

After Reading Marie Bashkirtseff at 21

November 10, 2008, 9:29 am

By [Gina Barreca](#)



(I came across the diary of 19th-century feminist artist and writer Marie Bashkirtseff when I was living in England in 1978; her life terrified and enthralled me in equal measures. I wrote this in my notebook 30 years ago today.)

The canvas, big as a door,
absorbs the Paris morning light.
Pencil sketches made in the rain
lie overturned. White paints rub
into your hair, red oils stain
your fingers; you move in sudden
gestures and broad strokes, murmuring
to yourself: "Paint more quickly."
As a child writing in the night
you recorded premonitions: three
candles lit in a room, a sparrow
caught in the greenhouse,
flying against the glass. You
feared your death
as shopkeepers
fear thieves.
Yet darker words written
by an older hand say that

magic and signs
have little power.
Tragedies do not happen, Marie,
because mirrors break;
mirrors break
because tragedies
will happen.
You were thankful, you wrote,
for the warning.
Brush and pen
like the hands of
a clock,
you worked against the days.

www.ginabarreca.com

FONTHILL PRESS gratefully acknowledges Gina Barreca for permission to reproduce her poem

