

Black Swans

Stories

Eve Babitz

**With an Introduction
by Stephanie Danler**

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Black Swans

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Introduction

Nobody Got On with Their Life

Eve Babitz was born in 1943 into authentic Los Angeles stock, if there is a such a thing. Here in L.A., we don't confer authenticity through lineage, titles, or deeds. Instead it comes from the adoption of the aesthetics, of this unstable slice of coastline, and the Babitzes did that with aplomb. No one has mythologized the Babitz family better than Eve herself, but here are the takeaways of an impossibly idyllic childhood: Her parents were artists, her father an accomplished composer who worked for 20th Century Fox, her mother a painter. Together they seemed to be the gracious sum of bohemianism, intellectualism, and a heavy dose of glamour. Eve's godfather was Igor Stravinsky, and she was fostered at picnics and dinner parties that included the Stravinskys, Charlie Chaplin, Paulette Goddard, Greta Garbo, Bertrand Russell, and the Huxleys. The list goes on—the most popular way to introduce Eve Babitz is to list the famous and infamous who

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frequented her childhood home and then, as she grew up, who frequented her bed. Before the Eve Renaissance began in 2012, she was largely an art and music groupie footnote—the sometimes lover of Jim Morrison and Ed Ruscha.

Typical, I think, that a woman whose entire life was a defense against being a “daughter of the wasteland” should have been reduced to notches on her bedpost. What I would have given at sixteen years old to come across Eve: a reader of Proust and Henry James; a brilliant observationist and satirist, a “beach-going blonde,” as she describes herself; serious about writing but also serious about parties, dresses, love affairs, and gossip; the chronicler of nuanced and volatile Los Angeles weather, a woman who loved the jacarandas, the smog, the ratty old restaurants like Port’s, Dan Tana’s, Taix, the sudden desert chill of evening. To find Eve Babitz at sixteen would have meant I wasn’t alone.

I didn’t find her. I read Didion rapaciously, but she felt so sturdily, harshly Northern, not an Angeleno like myself (I didn’t visit San Francisco until my thirties and still haven’t been to Sacramento). The men—Bukowski, Fante, West—baroque and leaden to me. I longed for mentors, guideposts that would let me become something more than the beach-going Southern Californian I seemed to be at sixteen. Instead I blamed the climate for lack of vision, disavowed the wasteland between the Santa Monica and San Gabriel Mountains, and left California.

People nowadays get upset at the idea of being in love with a city, especially Los Angeles. People think you should be in love with other people or your work or

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justice. I've been in love with people and ideas in several cities and learned that the lovers I've loved and the ideas I've embraced depended on where I was, how cold it was, and what I had to do to be able to stand it.

It's true, isn't it, that most of the decisions we make, how we define our values, needs, aspirations, are mostly a function of place? It's true of my life, the cities I've chased, captured, and had to leave. Sixteen years and many cold climates later, I moved back to Los Angeles. I was a stranger and a native. I had no idea the names of the freeways, where they went, how they intersected—I had left before I could drive, and insider status in Los Angeles is almost entirely connoted through knowledge of navigation and shortcuts. But I knew the weather, “the rainy, overcast L.A. . . . ripe for watercolors,” and the “hot-hot . . . like Calcutta laced with nasty damp.”

The New York Review of Books and Counterpoint were rereleasing Eve Babitz's books and people around me were shocked that I didn't know about her. I came upon her uneasily—it was her ease that frightened me. While Eve operates in a noble tradition of social satirists and diarists (the influence of Zola, Balzac, and her beloved Proust can be felt everywhere, and at her sensuous best Babitz is a spiritual twin with Colette), her stories often felt like unfinished sketches. Observations never coalescing into an investigation, with each piece skirt-ing any moral footing from first sentence to last. Reading her felt like disloyalty to my own path: I had gone east! Studied the canon, i.e., read all the men! I had discipline, a punishing, Protestant work ethic, and writing was a hard life built

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upon heavy sacrifices. And hadn't I learned—over painful decades—to take myself seriously?

“Artists in Los Angeles just don't have that burning eagerness people expect. And they're just not *serious*.” Babitz's amused, coquettish, raconteur-ing prose seemed a revolution to everything I had taught myself about art and suffering. It seemed that writing (and fucking, and eating, and drug-taking, and driving, even parking) was supposed to be fun? I'm always amazed at how books find us at the time we need them, as if there's some omniscient, benevolent librarian in the sky. The time was right for Eve: I had a sliver of confidence about my own writing. I had enough distance from the careless girl of my own teens and twenties. And I had tumbled back to California after difficult years in New York. “Fun” was the medicine. I ate her up with nothing short of delight. She, in turn, gave me back my jacarandas, Santa Anas, the cement riverbanks, and collapsing canyons. She created a city for me that felt endlessly fertile, vibrating with tectonic friction, electricity.

BLACK SWANS IS the collection where Eve Babitz's acid-soaked, languid Los Angeles and my salt-air, strip-mall childhood finally overlapped: the 1980s and '90s.

I woke up the morning of April 30, 1992, thrilled because my sister and I didn't have to go to school. My mother—a court clerk at the Compton Courthouse in South Central—wouldn't be going to work. “Oh, the riots,” I said to my younger sister, full of nine-year-old authority. My aunt and uncle were well-known district attorneys, my stepfather a prominent and unscrupulous private defender. The Rodney King trial was dinner

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conversation, as were all those epic televised trials of the '90s—to this day I still feel personally involved. But April 30 was not a day of reflection or fear. It was a day I spent making Shirley Temples. I trolled the neighborhood on my bike for fallen avocados and climbed into trees for lemons. I made bowls of mashed avocado with Worcestershire, and we ate them with a box of Triscuits in front of the television. We were kept out of school for the entire week. My mother wanted us close. It was paradise, but then, no one was surprised. Didn't we all migrate here to assuage our conscience with avocados and sunshine?

Eve woke up on April 29, 1992, preparing to meet an old friend and potential lover at the Château Marmont, where she could reflect on the years that passed between her wild twenties in the 1960s and the homogenization of the 1980s. Maybe this is most perfectly illustrated by the Château Marmont itself, crummy and hot without air-conditioning in the 1970s—"the rooms in those days were unfashionably sad enough to commit suicide in"—but now in the late '80s refurbished by its new owner André Balazs, who "replaced all of the shower heads, installed new refrigerators, and even ventured into the brave new world of room service." The Château had cleaned up its act. So did our girl, and no one seems more surprised than Eve to be in her forties.

In comes Renzo, a fellow writer, who "emerged from the slow elevator looking more like New York City than you or I could dream of in our philosophies." Eve takes him on a tour of her city, to a spectacular house in the Hollywood Hills where she recounts the story of Kate and Zack Gregson, golden children of Los Angeles turned cautionary tales, the trajectory of so many of the women Eve writes about. Kate's

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house—a mansion really, one of those shining Xanadus typical to the city—is abandoned, swimming pool sucked dry. Eve says to Renzo, as they listen to the Rodney King verdict being read on the radio, “It’s so hard to believe that once there was a time . . . back in the early seventies when I thought we’d actually won. I mean, I thought our side was so right, we could never lose again.”

Black Swans is Eve Babitz’s last collection, published originally in 1993, and it had been ten years since her last book, *L.A. Woman*, came out in 1982. For Eve, the world has changed, and *Black Swans* seems to be about our failure to recapture our youth, in all its frivolity and certainty and wakefulness. Eve and Renzo go back to the Château, and as we’ve seen Eve do in her many other books, she disappears into a love affair. Here’s Eve (at her best) recounting her sex binge at a time when she thought the Château (and the city) had lost its ability to enchant and entrap her:

What I remembered most afterward besides Renzo’s incredible body and his magical stamina was the sultry smell of burning, which I thought was us, and the silence that seemed, after a while, to be us too, which I thought was because I’d gone deaf from it all, except we talked so much, I couldn’t have been really deaf . . . Sometimes we’d talk for what seemed like days and then we’d start kissing, and things would lapse into that parallel universe you can only find in a place where they leave you alone and you’re not home. Every now and then we’d shove fistfuls of cherries or mangoes into each other’s mouths before passing

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out and then wake up still in dreams, with that velvet smoke throughout everything.

Classic Eve: heedless, living for the holy, corporeal present tense. I can only imagine that it made her an incredible lover, that commitment to pleasure and the body. Of course, the reader knows the smoke is not atmosphere pumped in by the art department. It's the smoke of the riots—sixty-six people killed, thousands injured—and the silence she believes to be a poetic fixture is an enforced curfew by the National Guard that ground Los Angeles to a halt. Eve realizes that her city has been burning: “For a moment, watching this on TV, I thought maybe it was my fault, and I said, ‘Maybe if I’d been home, none of this would have happened!’”

There are half a dozen moments in *Black Swans* that feel disturbing in hindsight (Eve’s lack of political consciousness is hard to read in 2018 and no doubt contributed to the general opinion that she was a “light” writer), yet those moments also feel human. The reason this thoroughly entertaining episode recounted in “Expensive Regrets” (is there anyone better at titles than the queen of shrugged-off aphorisms?) is successful is not through a righteous epiphany on the part of the characters. Any Eve reader knows they’ve come to the wrong place if they want judgment on the recklessly self-absorbed antics of the city’s denizens. But the story Eve tells Renzo, the one of the ruined house, the abandoned principles, shows us that Eve knows exactly what she’s doing. Describing a party at Kate and Zack’s house: “Everyone felt safe and protected: no police ever found their way there, and no one boring ever stayed for long.”

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Renzo playfully reminds her that the riots aren't personal. But in a way, they are. The Eve of *Black Swans* has the weight of the years and the voice of history within her. She knows that she and her entire generation have failed the idealism of the sixties. And doesn't that mean that our detractors back east were right? That our tans and our worship of exercise have made us shortsighted, with only enough bandwidth to chase temporary pleasures and fixes? Aren't our droughts and disasters proof we have no sense of responsibility to the years and generations to come?

You'll have to forgive us. We're a young city. The energy of *Black Swans* is similar to an adult looking back on a self-absorbed, cloudless childhood and not knowing whether to cringe and disown it or to celebrate it. That child is Eve who lit up Hollywood in the 1960s and '70s with her Sunset Strip exploits, maintaining a Peter Pan lightness on her feet. What we find in her later work is a woman who grew up—alongside a city that becomes harder and harder to glorify.

In her story "Weird August," she sums it up in her characteristic breezy, only gently self-aware style, one that always veers towards scathing and then retreats coyly, with a wink and tilted smile:

The thing about me and my friends, though, is that we are the types who are such gluttons for narcissistic fantasies (being, most of us, born with that kind of charismatic shimmer that attracts a lot of what we used to call "fun," before fun became in poor taste) that we began our lives knowing that sinking into gracious old age, being happy about grandchildren, planning

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family dinners, being proud we put children through college or had children not in jail—these are not the things we meant by “life” when we started. I mean, they may have happened, but not on purpose.

I don't think anyone has written about the freefall of youth as well as Babitz—the power of its taut skin and amoral beauty, the freedom from consequences and the future. And yet life goes on for all of us, and I think *Black Swans* finds our girl trying to make sense of the choices she's made and what her city has become. Impressively, it's still a land of ex-lovers, potential lovers, dance partners. Middle-aged Eve hasn't compromised her intensity as portrayed in her quest to learn the tango: “In most civilizations, it's considered a tragedy for people to become obsessed with each other to the exclusion of ‘more important things’—i.e., art, great deeds, etc. But with tango, obsession is nakedly celebrated . . . Nobody ‘got on with their life’ in *Tango Argentina*.”

Eve is still fighting back against those that would tell her how to write, what to write about, and how to spend her days. But there's a tension throughout *Black Swans*, and it comes from the miracle of aging. The pieces are strung through with nostalgia, harsh pronouncements on new-construction shopping malls, and perhaps even harsher anecdotes about friends who sold out, married up, and, the greatest sin of all, left Los Angeles. Yet, though air has been let out of the bubble, it hasn't burst. Eve is now well acquainted with loss, the hallmark of adulthood. She loses loved ones to AIDS (especially poignant in “Free Tibet”), to overdoses, to the East Coast and Midwest. The 1980s and '90s find her in rehab, a fervent converter to twelve-step programs,

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calisthenics, and a vegetarian diet (her appetite was legendary). When she quips at the opening of the book, “It’s only temporary: you either die or get better,” she qualifies it with the parenthetical “something we used to say about life in general, feeling sophisticated and amusing in bars, back in the days when we thought how you behaved was the fault of other people.” Yes, it was all temporary. Compare that with Eve of her twenties as captured in *Eve’s Hollywood*: “Who says you have to mature? I don’t want to get old and die. I want to die . . . I don’t believe in facing pain unless it’s the kind you like.” It turns out that pain doesn’t care what you like or your beliefs. And death and getting better aren’t the only options—there’s a third, far less attractive one, which is simply getting old.

That strange mixture that’s always been a major part of Hollywood—self-enchancement mingled with the ever-present fear of total disaster (earthquakes, fires, random murders)—lies beneath the physical reality of Hollywood, which sometimes looks too good to be true . . . The idea of middle age—never mind old age, God forbid one hundred years!—is the violent opposite of everything Hollywood is based upon, which, as anyone can see, is and has always been beauty . . . beauty without a whisper of fading, sagging, or wrinkling, although real girls do age, of course, no matter how self-enchanted they are. And age is a disaster.

Age is a disaster. What’s a beach-going blonde to do with a currency that felt inexhaustible, only to realize that it does

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little but decrease over time? That blonde writes. Eve wrote. Here's Eve, on the verge of recounting a hilarious and dark, speed- and LSD-enhanced love affair gone awry in the brilliant title piece "Black Swans":

Recently someone asked me when was the last time I was in a serious relationship, when I thought I might get married, and I said, "Oh, 1971. Before I got published and knew I was home free."

Yes, Eve, that's what it feels like to be back in Los Angeles, maybe as one of the "shimmering charismatics," writing, publishing, eating, dancing, driving, and obsessed with finding parking: Home. Free.

Stephanie Danler
January 2018