaissance man, but for his lumbo-sacral strain. Three times resisted Yolanta's entreaties that he consult the physician in Baden-Baden so highly recommended by other afflicted characters in this book.

## Boudoir

He followed her into the delphiniums and irises of her private wallpaper and began speaking to her back and her three reflections, all wearing a pout—or a scowl—or was she biting her lip?

## B O U D O I R

See the MUG of reconciliation.





## Bread

A couple of *pains de campagne* (*pas trop cuits*) on her feet, and wrapped in a semblance of sanity she had donned for her matutinal tour of the *quartier*, Yolanta entered the *boulangerie* on the corner and requested a copy of *Manon Lescaut*.

### B R E A D

Jacob Other, visiting Yolanta one afternoon in her *chambre de bonne*, found her popping two battered books into the toaster when he arrived for tea. The incident turned up in his essay (brief, as usual) “Déconfitures et tartines,” which ended, perhaps because of the marmalade on her nightstand, “It all remains to be seen through; she is so good at guesswork she’ll never put clothes on or find a literal meaning on the other side of the bed.”

It was someone else, anyway, eating a toasted page in LIPS.

## Bubbles

(from *The Glass Shoe*)

Dear father,

How you ever came to lay your head among the bosoms of this family is beyond my widest comprehension. I am trying, but my thoughts buckle back each time to the more essential question: how could you leave me here? I am writing to you at the end of my staggering day’s work (yes, I sometimes stagger from exhaustion and hunger, for they feed me but poorly, and leave few crumbs on the white lacquer breakfast trays for me to scrape up on the way to the dishwater and the window that meets my gaze above the hot bubbles in the morning sun—such lovely rainbows on those swelling edges be-