

—after paintings by Remedios Varo

1. Hairy Locomotion (1960)

*Dear Remedios: My husband seems to lack
ambition, motivation, drive to succeed.
Can I help him overcome his lassitude?*

Tell him to grow a beard and moustache.
He'll have to learn to levitate but
only after he's able to use the colored
wax that will stiffen his handlebars.
How else would you expect him to steer?
When the beard is long enough, starched
to support his weight, he'll be so high
above the ground that clouds may begin
forming around his head. It will be your
job to make sure they do nothing more
than cover his bald spot. What could
possibly be worse than having achieved
such heights, only to find that your
vision is blocked by its own eminence?

2. Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst (1961)

*Dear Remedios: My wife recently began
seeing a therapist, and I just don't
understand her anymore. She used to be
so willing to please, but now she never
cooks my breakfast, and rarely supper.
Sex? She refuses all advances, no matter
how tender as if she's ceased to care
whether I'll get a good night's sleep.*

Dear Disgruntled Husband: It seems to me
that you have little comprehension of
the psychoanalytic process. Your wife's
engaged in an intense inwardness of focus,
whose purpose is to help her drop the head
of her father in the nearest well. Next
to that, the three minutes required to
poach an egg, not to mention the nine

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months necessary to hatch one, have taken on new significance. She should be allowed to keep silence, since the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons-in-law even unto the twentieth anniversary. Don't be surprised if a hairbrush and a watch turn out to be the keys to her malaise: the moon in her cares nothing for minutes, and when the tresses are the same color as its face, the mask will fall away: her beauty will be no longer anything you might possess but full self-possession.

3. Creation of the Birds (1958)

Dear Remedios: I'm concerned about the dwindling number of songbirds that visit my back yard in the spring. Scientists think this has something to do with the deforestation of the Amazon, as well as environmental fragmentation in North American suburbs. What can a retired homeowner in Iowa do about this tragedy?

You'll need proper alchemical apparatus. Garden hoses simply won't do although you could perhaps set up a drawing table in the garage, as long as there's a window. The distillery should be no different from the one you'd use for corn squeezings, but you should adjust it to produce pigments from the sound of falling rain. Don your cloak of feathers. Hang a lute around your neck. Tie the brush to its central string, and begin to paint by moonlight. Audubon should be your mentor, as you model wings and downy throats. Then, when you refract moonbeams through the prism mounted as a magnifying glass, every bird you've drawn will emerge from the flat page and fly.

4. Portrait of Andrea and Lorenzo Villaseñor (1957)

Dear Remedios: I once had the dubious honor of baby-sitting the children of a prominent family in Mexico City a boy and a girl with diabolical penchants for mischief. One evening when their parents were out, I received a phone call from my fiancé. After I'd hung up, I was mortified to discover what they'd done to the parlor. Andrea was holding the strings of a kite cut from the drapery. Lorenzo's toy sailboat was floating in a pool pried from the floor tile.

A wind had sprung up, strong enough to support him on the back of the kite, while rain from a tiny cloud filled the boat's miniature sea. Planets and spiral galaxies hovered everywhere I nearly tripped over a pile of shooting stars that lay like marbles on the floor.

How was I to explain to my employers that their children were brujos? I fled and never returned to that ensorcelled household. But I wonder, did I do the parents a disservice by keeping silent?

Dear Mortified in Mexico City: I've visited the house in question, painted a portrait of these demonic siblings. I must say that I found their games delightful. It saddens me to think that soon you too may be a parent unable to observe or enter the gale of your children's imagination as it billows the edges of physics: a mantle of invisibility where every law has its own unheard of, impossible variations.

5. Celestial Pabulum (1958)

*Dear Remedios: I just can't seem to find
the proper formula for my baby daughter,
who cries and cries. Should I try another
brand of milk, a different temperature?*

How I wish that people would sign their
letters *Endless Wit*, not *At Wit's End*.
But then if it were true, I suppose
that no one would need the artist, high
in the tower of her Renaissance, forever
grinding the mill that turns the stars
to baby food. Yes, my dear, your child
too is caged: a crescent moon behind
the body's silver bars and her attention
to duty will wax and wane as yours did,
and still does. Mother's milk won't help,
nor any substitute. We're all crying for
the warmth that never comes, or is never
warm enough. There's nothing to do but
grind whatever comes along into the
soul's food, that celestial pabulum.

6. Harmony (1956)

*Dear Remedios: My husband is a composer
who spends so much time in his workshop
I almost never see him. So few repairs
get done around the house: the floor
tiles have buckled, roots and tissues
are reaching from beneath them to grasp
the feet of unsuspecting visitors. Birds
are nesting in the chairs; paint peels
from the walls. I fear for his sanity,
he spends so much time alone and what
of me, left to do the dishes in silence?*

Only Mozart could write music in the midst
of domestic brouhaha. Any art requires
solitude which is its bliss, its exacting
punishment. And if your husband chooses

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to sleep not by your side but in his studio,
understand it's not because he doesn't love.
He must stare at the peelings on the wall
until they become the tutelary spirits
who help him arrange carnations and shells,
ivy, crystals and carrots, octadecahedrons
like quavers, semiquavers on the five wires
of his musical staff. They'll vibrate, each
according to its amplitude within his heart,
whenever he purses his lips, blows through
the mouthpiece of his trumpet's treble clef.
You mustn't mind the messiness: his drawers
are full to overflowing with tuneful kitsch,
the bric-a-brac of daily life that becomes
unbearable until it sings. You're there too,
the muse he turns his back on. Don't ever
think he's forgotten you. He'll return, but
guiltlessly, as if from the arms of a lover.

7. The Useless Science (1953)

Dear Viewers: I'm tired of hearing how
depressed you are, how often you think
of suicide. You ask me over and over
whether there's some way to deal with
loneliness, divorce, a two-timing beau.
Perhaps you too were born in Spain to
parents who never understood you. Maybe
you fled to France because of Civil War,
surrealism a kind of politics, unpopular,
possibly deadly. How soon until Paris
would be overrun by Nazis and you were
condemned as a spy for recording dreams?
Until an American decided whether you
and your poet-lover were of sufficient
intellectual importance to save? How
many husbands later would you realize
that even in Mexico, where they spoke
your native tongue, you were still Woman
and there were rites of sacrifice both
foreign and familiar, equally intolerable?

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If art is the useless science, whose only
warmth is poverty the floor you've wrapped
around your shoulders like a cloak of tiles
there'd be little comfort in cranking the
winches of your willingness to be here,
trying to distill dejection until it
begins to seem like hope. Bells, flags
in the wind, a funnel for collecting rain,
warning sirens, the crucible of your
private alchemy: you must learn to bottle
the things of this world and the next, to
watch while others pop the caps and drink.