

Soon

Alba Arikha was born and grew up in Paris. She received an MFA from Columbia University, and now lives in London. She has published a novel, *Muse*, and a short-story collection, *Walking on Ice*. Her previous book, *Major/Minor*, a memoir about growing up in Paris in the 1980s, was shortlisted for the Spears awards and selected among the ‘Best Books of 2012’ by *The New Yorker*. She is also a singer/songwriter, and has recorded a CD of her songs, *Dans les rues de Paris*.

Praise for *Major/Minor*:

‘This is a fiercely honest and compelling account of what it is to grow up in an artistic household, and of the joys and miseries involved in the forging of an independent spirit.’

– John Banville

‘An unusually affecting book about the rage and rebellion of a stormy adolescence . . . I read it straight through, unable to stop.’ – Paul Auster

‘The ability to let prose ease into poetry, as Arikha does here, is rare.’ – Natasha Lehrer, *Times Literary Supplement*

‘Evoked with tactile sensitivity and poetic flair, Alba Arikha’s childhood is also freighted by history . . . Memoir here becomes the sister to the best rite of passage fiction.’

– Lisa Appignanesi

also by Alba Arikha

FICTION

Muse

Walking on Ice

MEMOIR

Major / Minor

Alba Arikha

Soon

Ceditions

An edited version of *Soon* was performed as an opera,
with music by Tom Smail, at the Riverside Studios, London,
in August 2013.

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For Tom

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Stained

I wish my brother were dead. That's what I wish
the woman said to her husband, a short man with round
glasses and a pale face that kept turning towards the train
window
when she wasn't speaking.
She said it again, DEAD, do you hear, DEAD would be
better than what he's putting us through now.
The man shook his head sadly and slowly
just to show her that he had heard
as if that still mattered
so many years of trying to understand
why
when
how
or maybe he knew
that it was no longer about understanding
but accepting that nothing
was the same
she was stained
like a piece of clothing
only recognisable by certain traits
once loved
now where?
Too tired to search
but still sometimes
only sometimes
he thought he had found her again
so for those sometimes
he stayed

though most of him was gone
lonely but she didn't know
didn't see
a drained man with no colour
no drive
no self left
his own fault for being so weak someone had said
a friend once
no longer.
He wanted to be still but she wouldn't let him
because she needed to be heard
always
and needed to speak
always
and needed to be loved
always
in case she found herself alone
never
except at night when she slept after drinking
too many glasses of wine
from a bottle of Bordeaux she would leave on the wooden
kitchen table
the one they had bought in France many summers ago
in an antique shop in the Loire valley
when things were still fresh between them
and everything about her was new
her eyes
the smell of her hair
her lips
the way her voice became raspy when she laughed.

I looked at the husband
at his face
at the way she spoke to him

and stuck her long vermilion nails out
like hooks
and how he recoiled
shoulders hunched
head lowered
as she hissed
again
about the brother and his mental disorder
about her husband and how he just sat there
about things I couldn't hear
words spinning inside her painted lips
like a wheel.
Then she smiled
gently
as if nothing had happened
as if everything was normal
she smiled and sipped on a cup of tea then
STOP
the train screeched
suddenly
an hour outside of Paris
pale yellow flatlands and raindrops falling
tentatively on the window
facing a forgotten road
and a forlorn building
with rusty balconies
and walls grey
like dry clay.
Everything was quiet now
as she was
looking at a French book then raising
her eyes
seeing me seeing her
seeing inside her

inside the husband
she now despised though
after all those years
she couldn't remember
why.

Ten years one day

Train brought to a standstill as
a man's voice comes onto the loudspeaker –
We apologise for this technical problem, we're dealing
with it and will keep you updated.
Updated.
Hours maybe
or minutes
possibly
stuck here on the train
with the couple
both reading now
each holding a thick book
whose title is hidden by their fingers.
'Arrête!'
A child cries out
no one seems to look up
but me
as another child answers back and they bicker in French
while their mother stands up and
starts to pace and speak too loudly on her mobile phone
which has been ringing continuously
'Tu comprends Mathilde, cette salope'
You understand Mathilde, that bitch
she says
while her children continue to bicker
no matter that their mother curses in front of them
she often does that
they will say if pressed
for details.