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ANNE HÉBERT'S LES CHAMBRES DE BOIS:
A TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

by

Kathy Mezei

**A thesis submitted to the Faculty
of Graduate Studies in partial
fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts**

Institute of Canadian Studies

Carleton University

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September 23, 1971

The undersigned recommend to the
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of the thesis
"Anne Hébert's Les Chambres de Bois:
A Translation and Interpretation"
submitted by Kathy Mezei, B.A., in
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for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a translation and interpretation of Anne Hébert's novel Les Chambres de bois. In the first part, the Introduction, an attempt is made to stand back and survey the novel objectively. We begin with some general observations about the novel. We then continue with a discussion of Les Chambres de bois in the context of Anne Hébert's writing, relating this novel to her other works and seeing how it fits into her development as a writer. From there, we proceed to a more complex analysis of the novel through an examination of themes, the metaphor of land and season, structure and language. The final section on language is presented from a translator's viewpoint and describes some of the problems I encountered in the course of this translation.

The second part contains the translation of the novel. And this translation, to put it as simply as possible, is an endeavour to relate the story Anne Hébert would have written had her native tongue been English.

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FOREWORD

All art is translation: the translation of the artist's perceptions and experience into a more universally comprehensive form, the form of words or music or sculpture.

What then is the task of the translator of literature from one language to another? Is it not to render that piece of literature even more universal by exposing it to another culture, another language? And what is the process of translation? Anne Hébert describes this process with great sensitivity:

Je crois qu'au début il y a une très grande générosité poétique qui se pose comme condition première et essentielle. Avant même que le traducteur ait pensé en sa propre langue les mots du poème, déjà en lui un accord secret s'est fait. Une sorte de voix intérieure d'avant la parole traduit le poème au fond du coeur en l'éprouvant à mesure comme une vie de surcroît. De cette communion peut seule naître une oeuvre digne de la poésie.¹

For anyone concerned with literature, translation takes you back to its naked essence: the word. For literature is, of course, composed of words. Words are taken for granted, they are the instruments of our expression. But now, when printed words, printing, the linear message are supposedly being threatened, when many writers and critics are retreating, with great articulateness, into a despairing silence, a close relationship with the basis of literature

¹Anne Hébert à Frank Scott in Anne Hébert et Frank Scott, Dialogue sur la traduction (Montréal: HMH, 1970), p. 48.

is a welcome occupation.

For, in this way, one becomes acutely aware of the fragility, the ambivalence, the beauty of words. And it is not just words, ideas, a plot, a characterization that the translator is trying to transpose, but the feeling, the sensibilité of another writer, another culture. Behind a poem or novel of Anne Hébert hovers not only the presence of the poet but also the heritage that is Québec. Of all this the translator is conscious. And if he is conscientious, each and every word is an agony because of the infinite possibilities of which, he feels, only one is possible.

For a writer, especially a poet, translating is one of the finest apprenticeships he can undergo, as Eliot, Pound and Robert Lowell have proven: he is immersed into the essence and technique of language as he is in no other way, except, of course, when he creates his own poem.

Translating a novel is quite different from translating a poem. But the time-worn problem exists regardless: do we translate literally, word by word, or do we interpret and recreate? Fidelity or freedom? Meaning or spirit? Dryden's metaphrase, paraphrase or imitation? That is for each individual translator to decide, tempered by the nature of the work. I find Anne Hébert's poetry and prose are best translated as literally as possible.

A poem is a very tight, intense unit and the translator must form another tight, intense unit in the other language. A novel is perhaps less demanding; whether the

sentence in French becomes four sentences in English is of little importance. But the expanse of words that comprises a novel does not excuse or hide an awkward phrase or an incorrect word.

One gets under the skin of a writer, so to speak, and one is not quite sure why, why that author, why those poems, why that novel. But there is something in the work of Anne Hébert that I find demands to be translated because in translating I understand, I become part of it; I am expressing in my words, the essence of the novel or poem. I have participated. In this sense, I am never that involved in a poem or novel in English.

My main concern here is not the personality nor biography of Anne Hébert; the woman who lives in Paris must remain an enigma to me. But the Anne Hébert moving in the poems, in the novels is a living, breathing, vital person. I have a vision of a wide, generous smile, pensive eyes and a toss of hair. My own image. A young, fragile, intense girl, disturbed, haunted, tormented; a woman, realizing late in life the fire and beauty of love, and watching, at a window, the rain trickling down the pane, pensive and sad, yet wise with the wonder and joy of creation.

And I am drawn into that world she creates through the delicate mastery and sincerity of her writing.

INTRODUCTION

When, through the process of translation, one has become closely involved with a work of literature, examined each phrase, agonized over each word, pondered the multiple implications of every sentence, warily approached the order of sentences, the tense of verbs, the significance of the punctuation, it is, all of a sudden, difficult to step back and discuss the work objectively. For, in translating a novel one becomes infused with the life that courses through its pages: Michel's tormented face, Catherine's capable hands, the black, bleak city of blast furnaces, the sunny, sparkling seashore and all the characters, their surroundings, the tone and pace of the novel merge with one's own consciousness.

Words, words that expand into characters, into fine and poignant images, into strange and profound emotions, pulse through one's being with a peculiar familiarity. And, of course, as it has often been pointed out, translation is, itself, a form of criticism, perhaps the highest form, for it requires, not only a deep understanding of the work, but also an ability to recreate and therefore, to express and interpret this comprehension. Northrop Frye comments on this in his introduction to the Dialogue sur la traduction of Anne Hébert and Frank Scott: "We see that a translation, when thorough enough, may be a critical elucidation of its original as well as a translation".¹

¹Northrop Frye, Foreword, ibid., pp. 13-14.

Thus, in analysing the novel, one is thrust into a different realm of "criticism" than in transposing it from one language to another. In translating, my understanding of Les Chambres de bois was intuitive, a response to a certain language and milieu created by Anne Hébert, a response developed and deepened over a long and intimate association with the work. However, it can be an interesting and rewarding process to try to examine and articulate that which was felt but not yet expressed.

Thus, I think it important to begin by standing back and observing the novel in its entirety and by discussing certain general impressions and responses. Next, I shall discuss Les Chambres de bois in the context of Anne Hébert's writing, relating this novel to her other works and seeing how it fits into her development as a writer. From there, I shall proceed to an examination of themes, the metaphor of land and season, images, structure and language.

I

AN OVERVIEW

Les Chambres de bois was published in 1958. It follows two volumes of poetry, Les Songes en équilibre (1942), and Le Tombeau des rois (1953), and a volume of short stories, collected under the title of Le Torrent (1950). It is Anne Hébert's first novel. Since then, she has brought out another

volume of poetry, Poèmes (1960), comprised of Le Tombeau des rois and Mystère de la parole, a collection of her plays, Le Temps sauvage (1967), and a novel, Kamouraska (1970).

Some of her later poems are printed in René Lacôte's critical study,² and have been published in various periodicals.

In Les Chambres de bois, Anne Hébert tells a simple story with few characters, little action, an uncomplicated plot. Her language is sparse and precise, dépouillé. Time and space are anonymous, and are, in fact, internalized; the real time and space of the novel exist within the characters, within their dreams, within the confined world created by Michel and Lia in their chambres de bois.

We begin "au pays de Catherine, une ville de hauts fourneaux,"³ which suggests to me, northern Québec, the childhood home of Anne Hébert.⁴ Part Two is set in Michel's apartment in Paris and Part Three on the Mediterranean coast. Neither the fiery, black city nor the seashore's exact location are pinpointed by the author -- her descriptions are sparing and emotive, never specific or effusive: "une ville

²René Lacôte, Anne Hébert (Paris: Seghers, 1969).

³Les Chambres de bois (Paris: Seuil, 1958), p. 27. All quotations from Les Chambres de bois are from this edition; henceforth, wherever practical, all quotations from Anne Hébert's works will be acknowledged in parentheses at the end of the quotation. A number alone will refer to Les Chambres de bois; page numbers from other works will be preceded by a title. Also, all quotations from Les Chambres de bois are taken from the French version, partly to facilitate comparisons with her other work, and partly because most critical texts are in French.

⁴Sainte-Catherine de Fossambault.

de hauts fourneaux flambant sur le ciel, jour et nuit, comme de noirs palais d'Apocalypse" (p. 27) or "tout alentour s'étendait le vaste espace solitaire planté d'oliviers, s'étagant jusqu'à la mer" (p. 147).

Time is denoted by the passing of seasons -- "il y eut un été si chaud et si noir" (pp. 27-28); "un hiver vint qui fut très froid" (p. 35) -- and the fall and break of day, but again vaguely, indifferently. This is the only measure of time: we are not given the ages of Michel or Lia or Catherine or told how many winters or springs pass. This creates an impression, firstly, of universality, a tale of and for all times, and secondly, of the insignificance of external time or space. In the Proustian sense, time (and space) is revealed as perceived by the mind of the character, through his memory and his own particular brand of consciousness. In Part Two, time is experienced internally, within Michel and Catherine and Lia's minds as they attempt to "instituer contre les saisons une espèce de temps à eux, immobile, antérieur" (p. 102).

The tale unfolds in three parts. The chapters are short: a series of episodes consisting of gripping images depicting faces and landscapes; minimal dialogue and description; and abrupt gestures rather than action or events. It becomes evident that much of Anne Hébert's meaning exists in the spaces between the lines, between the chapters, in the sharply etched images, in the few but pointed words of dialogue, in the rare but significant gestures. It requires a

Careful exploration of underlying themes and images to reveal the novel's true richness and complexity.

The tone of this novel, its symbolic language, its deceptive simplicity, its timeless, spaceless quality, its paradoxical concrete abstractness are reminiscent of a fable. It is a story of a journey through death and stagnation into life, the affirmation of life, and the struggle of life against the forces of darkness, death and evil.

Several factors combine to create this aura of dream or nightmare, this sense of fable, this quality of timelessness, this apprehension of mystery and evil lurking behind the unsaid words. There is, for example, the peculiar nature of the relationship between the protagonists in the novel, with its emphasis on childhood, on the strong attachment between brother and sister. Indeed, this tale of children locked in their childhood, of a brother and sister held together by strange bonds, this slightly gothic atmosphere of dark and forbidding forests with eerie, ancestral mansions, of oppressive, degenerate families are themes common to Québec literature, as for example, in the writings of Marie-Claire Blais, Réjean Ducharme, Claire Martin. Moreover, the theme of brother and sister with its slight taint of incest recalls novels such as Les Enfants terribles of Jean Cocteau and the mysterious, gothic stories of Edgar Allan Poe, The Fall of the House of Usher, and Henry James, The Turn of the Screw. In The Fall of the House of Usher,⁵ in a crumbling mansion, hidden

⁵Lacôte, p. 33, mentions that Anne Hébert has read Edgar Allan Poe.

in the woods, Roderick, a haunted man dwells in isolation with his sister. Like Michel and Lia, these siblings are musicians and artists. Roderick, similar to Catherine, suffers acutely from his senses, from sounds, smells, touch. Poe, too, evokes a death-in-life atmosphere, but he goes even further than Anne Hébert, for the sister, Madeleine, is literally buried alive in the house. Michel and Lia are certainly "buried" in les chambres de bois, but their death is spiritual not physical. It is Catherine who approaches a physical death and this turns out to be her salvation.

Anne Hébert continually evokes the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of the Bible. It is the Apocalypse that forms part of the simile in the opening sentence of the novel, creating a sense of impending doom. Catherine brings rice and white fish to Michel and Lia as they sit in the apartment as if bringing offerings to the dead. Lia imagines herself in the role of Mary, and Catherine, as Martha (p. 119), implying Michel to be a type of Christ. It is the images of bread, donkeys, olive trees that recall biblical parables and help to foster that sense of universality, of timelessness, of parable that Anne Hébert seems to be seeking.

Notwithstanding that Anne Hébert is a poet, there is, a poetic quality about this novel. It lies partly in the fact that it is the image that is the core of the work -- from the images, not the characters or dialogue stem the ideas, the

sensations that Anne Hébert wishes to suggest, and partly in the language and style that possess the same precise, poignant quality of her poetry.

In her Ars poetica, Poésie, solitude rompue, she explains:

La poésie colore les êtres, les objets, les paysages, les sensations, d'une espèce de clarté nouvelle particulière, qui est celle même de l'émotion du poète. Elle transplante la réalité dans une autre terre vivante qui est le coeur du poète, et cela devient une autre réalité, aussi vraie que la première. La vérité qui était éparse dans le monde prend un visage net et précis, celui d'une incarnation singulière. (Poèmes, p. 68)

One can see how in Les Chambres de bois, the wing of poetry has swept over the vision that Anne Hébert wished to project. It is not merely the language that is poetic in its concreteness, in its symbolism, in its beauty, but also the vision of the author and the manner in which this vision is presented. "La poésie d'un roman tient [. . .] dans la manière d'être du personnage en face de l'univers et dans le langage qu'il emploie pour exprimer sa vision de la réalité."⁶ Open at any page and the lines fall before you with the rhythm of poetry:

Catherine était bouleversée par la passion malheureuse de Lia. Il lui semblait que l'air même dans l'ombre de la jeune femme devenait plus vif et fouettait le coeur. Tout l'appartement se mettait à vivre au rythme tumultueux de la peine de Lia, de la colère de Lia, des larmes de Lia, des souvenirs de la chair brûlée de Lia. (p. 107)

It could be claimed that any failure that we perceive

⁶Réjean Robidoux et André Renaud, Le Roman canadien-français du vingtième siècle (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1966), p. 173.

in this novel may be due to the author's poetic stance. The language and style of her poetry, precise and dépouillé as it is, may not entirely suit the context of prose. In an interview in Le Devoir, the author admits this:

-Dans votre premier roman, les "Chambres de bois" vous sembles moins à l'aise.

-Si je peux juger moi-même, c'était trop immobile. C'était l'histoire de personnages immobiles, enfermés. Tandis que dans "Kamouraska", il y a quand même plus de mouvement. C'est plus vivant. C'était figé les "Chambres de bois" trop près du langage du poème. La poésie peut être présente, mais d'une autre façon. Je crois que les phrases y étaient un peu trop fermées sur elles-mêmes.

-Elles ne renvoyaient pas aux personnages?

-Elles enfermaient les personnages dans le langage.⁷

Réjean Robidoux and André Renaud, in their discussion of "le roman-poème d'aujourd'hui", point out that the difference between a poem and novel is one of intensity and duration: "Le roman se présente au contraire comme une stylisation de la durée. A ce titre, il ne peut ni ne doit, comme le genre poétique, reléguer au silence tout le continu moins dense qui s'étale entre les instants d'intensité absolue. En dernière analyse et par analogie, la durée est donc au romancier ce que l'instant est au poète."⁸

It is here where Anne Hébert walks the tightrope between poetry and prose, for prose should flow like a stream, whereas poetry falls drop by drop, each drop perfect

⁷Gisèle Tremblay, "Kamouraska ou la fureur de vivre", Le Devoir (12 juin, 1971), p. 13.

⁸Robidoux et Renaud, op. cit., p. 172.

and complete. When the novel falters it is due to a certain awkwardness, as the author herself points out, an awkwardness that filters through the language, affects the form and style, and consequently pervades the novel.

This problem of style arouses our curiosity about the other writings of Anne Hébert and about the stage of her writing to which this novel belongs.

II

THE CONTEXT OF LES CHAMBRES DE BOIS

A clear and dramatic development occurs in Anne Hébert's work, a development that can be traced from her earliest poems, Les Songes en équilibre, through to her latest novel, Kamouraska, the poems in Mystère de la parole and her most recent poems, still as yet uncollected. Moreover this development is reflected in microcosm in both the poem, "Le Tombeau des rois", and in Les Chambres de bois. In fact, a very close affinity exists between the volume of poetry Le Tombeau des rois and Les Chambres de bois:

Il y a, entre Le Tombeau des rois et Les Chambres de bois, plusieurs rapprochements, même anecdotiques, qu'il nous paraît important de relever. La thématique du roman est précisément celle des poèmes: le langage symbolique des Chambres de bois fait écho à celui du recueil; enfin, la technique structurale du roman est éclairée par le lien secret qui joint les uns aux autres les poèmes.⁹

⁹Ibid., p. 174.

In Les Songes en équilibre, the young poet explores the external world, composing a type of inventory about what she sees and feels; she is discovering the world;

Laissez-moi mes yeux!
Laissez mes yeux
Courir sur le monde
Comme la couleur sur la mer
("Tableau de grève", Songes,
p. 49)

It is a world clouded with songes which represent a way of interpreting and dealing with the reality that begins to close in on her. The basic emotions here are a combination of joy and melancholy.

Le Tombeau des rois carries us into a world where the poet has some experience in the Blakean sense. Here and in Les Chambres de bois and in the short stories, the poet explores the inner world to the limits of anguish and death; she descends into herself, into hell, into les chambres fermées towards the realm of death, confronts death and either emerges victorious like the falcon in "Le Tombeau des rois", "les prunelles crevées", like Catherine into the arms of Bruno, or succumbs to the raging river and death like François in Le Torrent.

Then, with Mystère de la parole and Kamouraska, the poet bursts into a vigorous, joyful affirmation of life and of the poetic word, an acceptance of the self and the world, a delight in passion with all its accompanying sorrows and ecstasies:

Que celui qui a reçu fonction de la parole vous
prenne en charge comme un coeur ténébreux de sur-
croît, et n'ait de cesse que soient justifiés les

vivants et les morts en un seul chant parmi l'aube
et les herbes.¹⁰

Not only is the poet's vision altered, but also her style and language. In Le Torrent and Les Songes en équilibre the language is personal, subjective, effusive like the rush of the torrent, a little undisciplined, but already revealing the precise, cutting images so characteristic of Anne Hébert. In Le Tombeau des rois and Les Chambres de bois, the image is more concise, the language sparse, controlled, even more dépouillé. The experience is still subjective but has been assimilated and carefully moulded into the form and structure. The language is as clear and limpid as a deep pool, though in the case of the novel, it appears stilted and enclosed.

In Mystère de la parole and later poems, "Le jour qui fut", "Pluie", "Fin du monde",¹¹ and in Kamouraska, there is a mature, sophisticated control of language and form. Here we find a richness -- not the undisciplined effusions of adolescence, nor the awkward, too deliberate exactitude of an author seeking a style, but the richness of a maturity of expression and vision. The lines of Mystère de la parole roll on, long, expansive, over-flowing; the sentences in Kamouraska are short but energetic, comprising the abrupt thoughts of a harassed woman; both works abound with a wealth of emotion and imagery not found in Chambres

¹⁰"Mystère de la parole", Poèmes, p. 75.

¹¹See Lacôte, pp. 151-152, 155-156, 163-164.

or Le Tombeau des rois.

We move from a poetry of silence and immobility, through le tombeau des rois and les chambres de bois towards a poésie de la parole and movement, from Les Chambres de bois which says little to Kamouraska which tells all.

We, then, discover that the movement within Chambres is similar to that within the poem, "Le Tombeau des rois": descent into the tomb or room (self), confrontation with death and, finally, a mutilated but promising affirmation of life. It must not be forgotten that this "rebirth" of Catherine in Part Three is not without drawbacks, for Bruno never takes on a strong or vital character and we are left with some doubts as to whether Catherine will not fall passive victim to just another man's desires, different though they may be from Michel's. Similarly, the child who emerges from the tomb, in the poem, does so with "les prunelles crevées".

Critics¹² have commented that Part Three is not as effective or powerful as the other sections. Until the appearance of Mystère de la parole and Kamouraska, one could justify this by claiming that Anne Hébert was more adept at somberly portraying the black depths of the inner self, the morbid approach of death, the caverns of silence than at describing a joyful, affirmative experience. But the exuberance of her later writing denies this. However, it may

¹²Lacôte, p. 72; Jean LeMoyné, "Hors les chambres d'enfance", Présence de la critique, ed. par Gilles Marcotte (Montréal: HMH, 1966), p. 42.

be that the author failed to match the new tone, the new direction the novel assumes in the final part. Her language does not expand with the vigour and vitality of the different experience and atmosphere. The form does not correspond to the content and the sparse, concise imagery of Anne Hébert's earlier style does not happily reflect the wider vision she tries to express.

"Le Tombeau des rois" closes with the child's awareness of "les reflets de l'aube" but there is no description of the actual experience of an affirmation of life, of living in the dawn; we stop short with the affirmation itself, with the perception of the rising sun, whereas in Chambres, Anne Hébert attempts to portray the consequences of this affirmation, the gradual possession of the self, of the earth and of love.

Les Chambres de bois can be seen as drawing together the themes and images of Le Tombeau des rois and becomes a culminative prose expression of the poetic concerns of that volume. It almost seems as if Anne Hébert found it necessary to repeat, in prose, once again, that process she ceaselessly explores in the poetry of Le Tombeau des rois.

III

THEMES

There is basically one theme that permeates the whole of this novel, as well as most of the poems in Le Tombeau des

rois, the short stories and the plays. Anne Hébert continually recreates "l'expression littéraire d'une incapacité de vivre".¹³ Man confronted by the bleakness, the harshness, the despair of his existence, appalled by the spectre of death ("Une petite morte/s'est couchée en travers de la porte"),¹⁴ recoils from life, from the fact of death, retreats into himself, into la chambre fermée: "Nous nous forçons de vivre à l'intérieur".¹⁵ Here he experiences a type of living death, ("Nous menons une vie si minuscule et tranquille"),¹⁶ dwelling in the past, in some lost and fantastic childhood, locked in silence. He either remains there like Michel in this "Chambre fermée/Coffre clair où s'enroule mon enfance/Comme un collier désenfilé",¹⁷ or rebels violently, fatally like François in Le Torrent. The other alternative chosen by Catherine, by Isabelle, Lucie, Sébastien (Le Temps sauvage), by the child in "Le Tombeau des rois", is to escape to a more open and satisfying life. It is only in Mystère de la parole that the "poet" accepting the earth in all its beauty and horror can partake in a genuine rebirth or incarnation.

This movement of descent into the self, symbolized

¹³Pierre Pagé, Anne Hébert (Montreal: Fides, 1965), p. 36, in reference to Le Torrent.

¹⁴"Une Petite Morte", Poèmes, p. 47.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁷"Le Chambres de bois", Poèmes, p. 42.

by the chambres de bois, the tombs of kings, the long night, in order to explore and confront the limits of death and silence, to struggle through fever, against "la main sèche qui cherche le coeur pour le rompre" (Poèmes, p. 61), and of re-emergence into the light of dawn, constantly recurs in the poems, stories and novels.

Some poems are concerned with the "inventory" of les chambres de bois, others with articulating the despair of being locked in one's childhood, in silence, in the past, in "ce doux ravin de gel/en guise de memoire", cut off from the world: "C'est ici l'envers du monde/ Qui donc nous a chassés de ce côté?".¹⁸ It is really only in the final poem, "Le Tombeau des rois", that we are shown the actual process of descent, struggle, and emergence into the light. As mentioned above, it is with the novel, that all the aspects of this theme are gathered together in one final clarification.

From where comes this desperate, yet matter-of-fact statement of François, so typical of Anne Hébert's characters: "Je ne gardais de la vraie connaissance qui est expérience et possession" (Le Torrent, p. 23)? Why is he, like Michel and Lia, "un enfant dépossédé du monde" (p. 9)? Why does Michel insist upon un refus de la vie, du réel? What is Michel's strange attraction for death? And, above all, why is the main response to this despair a refuge into the dream, the chamber, the château, the night or the barren

¹⁸"L'Envers du monde", Poèmes, p. 53.

wilderness? What is this absence that envelops the characters like a cloak of anguish: this absence without, which is the rejection of the forces of life, this absence within, which is symbolic of an incapacity to love: "Je me pendrai/ A la place de son coeur absent" ("La Pille maigre", Poèmes, p. 33). Only during that one hour between day and night is Michel "sauvé de toute absence et de toute crainte" (p. 70), is Michel capable of caressing his wife.

Claudine, François' mother in Le Torrent, lives in the forest with her son, isolated and embittered. By depriving herself and her child of any human warmth, she hopes to compensate for bearing an illegitimate child.

Agnès, in Le Temps sauvage, equally embittered, attempts to isolate her family in the mountains. By living in seclusion she aspires to avoid the pain that life inflicts, the pain she once suffered when she lost her fiancé to her sister.

Michel and Lia, bound by strange loyalties, tainted forever by the arrogance, pride and depravity of an aristocratic but decaying family for whom affection does not exist, only indolence, ostentation and cruelty, shut themselves up in les chambres de bois in a futile existence of half-read books, unfinished paintings, and childhood memories.

It is Agnès in Le Temps sauvage who articulates the nature of this barren existence: "La plus grande réussite de ce monde, ce serait de demeurer parfaitement secret, à

tous et à soi-même, sans âge ni raison, ni responsabilité, une espèce de temps sauvage, hors du temps et de la conscience" (Le Temps sauvage, pp. 48-49). The inner self becomes a kind of locked cabinet, containing dark and mysterious secrets. Is not this long, monotonous season, unmarked by age or reason or responsibilities, a kind of wild time beyond time and consciousness, the very goal of Michel? This is precisely what Catherine rebels against when she begs Michel for the house keys, for permission to go to the market. She wants to assume some responsibility for her own life.

This feeling of exile that Anne Hébert is continually expressing in one form or another has its seeds (in the terms of reference provided by her writing) in the alienating experience of family life, of a deprived or lonely childhood, a morbid past; in the harsh, unrelenting land and climate, seeds which fall on fertile ground in the sensitive, neurotic, passive natures of Anne Hébert's protagonists. Moreover, Anne Hébert's preoccupation with this "absence au réel", this "refus du présent",¹⁹ can be traced to the kind of Catholicism prevalent in Québec with its Jansenist orientation:

Tout notre passé est inscrit dans cette séduction de l'absence et tout notre présent est au travail dans cette inexorable métamorphose de l'oeuvre, dans ce voyage souterrain vers la lumière, vers la possession et l'accomplissement [. . .] la présence n'est acquise qu'à travers une absence vécue jusqu'à l'absurde. Il y a toute la nuit à traverser pour retrouver l'aube et tout l'irréel à arpenter avant d'accéder de nouveau à

¹⁹ Albert Le Grand, Anne Hébert: de l'exil au royaume (Montréal: Presses de Université de Montréal, 1967), pp. 30, 27.

une géographie de l'homme. Les diverses modalités d'une absence habitée par la tentation de la mort donnent à l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert sa dimension tragique.²⁰

But it is not the reason behind this attitude, this mode of existence that concerns Anne Hébert as much as the portrayal of this state of being. This, then, leads us to the other themes which form an intricate part of the "incapacité de vivre" (see above p. 15). These are the themes of childhood, the past, dreams, death, solitude and silence, enclosed space (and time) and finally, the inability to love.

Exploring the world of childhood is, once again, a theme common to Québec writers of this century. In Anne Hébert's earlier works one is always conscious of small children or high-strung adolescents; it is only in Mystère de la parole and Kamouraska that a mature, passionate woman emerges. Certainly Michel and Lia never seem to enter the adult world and Catherine is only beginning to act like a woman by the end of the novel.

Neither Michel nor Catherine had childhoods. Michel's life was too lonely, sickly and alienated; Catherine was forced at an early age into a responsible role of managing a household. Her only recourse to the world of a child was through dreams, dreams of châteaux set deep in the woods. In Paris, Michel and Catherine attempt to recreate a childhood. They play at being children by living in seclusion, playing games, dressing up, shying away from responsibilities and

²⁰Ibid., p. 27.

finally, by retreating into childish fantasies:

Dans le grand dénuement où Catherine se trouvait, Michel crut qu'elle n'avait rien de mieux à faire que de céder à la plus haute rêverie qui courait après elle depuis son enfance. Il se mit à raconter [. . .]. (p. 90)

Indeed it is this common experience of a deprived childhood that forms the main bond between Michel and Catherine: "Nous sommes blessés tous deux d'une même blessure", cries Michel to his wife (p. 151).

Upon Lia's return, Michel and Lia enter into their own private world which excludes Catherine: "le frère établit une sorte de campement baroque auquel il convia sa soeur" (p. 129). Michel reminisces about the huge kitchen with its blazing fire. Lia protests for her memories of that place are not childhood memories but those she shared with her lover: "J'ai d'autres souvenirs très précis en cette grande cuisine [. . .] j'évoque d'autres patines, d'autres pigments et je redeviens avide et chaude" (p. 137). But when Catherine visits the brother and sister for the final time, Michel seems to be succeeding in drawing Lia into this world: "Nous jeûnons et nous prions ensemble. Un jour, je le crois, elle redeviendra pure comme ses os. Nous referons le pacte d'enfance et nul n'aura accès jusqu'à nous" (p. 189).

The past, too, is both refuge and bitter experience, and, for our characters, the past is their childhood. Beyond that, lurks the mysterious, familial history of both Michel and Catherine which is never revealed to us, only obliquely,

elusively hinted at. The parents remain shadowy figures.

Only the time of present action seems real to us -- the world of Catherine, Michel and Lia that is immediately before us. The past, and all the characters, who are not involved in the action of the moment become vague and blurred, blending into the fog and rain and the shadows of the forest. At the same time, the present never seems real to Michel or Lia, and only becomes vital to Catherine when she is by the seaside. This retreat into the past provides refuge from the anguish of the present, the terror of the future.

For the reader, the past remains a misty haze. The technique employed by Anne Hébert, by which information is divulged bit by bit at various points throughout the novel -- as, for example, Aline's confessions on her death bed -- can be an effective means of filling in the background. But in this novel, such revelations do not really clarify the past. Either Anne Hébert yet lacks the skill to accomplish this -- for in Kamouraska this technique works beautifully: Elizabeth's entire past is gradually revealed through her fragmented dreams -- or she was intending to evoke, in this way, an aura of mystery.

For Michel, the past is a bittersweet experience. He reminisces nostalgically about the warm, huge kitchen, yet rebuffs Catherine when she recalls their first meeting for it reminds him of his past.

The past is experienced through memory, "ce doux ravin de gel", and it soon becomes difficult to distinguish between memory and dream. Catherine's memory of her encounter with

Michel that rainy, foggy day in the country merges with her dream of "la maison des seigneurs [. . .] posée au creux d'une boule de verre" (p. 33). Finally, reality and illusion are confused:

Un pays de brume et de forêt se levait en Catherine.
Elle y retrouvait un seigneur hautain, en bottes
de chasse, une fille noire, affilée comme une épine,
tandis qu'un petit garçon effrayé s'illuminait
soudain et prenait taille d'homme (p. 40).

This brings us then to the theme of dreams. Both in the poetry and the novels les songes provide a refuge from the world, dropping a gentle veil over reality. They lift the poet into another realm, another reality where safe from the exigencies of daily life, she can dwell in her imagination, giving vent to her particular perception of the universe around her.

Catherine's dreams, for it is her dream world we most frequently enter, provide another perspective within the novel, still another method of conveying illusion and reality, the interior and exterior worlds.

In Part One, Catherine, intrigued and captivated by the image of a château, is caught in a fairy tale childhood dream. The mystery and evil that lurk there permeate her dreams in the guise of fog and rain. Her whole encounter and relationship with Michel seems unreal to her. She confides her fears to Anita: "Tante Anita, j'ai peur que tout cela ne soit un rêve et que Michel ne m'épouse jamais" (p. 49).

But in Part Two, when Catherine is already dwelling in an illusory world -- the world created by Michel -- her dreams take on a realistic, earthy quality. She dreams of the château bursting into flames and of a glowing splinter that burns at her wrist for some time before it expires. Instead of the infant Michel longs for, when Catherine stares in her mirror, she sees the images of her sisters, the sights and smells of their home. In her delirium, she recalls Michel's desire to drown her and she awakes, fighting for her life.

In Part Three, however, there are no dreams, for Catherine is immersed in the reality so intensely surrounding her -- the sights and smells of the seaside, the young man, Bruno. The last line of the novel is Catherine's revelatory comment upon her life with Michel, a life imprisoned by impotent dreams: "'Une toute petite bague pour le songe', Michel, rien qu'une tout petite bague" (p. 190).

Two faces of death are revealed in the novel. There is the death-in-life experienced by Michel and Lia within their chambres de bois and about which Catherine comments: "C'est une petite mort, Michel, ce n'est qu'une toute petite mort" (p. 88).

This moribund existence finally drives Catherine to her death-bed. Her encounter with death parallels the experience in "Le Tombeau des rois", when the girl descends into the tomb of kings. Michel is so fascinated by the death

hovering over Catherine which represents the actualization of his own inner death -- his absence -- that, like Narcissus, he leans over this mirror reflection of the state of his own soul. Michel delights in the aesthetic aspects of death -- other people's deaths. Driven by his artistic soul, he is eager to paint Catherine's death mask. Catherine is aware of this proclivity of Michel as she imagines his reaction to Aline's death, "un instant ranimé par le grandeur de la nouvelle, flairant l'amère poésie de la mort comme une proie, puis se retirant tout de suite, éprouvant sa propre invisible douleur réveillée" (p. 180).

Catherine's resurrection, like Christ's, implies a new order, a new shape of things to come, though the fruits of her rebirth are selfish and personal. Only Catherine benefits. The horror of death can be conquered only by an affirmation of life -- Catherine possesses this gift, Lia and Michel do not. In fact, Catherine's practical and productive gifts -- cleaning, cooking, sewing, are set in contrast to Michel and Lia's artistic but impotent gifts -- painting, music. It may seem strange that an artist praises the value of practical gifts over creative ones, but Anne Hébert, as evident in Mystère de la parole, proclaims the importance of une possession de la terre. This joyful possession is necessary for true and fruitful creativity. In her poem "Naissance du pain" (Poèmes, p. 76), through powerful and moving images she compares the composition of a poem to the baking of bread.

The inbred, neurotic efforts of a dying race do not

produce vital art. As Lia points out, "Mon pauvre Michel, nous sommes sans pouvoir, aucun, vois, tu ne sais même pas faire du feu" (p. 127). It requires Catherine, with her "mains pleines de pouvoir" (p. 83) to start the fire.

So the spiritual death and stagnation of Michel and Lia are also representative of an artistic demise and stagnation. It is for this reason that Anne Hébert explains that in "Le Tombeau des rois", she went as far as she could in the exploration of the self and death: the next step would have been silence:

C'est qui je suis allée le plus loin possible dans un certain sens; le plus loin possible vers la mort, si vous voulez. Avec le poème qui s'appelle le Tombeau des rois, je ne pouvais plus aller plus loin ou après c'était vraiment le silence. Alors, j'ai fait un poème sur le pain.²¹

Instead she turned towards the dawn, towards an enriched image, an expanded and vigorous poetic word.

A corollary of this state of exile -- from life, from society, is solitude, and silence. Both Catherine's father and uncle are men in such states of exile; her father withdrew into solitude after his wife's death, the uncle aspires to the muteness of a stone wall. Though Michel, Catherine and Lia live together, there is no real communication between them, and each is absorbed in his own private and anguished world. Words become weapons which Michel and Lia fling at

²¹ Le Devoir (12 juin, 1971).

each other. But silence is still harder to bear, and Catherine cries out: "Dis quelque chose, Michel [. . .] le tic-tac de l'horloge va prendre encore toute la place" (p. 79).

Anne Hébert is very successful throughout the novel, in creating this atmosphere of deathly silence which is the ultimate manifestation of a barren, secluded existence. "Il y eut tant de silence cette année-là qu'on entendait exister les choses fortement autour de soi" (p. 35). The silence of the outer world continually echoes the desperate inner silence.

Surely Anne Hébert's most intriguing image stems from her various renderings of enclosed space. The title of the novel, Les Chambres de bois, is vital proof of that. The enclosed space, be it tomb or château, is symbolic of a soul closed in upon itself, of a stultified inner existence, of a neurotic self-obsession. Many of the poems in Le Tombeau des rois develop around this image and it is interesting to note, at this point, some of the correspondences between these poems and the novel.

In "Vieille Image", it becomes necessary to burn the château, relic of childhood days; the château described here reminds us of the home of Michel and Lia: "Ce mirage de château/A la droite/De notre enfance" (Poèmes, p. 31).

In "Un Mur à peine", the poet is drained of life, is enclosed in a walled garden because of the "liens durs/Que j'ai noués/En je ne sais quelle nuit secrète/Avec la mort!"

(Poèmes, p. 37).

The voice of "La Chambre fermée" could well be that of Catherine, crying out, "Qui donc m'a conduite ici?". She describes this "chambre fermée" where she is placed like a sacrificial Christ, arms spreadeagled, her heart cut from her breast. The last verse foreshadows the novel:

Laisse, laisse le feu teindre
La chambre de reflets
Et mûrir et ton coeur et ta chair;
Tristes époux tranchés et perdus.
(Poèmes, p. 41)

Do not "tristes époux tranchés et perdus" inhabit les chambres de bois, and is not Catherine set to "ripen" into a beautiful playmate for Michel within those rooms?

The poem entitled "La Chambre de bois" is closely linked to the novel, and, again, the voice emerging from the poem could be Catherine's. The inhabitant dwells there, imprisoned with her anguished senses while life surges at her window: "La place du monde flambe comme une forge/L'angoisse me fait de l'ombre/Je suis nue et toute noire sous un arbre amer" (Poèmes, p. 43).

The poem "Vie de château" describes a life that has a clear affiliation with the life led by Michel and Catherine. I quote it in full:

C'est un château d'ancêtres
Sans table ni feu
Ni poussière ni tapis.

L'enchantement pervers de ces lieux
Est tout dans ses miroirs polis.

La seule occupation possible ici
Consiste à se mirer jour et nuit.

Jette ton image aux fontaines dures
Ta plus dure image sans ombre ni couleur.

Vois, ces glaces sont profondes
Commes des armoires
Toujours quelque mort y habite sous le tain
Et couvre aussitôt ton reflet
Se colle à toi comme une algue

S'ajuste à toi, mince et nu,
Et simule l'amour en un lent frisson amer.
(Poèmes, p. 54)

Here we find the same spartan inventory of furniture as in the novel. There is the futile preoccupation of gazing in the mirror at oneself, that is, delving into one's inner self. As the novel illustrates, the hazard of this preoccupation is that "Toujours quelque mort y habite sous le tain". The "dead man" who feigns love in a slow, bitter shudder bears a strong resemblance to "l'étrange amour de Michel".

In "Le Tombeau des rois" we find that the enclosed space has narrowed from a château to a chamber to become, finally, a tomb, the resting place of corpses, the space that encloses death.

In Les Chambres de bois, we move from the seigneurial mansion, "trapue aux fenêtres longues et étroites" (p. 30), from Catherine's home where her recluse father "parût apaisé au coeur de sa maison bien close" (p. 51) into les chambres de bois, "ces deux seules pièces lambrissées de bois, aux meubles anciens, aux bibelots rares, aux objets usuels incommodes ou abîmés" (p. 81).

As if this tiny apartment were not small enough, Michel constructs "une petite maison de paille", composed of his narrow iron cot and his piano, so that he can retire even

further into his solitude.

He then proceeds to fashion another tiny camping ground, "au coin du feu, en cet espace réduit" for himself and Lia, where "des verres, des livres, des cigarettes, des cendriers débordants de mégots s'entassèrent sur le tapis et marquèrent les places de Michel et Lia" (p. 129). Their life is now encompassed by this "espace réduit". Excluded from all this, Catherine has found her own space: "Catherine s'enfermait volontiers dans le petit cabinet de toilette qui était tout en glaces" (p. 77). She amuses herself with "La seule occupation possible ici/Consiste à se mirer jour et nuit". But when she leaves the chambres de bois to recuperate at the seaside, the space opens up, the land spreads towards the sea, the windows of her bedroom look out over gardens, over the sea and much of her time is spent in the open air. In this way, Anne Hébert attempts to create a feeling of freedom and release.

It is interesting to note that in Mystère de la parole, the image of rooms or houses expands into cities, these, with their brimming, bustling life become the key image; we pass out from the cloistered rooms to mingle in the life of the city.

If we pause for a moment and reflect upon these prevalent themes and images, we realize that this obsession with closed rooms, memories, dreams, the past, solitude, is really an obsession with enclosed time and space. By existing in a tiny space, where little happens, Michel hopes to make time

stand still. For him, real time exists in the bittersweet years of his childhood, real space in the faraway family home. Both are beyond his reach, especially when Lia sells the estate to her lover.

Lia has sought to expand her experience of time and space, her memories are not just childhood fantasies but memories of her lover; she has visited far and distant lands; she attempts to present a piano concert. But when her experience of love grows bitter, when her concert is a failure, like a wounded animal, she seeks shelter in the comfort of the arid existence created by her brother. By attempting to make time stand still, by further and further narrowing their space of habitation, Michel and Lia hope to avoid pain by avoiding experience. And enclosed time becomes a metaphor of enclosed space and vice versa. In a small apartment with the curtains drawn, one can barely distinguish night and day, mark the passing of the seasons.

However, the result of this desperate retreat from the motion and flow and dimension that constitute the forces of life is a withdrawal into the self. Then, time is perceived in terms of memory, as an ever-present past. Feeding upon oneself, in this way, becomes a destructive and sadistic act. The time and space that Michel inhabits is that of his own inner self. But what a barren, frozen, tormented place that is! Its main quality being that of absence what a desperate existence he has sentenced himself to! And so, the cluttered and gloomy apartment is merely the metaphor of his own close and unhappy soul.

To prevent external time and space from encroaching upon him, Michel insists upon living in the dark; he does his work by night and sleeps during the day, frantically avoiding the sunlight. "Il ne faut pas réveiller Michel, le jour l'irrite et le blesse; moins il en a, plus il vit", Lia informs Catherine (p. 96).

Catherine attempts to share this constricted world of Michel. But the memories of the past that haunt Michel are not real to her and she is stifled in the tiny apartment: "Moi, j'ai toujours aimé le jour et l'été" (p. 97). She wants to run barefoot in the puddles -- to feel the earth pulsing beneath her feet. She, unlike Michel and Lia, does not possess the deep and mysterious resources of the self that subsume any desire to dwell in the present, to experience the flow of life around them. She is, in many ways, a superficial person, a passive person; yet the profoundness of Michel and Lia, tormented as they are, does not seem particularly enviable.

Closely allied to this incapacity to live, is the inability to love. Here is another theme that permeates Québec literature. Anne Hébert's earlier works are markedly devoid of any emotion. She examines her surroundings, the terrain of the inner self with precision and abstraction, almost impersonally. Like a curious child, she dissects her body, her soul; for this reason, Bessette has called her

poetry, "une poésie de la dislocation".²² He also points out that there is no great emotion exhibited in Songes en équilibre, Le Tombeau des rois, or Les Chambres de bois, only a "surprise mystifiée",²³ the "surprise mystifiée" of a child calmly surveying the results of his handiwork.

In stark contrast, Mystère de la parole sings of love and passion, of the joy and despair that the giving of oneself involves. Kamouraska is a tale of emotions so intense that they culminate in murder. Elizabeth is not afraid to plunge her soul and body into the depths of experience, not afraid to suffer the bitter consequences. She is fertile, vibrant, bearing numerous children, outliving two husbands; she is as fruitful and enduring as the earth itself: "Posséder cette femme. Posséder la terre" (Kamouraska, p. 129).

But Chambres is barren of any such love or passion. The inability of Michel and Lia to love, to give of themselves, reflects their inability to participate in life. Catherine's love for Michel falls on infertile ground; her union with Bruno rises not from any deep love, but rather from needs and circumstances that draw them together.

Michel turns to Catherine out of loneliness and desperation, betrayed by Lia's liaison with her lover. He cannot express any deep feeling for his wife: his physical impotence is a manifestation of his emotional debility, "Catherine, c'est

²²Gérard Bessette, "La Dislocation dans la poésie d' Anne Hébert", Une littérature en ébullition (Montréal: Éditions du Jour, 1968), pp. 13-23.

²³Ibid., p. 20.

affreux, je ne t'aime pas [. . .] et pourtant j'ai envie de toi" (pp. 82-83). The expression of his feeling for her resembles the experience of "Vie de château" where "quelque mort [. . .] simule l'amour en un lent frisson amer". He fears the warmth and sensuality of her body because he cannot respond: "Tu es chaude, Catherine, si chaude et douce" (p. 75). He wants to mould Catherine into a fine, delicate playmate who will share his fantasies. When she breaks the news to him that she is leaving him for another man, he is even incapable of jealousy; his chief concern is that he will not be left all alone. His attachment to his sister is a peculiar and perverse one, born out of their mutual and unhappy childhood, and sealed in a pact of loyalty. When Lia went off with her lover, Michel reciprocated by marrying Catherine, but his greatest desire is to be reunited with Lia.

Lia, like her brother, is quite incapable of loving. She becomes involved in a desperate and destructive affair with a man who eventually leaves her. When Lia, after a long silence, breaks down and relates the story of her love, it becomes a tale of humiliation and the man, a callous, grasping, Don Juan figure who abandons her "comme un vieux pain noir qu'on rejette après l'avoir rompu" (p. 125). Lia becomes a bitter and broken figure dwelling in her own tormented memories, until finally, she resumes the strange relationship with her brother.

Catherine, raised in an atmosphere where silence and coldness prevail, is informed that it is her duty to marry. Deprived of any warmth or excitement in her marriage with

Michel, Catherine eagerly absorbs Lia's tale of passion, longing to experience, herself, such violent emotions. Instead she gives herself to Bruno, to a love untainted by mystery or fantasy, to a love firmly bound to the earth.

It is Aline's experience at the hands of the seigneur, Michel's father, that exemplifies the chilling cruelty that haunts all the manifestations of love in this novel: "Le premier seigneur m'a prise à treize ans [. . .] toutes les nuits, il m'éveille et me prend. La maison est profonde comme un coffre; nul ne sait ce qui s'y passe" (p. 175).

Love is either an act of desperation or violence, tragically resolved, or at best, a calm and sensible agreement between two people. These relationships are sketchily portrayed, they erupt quickly, and no other alternative seems feasible. In other words, they are not developed realistically. But this tends to enhance the fable-like quality of the novel. Anne Ébert does not intend to delve into the psychology of her characters, their lives or emotions; she wishes to suggest a certain state of being, evoke a certain mood. We are in the realm of stark charcoal sketches, not rich oil paintings.

IV

THE METAPHOR OF LAND AND SEASON

In this country, the contours of the land and the extremes of climate are so imminent that they have become deeply imbedded in our consciousness, our imagination, our literature. Man is constantly defining his relationship with the nature that surrounds him. He sees his passions, his fate reflected in the passage of the seasons, in the curve of the terrain. This acute consciousness of physical environment constitutes one of the key motifs in Canadian literature and the artist continually returns to the landscape to define himself and to clarify and express his existence:

La terre que nous habitons depuis trois cents ans est terre du Nord et terre d'Amérique; nous lui appartenons biologiquement comme la flore et la faune. Le climat et le paysage nous ont façonnés aussi bien que toutes les contingences historiques, culturelles, religieuses, et linguistiques. Cette terre dont nous sommes la matière vivante, parmi les villes et les forêts, les champs et l'eau, cette terre quotidienne et sensible qui est nôtre, la voyons-nous vraiment et prenons-nous conscience de notre être enraciné dans un lieu particulier du monde, avec toutes ses contradictions essentielles?²⁴

Albert Le Grand comments on the correspondence between the inner and outer landscapes: "Cet appel à une plus grande conscience s'enracine dans une géographie intérieure de l'oeuvre que recouvrent la nuit et le silence, et rejoint un

²⁴Anne Hébert, Le Devoir, supplément littéraire (22 octobre, 1970).

pays -- le sien, le nôtre -- qu'elle veut arracher à son exil intérieur."²⁵

For Anne Hébert, as for many Québec poets, the landscape becomes a metaphor of the inner landscape, the terrain of the heart. The countryside is a metaphor of the human condition. The land, the seasons, the days and nights entwine themselves into the thematic patterns of the novel.

But it is important, at this point, to recognize the nature of Anne Hébert's metaphors. It is not a question of diving into nature as a source for comparisons or similes. Fingers are not like branches but are branches:

Branches des dix doigts
Petits arbres d'ossements
("Nos Mains au jardin",
Poèmes, p. 49)

Hers is not a romantic conception or rendering of nature. Instead, as she has remarked, nature forms an intricate part of her being, and she, equally, is integrated into its being. The passing of the seasons, the fall of rain, affects and complements the entire tone of the novel, the very souls of the protagonists, reflecting their capacity to love and to act.

The opening lines of the novel, "C'était au pays de Catherine", clearly illustrate this. With this effective phrase, we are drawn not only into Catherine's physical environment but also into her spiritual and social environment.

²⁵Le Grand, op. cit., p. 9.

In the first part of the novel where the harsh, bleak existence of the industrial town is described, we pass through the seasons with the monotonous, indifferent pace of those who have long grown as accustomed to the vagaries of seasons as to the sterility and pain of their lives. The summer is hot and black, as fiery and black as the blast furnaces, as hard and unrelenting as their lives: "sous l'abondance d'un pain aussi dur, des femmes se plaignaient doucement contre la face noire des hommes au désir avide" (p. 28). The winter is bitterly cold and the snow locks the families deeper into silence and solitude. The extremes of climate seem to reflect the states of the characters' souls.

In contrast, the mysterious and shadowy seigneurial home of Michel and Lia with its strange vie de château is shrouded in fog and rain, "un paysage noyé de pluie et de brume". And appropriately, Catherine's first encounter with Michel is "sous la pluie", the falling rain sympathetically mingling with the unhappy boy's tears.

In the second part, because Michel and Catherine and Lia exist in a state of deliberate exile from life, nature loses its dramatic quality, its potency, its imminence. An alienated man is also alienated from nature. It is a damp land, and the passage of seasons and the days are glimpsed only through windows. Even the winter merely "drizzles" down upon the city. Catherine longs to feel the earth beneath her feet, "Je veux courir à perdre haleine, pieds nus dans les flaques" (p. 73). Her only contact with the earth and

weather is through her windows. She hears the rain pattering on the panes, and flings them open, "pour saisir au passage n'importe quelle odeur sur terre qui ne fût pas maudite" (p. 130). Like a flower deprived of light and water, she fades and fails in the cloistered rooms. For, as she explains to Bruno "elle avait constamment besoin de sentir la terre exister auprès d'elle et par elle" (pp. 180-181).

In the final part, Anne Hébert makes a concerted effort to celebrate Catherine's recovery and re-emergence into the stream of life, through an explosion of colours and smells, through descriptions of the seashore, the gardens, the winds that sweep off the sea. We emerge from the dark apartment, blinking, into the sunshine. Catherine delights in the sun streaking through her bedroom window, in the scents and colours of the flowers. Aline, still bound by fears inculcated during her service at the seigneurial home, complains of the strong winds, reproaches Catherine for bringing into the house "des effluves marins forts comme des paquets d'algues" (p. 149).

Catherine brushes aside these fears and insists upon immersing herself in the life that surrounds her: weeding the garden, hanging up laundry, visiting a family in the mountains, bathing in the sea. She refuses to be hampered by Aline -- this last link with the vie de château, barren, terror-ridden, repressive. She tells her: "Je me séparerai de toi quand je le voudrai comme j'ai quitté mon mari" (p. 165). Catherine's refusal is a refusal to be deprived of her right

to participate in life, to be happy.

It is in the heat of the summer -- those long sunny days by the sparkling sea -- that Catherine meets Bruno, that their love is consummated. Both rejoice in the feel of the earth, the sea, and the sun, and each other's bodies.

With her sharp, suggestive phrases, Anne Hébert manages to evoke an atmosphere of drizzling, damp days or lazy, hot afternoons with the sun blazing down upon the earth and the song of the cicadas ringing from the treetops that complements the mood of the characters. We can also see how the landscape and the passage of seasons follow the progress of the novel: from the bleak, industrial cities to the gloomy apartment to the brilliant seashore, from Catherine's monotonous existence to her descent towards death and her re-emergence into life.

V

IMAGES

As has become evident by now, here, as in her poetry, the image forms the core of Anne Hébert's work. From the images are constructed the structural and thematic patterns of the novel. These precise and emotive images that haunt the reader with their strange and impressionistic accuracy comprise Anne Hébert's chief mode of perception and expression. It is these images that form, enhance, and reveal the

themes of the novel.

We have seen how, for example, images of châteaux, chambres de bois, develop the theme of enclosed space, of un refus de la vie, how images of the land accompany the states of mind of the characters.

Words for Anne Hébert become symbols and we can observe a particular orientation of her images that threads its way throughout the entire body of her work. Her most effective and striking images seem to fall into three corresponding categories: the body, nature and the house. There is a correlation between the components of these categories. For example, the parts of the body such as eyes, heart, hands (fingers), breath (song), bones correspond to water (rain, fountains), forest, branches, wind, trees, in nature which in turn correspond to mirrors (windows), rooms (houses, tombs), furniture, piano (music) in the house or château. These corresponding images tend to perform similar symbolic functions and to supplement each other.

Let us now examine three of these images which occur in the novel: eyes, hands and bones.

Eyes, mirrors, and water are modes of perception: eyes gaze outward into the external world, mirrors and water are instruments for reflection, for looking at and into oneself, "les prunelles pareilles/A leur plus pure image d'eau" ("Il y a certainement quelqu'un", Poèmes, p. 51).

Anne Hébert is often concerned with the concept of "transparence": windows and the surface waters of pools should be transparent so that one can clearly see into the

life of things. Catherine is associated with this transparency -- there is little pretence or illusion clouding her soul. In the opening pages, there is an emphasis on cleaning windows covered with soot from the blast furnaces, and Catherine insists on "toute transparence refaite à mesure". So when Catherine observes herself in mirrors, it is "sans que son image mièvre la trompât, reflétée au passage dans les glaces des vitrines" (p. 43). And when she tries to imagine herself as an infant as she gazes into the mirror, she is greeted, instead, by images of her little sisters at home, reminding her of her true nature, dispelling all illusion.

However, for Michel, such an occupation must be an "enchantement pervers" for in his case "toujours quelque mort y habite sous le tain". Unlike Catherine he is not transparent; what lies beneath his polished surface is too deep, mysterious and disturbing for the mirror to reflect a true image.

Water is even a more profound and complex symbol: "La vie la plus belle et la plus forte devait ressembler à cela: une eau transparente et vive, sans jamais revenir en arrière, renouvelant ses images à mesure".²⁶

Clear waters reflect a lucid image. But waters are deep and dark and to sink into them is to sink into a dream, into death.

²⁶Page, op. cit., p. 14, quoting from Anne Hébert's script, La Canne à pêche, p. 2.

L'eau de ces bois sombres
Et si pure et si uniquement fluide
Et consacrée en cet écoulement de source
Vocation marine où je me mire.
("Les Grandes Fontaines",
Poèmes, p. 17)

Water is the source of the creation of life, the symbol of the mysterious depths of the creative soul. It is also, as in Le Torrent, the destroyer of life, the symbol of death. It forms one of the elemental forces of life from the time of the separation of the earth and the waters. In Mystère de la parole, Anne Hébert writes "Je suis la terre et l'eau . . ." (p. 86). The flow of water cleanses and purifies like the baptismal waters. Catherine, hurt by Michel and Lia's disparaging remarks, lets the water flow over her hands as if they were raw wounds, hoping to wash away the pain. Michel, dreaming of a purified Lia, calls to her: "Lia, tu es lavée comme l'eau, ma soeur eau, c'est toi, Lia" (p. 119).

Catherine experiences her "resurrection" by the sea. Thus, water draws its wealth as a symbol from sources in the Bible and religious rituals, as well as from the rivers and pools of the forest, from nature.

Hands are symbols of giving and receiving; they are instruments of utility and creativity; they are symbolic of one's total being, of the relationship between one's inner self and the outer world. In the poem, "Les Mains", the

girl's hands are an intermediary between herself and the world, they are making futile gestures and

Les signes du monde
Sont gravés à même ses doigts.

Tant de chiffres profonds
L'accablent de bagues massives et travaillées.
("Les Mains", Poèmes, p. 21)

Like Catherine, this girl's hands are "cette offrande impitoyable/Des mains de douleurs parées/Ouvertes au soleil."

The poet, in another poem has "cette idée/De planter nos mains au jardin", but for the hands to flower, "Il faudra la saison prochaine/Et nos mains fondues comme l'eau" ("Nos Mains au jardin", Poèmes, pp. 49-50).

Catherine's hands are described as being capable, busy -- they are the external manifestations of her state of being. Michel pauses to admire them as she sews: "Quelles mains pleines de pouvoir tu as!" (p. 83). But once she moves into les chambres de bois and becomes idle, her hands are no longer rough and reddened, but "ses mains [. . .] devenaient blanches et ses ongles [. . .] s'allongeaient comme des griffes de bête captive" (p. 72). It is through her hands that her illness first manifests itself, "Les premières, ses mains vinrent à manquer" (p. 129).

The most powerful image employed by Anne Hébert is that of bones:

Je suis une fille maigre
Et j'ai de beaux os.
("La Fille maigre", Poèmes, p. 33)

This stripping to the bones, this denial of the flesh, is the striking metaphor for the refus de la vie; it

is the ultimate depouillement. Language, too, is stripped to its very bones, shorn of all excess flesh, only the clear, hard, exact word remains: the skeleton of an idea or image. Flesh betrays one. Witness how Michel succumbed to the warmth and softness of Catherine; the hard, inflexible bones of one's being are too rigid, too immobile to permit betrayal, action or emotion. But the skeleton -- the bare outline of bones is the very image of death:

Alors surgit le thème des os, qui représente ce qu'on possède de plus sûr et de plus irréductible, le dernier recours de la solitude et sa dernière complaisance. La chair devait nous faire communiquer avec le monde, et elle nous a trahi. Tandis, qu'avec les os on peut être tranquille, même si c'est une tranquillité [sic] à l'image de la mort. Le poète célèbre maintenant, non plus la solitude aux "mains ouvertes", mais la dernière extrémité de l'isolement [. . .] l'existence nue, sans beauté et sans don; [. . .] le poète imagine des amours étranges où la chair ne jouerait aucun rôle.²⁷

To strip to the bones is the ultimate purification. Michel praises Lia's thinness to Catherine, "la maigreur de Lia qu'il comparait au pur tranchant de l'esprit" (p. 119). He believes that "un jour [. . .] elle redeviendra pure comme ses os" (p. 189). Catherine and Lia are set in contrast: Catherine as the warm living flesh, Lia the cold, brittle skeleton of death.

Claudine, François' mother in Le Torrent, constantly tells her son: "Il faut se dompter jusqu'aux os" (p. 11), precisely because the bones are "ce qu'on possède de plus

²⁷Gilles Marcotte, Une Littérature qui se fait (Montréal: HMH, 1966), p. 291.

sûre et irréductible, le dernier secours de la solitude et sa dernière complaisance".

When Anne Hébert plunges into the vitality of Mystère de la parole, when her vision of the world expands into a joyous affirmation and acceptance of the earth and water, when her language grows richer and more vibrant, it is as if the world were made flesh. But, as "Le Tombeau des rois" illustrates, it was necessary to "connaître l'état des os", to experience this dépouillement in order to emerge victoriously into the fullness of a new life.

The "fille maigre" in Anne Hébert's poem, with her thin, frail, ephemeral appearance, seems to characterize all the heroines: Catherine and Lia of this novel, Lucie in Le Temps sauvage, Emilie, Catherine, Stéphanie, Dominique in the short stories are all such intense and slight girls. Their childlike appearance enhances their refusal to grow up. This intimation of childish innocence and rejection of the adult world pervades, as well, the poems of Le Tombeau des rois.

Catherine, when confronted by the demands of the adult world, such as marriage, retreats into childishness, "simulait le travail ou l'enfance lorsque l'un d'eux s'arrêtait pour la regarder et lui dire bonsoir" (p. 37). Only at the end does she develop into a woman capable of making decisions and pursuing her own well-being. Lia, on the other hand, grows thinner, retreating into the solace and hardness -- or as Michel would have it -- the purity of her bones.

Elizabeth, in Kamouraska, as she recalls her past, is a plump middle-aged woman, and this one heroine has developed from a thin, dreamy girl into a solid, desirable woman: the essence of her beauty, unlike Lia's, is in her flesh, not her bones.

Anne Hébert carefully and adroitly employs sensory images in a way that recalls Huysmans' A Rebours. When Catherine can no longer bear the stifling atmosphere of les chambres de bois, her senses rebel: "La jeune femme avait passé ce jour mauvais allongée sur son lit, à souffrir des sons et des odeurs" (p. 135). The stench of Michel and Lia's cigarettes, the click clack of Lia's high heels, the feel of the sheets against her skin, bring her to the brink of agony and despair.

Once she finds herself by the seaside, she hesitantly tests her abused senses: "Crois-tu que le parfum des géraniums puisse me faire mal?" (p. 146). She revels in the taste of black bread and olives, the rush of the wind, the damp beach beneath her. Her body, whose whiteness was so carefully cultivated by Michel, becomes browned by the sun and sea. She is finally able to enjoy and respond to her senses, her senses which are no longer assailed by intimations of death.

VI

STRUCTURE

In this part of the discussion, we will take a closer look at the structure of the novel.

As has been pointed out above, the story is a simple one: divided into three parts, with an uncomplicated plot, little action, very few characters. The complexity of the novel lies in the recurrence and development of themes through the subtle interplay of images. For example, the rebellion of Catherine's sensory organs, as she falls ill, becomes more significant as one realizes that it is the revival of these senses that both heralds and expresses Catherine's recovery in Part Three. Only a careful reading will reveal the implications of such images as bones, hands, enclosing space.

What is of particular interest, here, is the role of the characters. The characters themselves are rather flat and stereotyped -- they have developed no real personality and represent abstract ideas and states of being, rather than complex and integrated personalities. But this, I believe, was Anne Hébert's intention. They are, in a sense, symbols of a certain life style and attitude of mind.

When we examine the pattern of the roles, we see that they are repeated in the plays and short stories. We have already mentioned the prevalence of the small, thin, intense girl, still clinging to her childhood. The stories --

L'Ange de Dominique, La Mort de Stella, Le Printemps de Catherine, La Robe corail -- are told from the viewpoint of these heroines.

In Les Chambres de bois, the story is related from Catherine's perspective, yet we are not really involved with her; we view her as objectively as we view Michel and Lia. However neither is the author the omnipresent manipulator -- she does not overtly intrude upon the novel. In this way, Anne Hébert is invoking the aura of a fable, where the tale tells itself.

In the novel, the men fall into two categories: they are either violent, vain and arrogant like the seigneur and Lia's lover, or solitary and brooding like Catherine's father and uncle. Michel combines both qualities and Bruno is too shadowy a figure to permit any real discussion. The one striking thing about Bruno is his insensibility: "laissez les morts s'occuper des mort . . ." (p. 180); this shocks Catherine and provides a contrast to Michel's acute sensitivity, especially in matters of death.

The mother, here, is quite absent, both mothers having fled during the protagonists' childhoods. Quite to the contrary, the mothers are the moving force of Le Torrent and Le Temps sauvage, domineering, aggressive, bitter women who rule their families with an iron glove. It is hinted that Lia's mother was of similar breed.

The brother and sister, united in their defiance of the world appear in the form of Lucie and Sébastien in Le Temps sauvage, Olivier and Véronique in La Mercière assassinée, and

Stéphanie and Charles in La Maison de l'esplanade. But it is, of course, Michel and Lia, who carry this relationship to the heights of perversity.

Two figures recur in a persistent and haunting fashion: the aunt and the servant. The aunt is that strange figure who fulfills the role of the absent mother, yet possesses an even greater authority by virtue of her stance as an outsider, and her wider experience of the world. Anita is an aunt and similar characters appear in L'Ange de Dominique, Le Temps sauvage and in the form of three maiden aunts in Kamouraska.

The servant, in the true biblical sense, is there "to serve". Unless we realize that, the figure of the old family retainer may strike us as an anachronism. Moreover, the servant is a sort of archetypal figure who silently, relentlessly accomplishes her duty. In Les Chambres de bois, Aline serves as a respite from the extreme tension of three characters in continual conflict. Aline appears only briefly until the third part, but there are hints of her strength, her immobility in her gestures as she tidies up Michel's chaos or ignores Catherine.

She provides, in the final chapters, the last link with the stifling, moribund existence of Michel and Lia and their degenerate family, the last link that must be broken before Catherine can be free. Of all the characters in the novel, Aline emerges as the most plausible. She has served the seigneurs, Michel and Lia, and now, Catherine. She grows more and more embittered by the lack of grandeur of her

masters; her existence is defined by her servitude. Her servitude, however, is merely of another variety than Michel's or Lia's or Catherine's.

An equally capable and indomitable servant is portrayed in La Maison de l'esplanade in the person of Géraldine who cares for the chambres des morts. Adélaïde, the mistreated servant in La Mercière assassinée, wreaks vengeance on her masters by methodically murdering them one by one, only to be assassinated, in turn, by her seigneur, Olivier. Catherine, La Pouce, the equally mistreated and resentful servant in Le Printemps de Catherine enjoys her spring, her release from servitude as the horrors of war besiege the town.

VII

LANGUAGE

Having translated this novel, I am, of course, acutely conscious of Anne Hébert's language, and therefore, I think it best and most interesting to approach this topic from a translator's viewpoint.

I found that both Anne Hébert's poetry and prose should be translated as literally as possible, as long as the English flowed and cohered. Her language, at least, in Le Tombeau des rois and Les Chambres de bois is as cutting as the edge of a knife, as lucid as a clear, deep pool, as bare and brittle as the bones she so often describes; it is

economical, precise, with a slight, perhaps deliberate awkwardness.

The translator must continually restrain himself, considering each word, each phrase and their placement as carefully as Anne Hébert herself has done. Many of Frank Scott's²⁸ emendations of his earlier version of "Le Tombeau des rois" revert back to the original French expression and to a more literal rendition, e.g. Presse le fil first translated as "Tightens the cord", becomes "Presses on the cord", and simulait le dernier tourment, "simulating the last agony", becomes "simulating the ultimate torment" in the final version.

Anne Hébert's French is so precise that one is tempted to use the English word that most closely approximates it: "presses" for presse, "torment" for tourment. But there are dangers inherent in this; "astonishment" is often too strong a rendition of étonnement; it is frequently better to use "surprise".

Furthermore, Anne Hébert, quite justifiably, objects to the too literal interpretations of her poetry that she has encountered:

Par contre que de traductions littérales qui, apparemment honnêtes parce que respectant le sens du poème dans ce qu'il a de plus visible, le réduisant à l'état de prose, toute émotion perdue, toute magie soigneusement exclue [. . .] On a parfois traité mes poèmes de cette façon avec une grande bonne volonté,

²⁸See Dialogue sur la traduction, pp. 61-96.

Un respect extérieur évident. Mais sans qu'il ne soit jamais question d'équivalences poétiques.²⁹

Anne Hébert is here discussing poetry, not prose, but, as mentioned previously, this novel possesses many of the qualities of poetry, especially in the realm of language.

The problem with translation is that at the same time as suppressing the differences of language. it reveals them more fully. This is notably the case in French and English, the "two most incompatible tongues of the Western world."³⁰

English appears constantly as an open language, French is closed, closed into itself, into its own, unbearable purity [. . .] But thanks to their barren language, the French writers were obliged to invent the great style, to develop habits of precision, of balance, writing became for them, the setting of words into sentences like diamonds into a crown. Eventually the deficiencies gave birth to astounding mastery and virtuosity. "They have a rather poor instrument," as Joyce used to say, "but they play wonderfully well."³¹

Jean Paris continues by pointing out that English resembles the sea with each word opening onto a vast horizon of evocations and symbols, whereas the French resembles a stone, enclosing all sentences, reducing them to the clearest most precise meaning; the oceanic English absorbs foreign words, while the French rejects them.

It is because Anne Hébert's language most definitely

²⁹Ibid., pp. 48-49.

³⁰Jean Paris, "Translation and Creation", The Craft and Context of Translation, ed. W. Arrowsmith and R. Shattuck. (New York: Anchor Books, 1964), p. 79.

³¹Ibid., p. 81.

possesses this "stone-like" quality that one must restrain the exuberance of the English language and try to create a similar impression of immobility, enclosure, brittleness. And it is for this reason that I find a rather literal rendition most effective. For example, sous l'abondance d'un pain aussi dur (p. 28) caused me a great deal of difficulty. In the French it is clearly a metaphor for the hard life and the hot black summer suffered by the workers. It is particularly effective because of the religious -- sacramental -- and biblical implications of "bread". It is an image Anne Hébert often employs. I did not want to lose the brevity and therefore, the impact of the concise and evocative image, and all my versions in English seemed awkward, lengthy and confused. Finally it occurred to me that "under the abundance of such burnt bread" would be the most effective rendering; "hard" did not sound poetic enough in English -- the French has the advantage of a more elegant word order -- the "burnt" would provide a similar yet more poetic impression.

On the other hand, one would not translate On dirait que j'ai le vertige (p. 63), literally. "I'm feeling rather dizzy" seems to me a plausible way of expressing Catherine's feeling of excitement on being embraced by Michel.

The problem is primarily one of grasping the essence of Anne Hébert's language and trying to render it as accurately as possible. Because Anne Hébert's meanings and the "spirit" of her novel are so bound up in the sparseness of her language and the preciseness of her images, the heart of the novel lies in the "word".

There is, nonetheless, an undeniable simplicity in her prose; one does not become entangled in the convolutions of Proustian thought and imagery. One does not have to struggle with complex ideas, character portrayals, intricate descriptive passages. You concentrate on each essential word. Can la campagne nocturne (p. 60) be rendered by "shadowy countryside" which is more poetic, more fluent than, for example, "nocturnal countryside"? Since it was just previously mentioned that the sun was setting, the reader should understand that "shadowy" refers to the falling night, and "shadowy" has the advantage of suggesting mystery and terror.

One obstacle that I kept encountering was Anne Hébert's rather maladroit use of similes, which are tacked onto the ends of sentences and hang there like the last, unwanted guest at a late party.

Consider the sentence "Si Catherine se penchait à la fenêtre donnant sur la cour étroite comme un puits, elle gardait un instant sur son visage et ses mains de pâles reflets de nacre et d'huître, ainsi qu'un miroir d'eau" (p. 72). What to do with miroir d'eau? Sometimes similes like this can be tucked into another part of the sentence or converted into an adjective. This one finally became: "When Catherine leaned out the window overlooking the courtyard, deep and narrow as a well, her face and hands, like a mirror of water, would reflect, for a moment, the pale shimmerings of mother of pearl and oyster."

This leads us into the chief problem that presented itself in this translation. Anne Hébert's style is often awkward and stilted, partly, I think, deliberately, in order to evoke a closed, stifling atmosphere, and partly, the consequence of this being her first novel and her failure to successfully distinguish her prose from her poetry.

What is the translator to do? Should he recreate the awkwardness in English or should he attempt to smooth out the rough patches? I decided that I would try to retain a similar awkwardness in English, hoping that the reader would be aware that this was due either to the deliberateness of the author or to weaknesses in her style. For example, the grammatically incorrect use of "mend" in "Since her mother's death were there not three younger sisters to feed, bathe, comb, dress and mend" is also present in the French, "N'y avait-il pas trois soeurs après elle qu'il fallait nourrir, laver, peigner, habiller et repriser" (p. 27).

Similarly, her sentence order is often repetitive: simplicity becomes monotonous, so occasionally I've inverted the order while still trying to retain an impression of the monotony that reflects the dull existence Anne Hébert is describing.

These are some of the obstacles and queries that confronted me in this translation; there are, of course, many others. Every word is a challenge and an agony. But, most

important, one must approach the work with great sympathy, with an awareness of, a feeling for the novel's essence. If these qualities are missing in the translator, his translation will not express the innate coherence and individuality of the original. It is Anne Hébert's story I am translating, not my own, and therefore, I must efface my own personality and attempt to render hers. This is how I feel about this particular translation. In another case, I may wish to follow the lead of such poet-translators as Pound or Lowell who develop their own poems from the original.

Translating draws one into the heart of the novel: so deep into its heart that I, along with Catherine, feel enclosed on all sides by les chambres de bois. Yet all the frustration of being thus enclosed disappears when, finally, one emerges with a completed work -- that is, completed as one ever is for one never ceases revising. One emerges with a mixture of sensations, but there are two which stand out. There is the feeling of having become more deeply involved in a writer and a work than ever possible through mere critical analysis. And then, there is the unique experience of becoming acquainted with the intricacies of a foreign language and with the frailty, the beauty and the rather wonderful malleability of one's own language.

TRANSLATION

PART ONE

It all began in the land of Catherine, in a town of blast furnaces scorching the sky, day and night, like the black palaces of the Apocalypse. In the morning the women would wipe their windows stained with soot from the red-hot fires of the night.

The windows of Catherine's home were spotless, the tiles of her kitchen floor shone with the glow of a beautiful black and white chessboard. Catherine, continually restoring all this transparence, had never allowed herself to be overcome by time or work. Since her mother's death were there not three younger sisters to feed, bathe, comb, dress and mend while the father withdrew into his solitude.

The year her mother died, there was such a sweltering and black summer, that beads of soot were dripping from every pore. The blast furnaces flamed in ardent competition with the summer heat. Under such an abundance of burnt bread, the women would complain softly, as they leaned against the grimy faces of their men possessed by hungry desires.

All the countryside around was steaming like a stagnant pond. In the autumn, Catherine and her sisters were taken to an aged uncle who no longer worked. Since there was no one to run errands, his home had fallen into neglect. The little girls took care of all their uncle's shopping which was why he had invited them.

Then, one day, on their way to the village, they became lost in the fog. Every road looked the same, some winding

over canals, others skirting grassy fields with willow trees, blue with mist, reappearing, here and there, like musical themes.

The youngest sister began to cry. Catherine grabbed her hand and persevered in searching the rain-drenched countryside for a wine and tobacco merchant and materials needed to repair a dilapidated armchair. Soon, the rain was pouring down so violently that all four sought shelter beneath a tree, their heads bent, cheek to cheek, arms around each other, backs to the storm, bound together like a thick sheaf of lost children. Catherine peered through the tangle of her hair, her eyelashes brushing Lucie's cheek who jerked her head as if shaking off a fly. Lucie's eyes followed Catherine's gaze and both saw the hunter and the children emerge from the woods.

The man strode along in front. The girl followed behind him, struggling to walk fast and straight in spite of the gun slung across her back. The boy trailed along, his head lowered, bowed under the weight of the game bag.

It was Lucie who asked for directions. The man answered shortly, in a bored tone, then as he looked at Lucie, an expression of quickening interest and craftiness passed over his langorous face, like a wily fox suddenly dropping his mask. He murmured to Lucie that he thought her very promising for her age and explained the way to the village to her. Then, under the cover of the rain, he arrogantly resumed his mask of boredom.

They all remained a few minutes longer under the

shelter of the trees, the children, a little apart from their father.

The face of the hunter's daughter was the colour of nutmeg, with narrow, black eyes slanting towards her temples. Without glancing at Catherine or her sisters, she murmured between her teeth that she had been hunting since before day-break across the marshlands and that the game bag was now full of quail. The boy complained of a fever. He raised his frightened face, streaming with tears, up to Catherine and whispered that his father was forcing him to carry the heavy game bag of wounded birds. Catherine was so close to the boy that she could have traced the path of his tears with her finger, as they trickled along his cheeks down to his protruding cheekbones. The rancid smell of bloody game surrounded the boy like the odour of his own bitter distress.

The hunter whistled to his hounds and started on his way, at his heels, the girl and the boy and the long, lean dogs.

That evening, Lucie coaxed a few words from her uncle whose greatest desire was to be as mute as an impenetrable wall, a dumb stone, or a scowling corpse. Lucie watched her uncle through her lashes and told him about the hunter who had found her very promising for her age.

Her words carved their arduous way through the stony silence of the uncle; veins swelled in his neck and at his temples. He swore, choked and then, with a mixture of resentment and bitter mirth, he spoke of usurped hunting and fishing rights, of an entire countryside ravaged by one

seigneur, of wounded animals rotting in the brush, and young virgins corrupted in a night. He described the squat house with its long and narrow windows. Lowering his voice, he told of the woman who lived there in perpetual idleness, frequently indulging in various forms of ostentation and cruelty. He, himself, had seen her motionless figure, owl-like, silhouetted against the window of the home of the seigneurs, one rainy evening.

Once the stores of wine, tobacco, kindling, flour, sugar and salt had been laid in, when the ancient cuckoo clock had begun to chime the correct hour, when oil had silenced the creaking hinges, when all was clean and tidy, and the dog no longer roamed wild, the uncle sent his nieces away.

Catherine and her sisters never again returned to the country.

For a long time, a landscape drowned in rain and fog haunted the little girls, at times one, at times the other, and occasionally all of them at once. And then, in the evenings when their father was asleep, they would exchange their impressions in hushed voices. The two beds touched each other in the shadows forming a field of sleeping sisters, Lucie's head a black cluster among the tousled wheat-coloured curls of the other three entangled heads.

Catherine being the eldest, with all the gravity her age implied, was storing the vision of the home of the seigneurs deep within her heart where grave and sacred objects dwelled. Already there enshrined were the death of her mother and her own curtailed childhood. She had a dream:

"On the highest shelf of the cupboard among the piles of linen, the home of the seigneurs was resting in the hollow of a glass ball, like a ship in a bottle. The perfume of trees was captive there and the enduring pain of a little boy, bereft of all compassion. When Catherine seized the

glass ball with her hands, rain and fog descended, little by little, upon the house, the trees, and the child's misery. The entire image was washed away in the inverted hourglass."

But the exigencies of day beckoned to Catherine. There were the mornings, resplendent with the aroma of baby-girls, their shrill voices tearing at each other like sharp claws and all the basket weave of golden and jet-black curls. Occasionally, the rarely heard voice of the father rang out like a dull gong, clamouring for silence.

When the father had gone to work and the sisters were at school, Catherine bent her childish head over the daily tasks. Everything ran smoothly as if two competent servants at the end of this child's arms were forced to struggle alone, unrelenting throughout their harsh life, against the blackness of the land, against the malignant dampness that clung to the linen, the furniture, every corner of the house, the heavy boots of the father, even to the bitter lines of his face.

The winter that followed was so bitterly cold that Catherine's ivy burned at her window. Snow buried the countryside. So deeply had silence permeated the land that year that one could blatantly hear things existing around one. One by one, the sooty footprints were erased before the doors. For two whole days they were completely without wood. The youngest child caught a fever and wept from a searing pain in her side. The father would quite happily shut himself up for long periods in a state of mute fury.

By the time the winter drew to a close, Lucie had grown taller than Catherine. Standing at the doorway, in the spring sun, she would stretch with the tranquil joyousness of a girl who has moulted her childhood. With her youngest sister perched on her shoulders, she strolled along the bumpy streets. Here and there, in the town, people were muttering anxiously about work, which having previously sought high and low for workers was now laying them off, one by one. The little girl, from her vantage point of her sister's shoulder, spied through the window of his home, one of these laid-off men stretched across his bed in broad daylight, like a reprimanded child, his miserable eyes fastened on the ceiling.

It occurred to Lucie that her father was growing old which would pose a threat to the security of their home. That evening, she declared, somewhat haltingly, that she didn't want to go to school anymore and that she would look after the house in Catherine's stead.

Lucie chopped off her long braids and brought them to her father. When the man was confronted by his first shorn head, by his first rebellious child, her forehead set like a stubborn goat, he slashed the girl across the face with the long black braids, gripping them like a pair of horsewhips.

The father had a sister called Anita. She arrived one day, sniffed at her nieces as if they were a bouquet of flowers and found them fresh and beautiful. They confided in her the problems of the household. Her face became as grave and preoccupied as if she were threading a needle. First of all, she assured the father that work does not recede from a man's body as long as he is willing. As for her nieces, she felt that the eldest one should be married off with Lucie taking her place in the household. She despaired of Catherine's childish figure. And it was a pity that the girl's profile as she bent over her sewing by the window, seemed so serious.

From that time on, at the hour when the flames of the blast furnaces were battling with the violet shades of the long summer evenings, Catherine could be found sitting on her porch.

The men of the region were rough and degenerate. And the pale girl with her too short skirts, her bony knees, would feign either busyness or childishness whenever one of them stopped to look at her and bid her good evening. She wanted to nurture her dream and remain aloof, surrounded by defiance and mystery like a woman who is secretly tracking down a barbarian prince.

In the hall of the deserted school house with the tall green ferns, Catherine has paused to listen to the music. "The piano is in tune," she kept murmuring to herself in wonderment all the way along the corridor as if she had suddenly been struck by an overwhelming understanding of all earthly things. "This is for the fête on Sunday," the headmistress had explained trying to force a smile across her face, faded as a worn coin.

Catherine has sat down by the piano, fascinated by that visible flow of music to the pianist's fingers and even to his troubled, thin face. "There is no one listening here but I," she thought a little frightened by the intensity of her attention. The stranger was playing for her. After a little while, she began to feel uneasy for the music grew impassioned, wild like rice in its frenzied dance above the fire.

Then, the young man stopped playing. He came up towards Catherine. From close up she saw the olive tone of his skin, the delicacy of his bones, that astonishing almond-eyed gaze, most often on the watch under his eyelashes, and occasionally, flashing over her like a blaze of gold.

He seemed to want to guard his fingers from all contact. Catherine despised such delicate hands. He sat down on the bench beside the girl, looking at her without seeing her, confessing his weariness, the subsiding of that exaltation that had seized him at the piano like a violent

storm. Footsteps sounded in the corridor. The young man stood up. He whispered in Catherine's ear:

--One day, I'll give a real recital, in a real concert hall, you'll see . . .

He bowed before Catherine as after a concert performance. He made her promise to come to the school fête for he wished to see her again.

Catherine had to race after her younger sisters who had already left the school.

That Sunday they waited a long time for the pianist who did not come. Half the audience being children, the room buzzed like a noisy sports arena. At the request of the headmistress, a red-headed lady played the violin and two scrawny little girls danced a flamenco.

After the performance, Catherine went home with her sisters. They discussed the pianist who lived in the country, quite near the forest, in a house as large as the school.

--That is the countryside we visited the year mother died, said Catherine.

She was careful not to mention to her sisters her encounter with the pianist but she was wondering why he hadn't turned up at the concert. A vision of a landscape smothered in fog and forest rose before Catherine. There she discerned an arrogant seigneur in hunting boots, a dark girl, prickly as a thorn, while suddenly the image of a terrified young boy was coming into focus and taking on the shape of a man.

One morning, the mailman handed Catherine a letter, insisting that it was for her. The girl was alone in the house, doing the laundry, a thick braid of hair thumping at her back. Wiping her hands, she turned the letter over several times before making up her mind to open it.

The letter was signed: "Michel". It read: "I do not know your name. I know nothing about you. If I've found out where you live, it's because I followed you that other night without your knowing it. Forget that concert I missed through bad luck. And, I beg you, come this evening anyway, at the agreed time to a place near the school there where the trees of the park begin, as if I were asking you for the first time."

In the park with its gnarled trees and sooty lane-ways, Michel and Catherine sat down on shaky, rusty iron chairs. In the distance, they could hear the muffled sounds of the town. The wind had quieted down. Intermittently, yellow leaves would fall, heavily, like coins tossed into a pool. Michel watched Catherine, furtively, without speaking. When she got up to leave, he tried to restrain her.

--You'll come again, won't you? I'll wait for you here, at the same time?

She nodded "yes" with a toss of her head. The young man found her hand as rough and reddened as if she had just lifted it from the dishwater. The girl quickly pulled herself away and began to hurry home.

It was about this time that Anita began to come almost daily. Her laughter could be heard mingling with the children's in the evening around dinner time. Each of them would try to outdo the other in facilitating, protecting and arranging for Catherine and Michel's rendez-vous without the father knowing. As soon as Catherine arrived home, silence would descend upon the room. In defiance, Catherine remained silent too.

Who had told Anita about Michel? Hadn't Catherine always lifted towards her aunt a blank and unresponsive face in answer to all her probings?

However, Michel had never turned up at the rendez-vous and every evening the young girl would pretend to her sisters and Anita that she was answering the pressing invitation of a young, handsome and indolent seigneur. So she would go for walks along the streets all by herself, gazing at the display windows and boutiques, choosing flowers, dresses, jewels, undecieved by her own frail image reflected in the store windows as she passed.

Then, one evening, as Catherine lingered in the park before returning home, there was Michel in front of her again, greeting her blithely, as if he had never disappeared.

They walked together by the edge of the canal.

Michel said that he had come by way of the woods, deep in shadow under its umbrella of trees. Catherine replied that she had to go home, that everyone was waiting for her. She spoke quietly, watching the young man furtively, not daring to question him about his long absence. She mused: "What could have happened to make him forget me so easily, for so long, as if I'd been dead for a long time? What strange seigneurial duty tied him to his home and prevented him from coming to me?" And she searched his freshly-shaven face in vain for some sign of tragedy, illness or fever. "How calm and distant and collected he appears," she was thinking. And all of a sudden, it seemed to Catherine that someone wanted to wash her heart of an ardent, fabulous childhood château, prisoner of a land drowned in rain and fog.

Michel's voice at her ear startled her:

--What are you thinking about, Catherine? You seem very preoccupied?

--Nothing, Michel, nothing . . .

--Isn't it beautiful and calm, this evening? You know I haven't felt so peaceful in a long time.

Catherine repeated that she wanted to go home. Michel looked surprised, then became worried, fearful of losing Catherine:

--But Catherine, I've hardly seen you and you want to leave me already?

The girl felt Michel's anguish weighing down upon her like a restraining hand. She was on her guard not to reveal her joy.

Michel came the next day and all the following days. As soon as he neared the town, oblivious to the passers-by, his eyes would scan the streets for Catherine, while he stomped along the pavement with his long strides as if he were continuing a jubilant walk through the forest, crossing marshes among grasses and bushes, causing waterfowl to surge upward before his tread.

Wherever Catherine walked in town, in that twilight hour between day and the autumn light, the young man would come bounding up to her in his muddy boots, a lean-shanked hound at his heels.

Catherine became frightened. She begged Michel to be cautious so they would not be seen together in the town. She described her strict home where a taciturn man sat, every evening, amidst his daughters. And suddenly, the fleeting and silent shadow of Anita slipped into Catherine's heart, and she was crushed.

"How oppressive this house heavy with sleep seems," thought Catherine as she tucked in her sleeping sisters. She undressed quickly. Then, disturbed by Anita's prolonged presence in the room, she hesitated before going to bed.

"But what's keeping her from going home, she, who only leaves her place with carefully made-up eyes, with some artful design engraved on her determined face? She's been fussing over me since dinner. She points to the mud on my shoes. She scrutinizes my expression, is surprised if I sing, makes a big fuss about a nondescript yellow leaf stuck to the wool of my sweater; she would just about sniff my hands to track down that smell of wild game that wins my heart so swiftly, so surely that I won't be able to sleep for a long time to come."

Twice Anita's muffled voice has called Catherine. Anita was quite aware that she could not elicit a word, a gesture or glance from this girl, immutable as stone. "But her heart is beating there, a heart stung to the quick by my words as if pricked by a bundle of thorns."

The young woman explained that Michel possessed great wealth and eternal leisure for his torment. She also spoke of the father who would soon not be working any more and who didn't know what to do with the four girls in his home. She emphasized the state of humiliation of this man, summoning all anger to his support. She spoke in hushed tones, her head bent towards Catherine, searching her eyes, clipping each word.

--You understand, Catherine, that you've been seen together in the town, Michel and you. One of these days your father will find out about it. What is there between this lad and you? Not a great deal, I suppose, you innocent child. But you know your father does not take love or death lightly. Are you at least listening to me, Catherine? . . .

At this point, the father muttered confusedly in his sleep. Catherine jumped to her feet. Anita relaxed, and said very quietly, almost regretfully:

--You must get married, Catherine . . .

The young girl swallowed painfully, as if she were choking:

--To Michel?

--To Michel? Of course, who else?

The father uttered an inhuman cry. He was vehemently protesting against a terrifying and rusty weathercock, creaking through the town, calling the dead. Then, in his ordinary voice, he asked, then beseeched, that all the doors and windows be tightly closed.

Catherine stepped up to her aunt who already had her hand on the doorknob. Her blue eyes were widening immeasurably. She murmured in a half-whisper:

--Aunt Anita, I'm afraid that this is all a dream and Michel will never marry me.

When Catherine told Michel that she had known him for a long time, he was surprised, his brow clouded over, and he replied that he didn't remember anything about it, and besides, he didn't like to be reminded of the past. Catherine continued, describing the rain, her sisters, the hunter and his children . . . Michel seemed bored by Catherine's story. Then, he turned suddenly towards her and stared straight into her eyes with his fierce, yellow gaze.

--Ah! Catherine, why unearth the past? With you, I was relaxing like one who has never had a childhood.

Catherine stared fixedly at two pebbles lying at her feet.

--Michel, I want to know. I must know. What goes on in your home and in the forest that surrounds it? What happens to you when you leave town? I want to know, Michel! And your sister so dark?

--That little sister so dark and violent, Catherine, so young and almost damned . . . But what do you mean by this? Do I question you about your home?

Michel lifted Catherine's head, held it between his hands, close to him, brushing back her hair, stroking her hard little skull, touching her forehead, her nose, her chin, her cheeks damp with tears, as if he were feeling the fresh hardness of a pebble polished by the sea. Catherine, too, contemplated Michel for a long time, without lowering her

eyes. Michel began to tremble as if he were afraid.

For three days, Catherine refused to go out at the usual time. She forbade the children to leave the house. She ordered the shutters and the door to be closed earlier than usual, using as a pretext, the fog and that earthy smell pervading the town with the onslaught of the long autumn evening. When the father returned home, he seemed soothed by his closed-in house.

On the fourth evening, Catherine went to bed, while Lucie took charge of the house. A chorus of alternating childish voices assaulted Catherine as she dozed, blending in with the voice of that sombre enchantment, deep within herself, by which she was possessed.

--Why does Catherine forbid us to go out? --It's Michel who makes her as irritable as poison ivy! --Is Catherine going to marry Michel? --I don't want him to take Catherine away to that house in the depths of the woods! --You go inside and it smells of cedar chests and damp ferns. You can get lost in the kitchen that is like a torrid city, cluttered with spices, cooking odours, flaming copper implements. The women, especially, are evil and they sleep in the most distant rooms in beds as big as houses.

During the last few seconds, Lucie's voice kept rising, solitary, intoxicated by her own words; Catherine, now wide awake, had gotten up to listen to her sister's story:

--The mother died all alone in the early hours of the morning, the children asleep by the fire did not notice anything.

The servant had fled away the previous evening, and the father had not returned from hunting. In turn, the father died in a foreign land. The little girl grew up. It is a house where women rule. She has engraved her name on the window and on the mirrors. Lia, that is her name, the sister of Michel . . .

Catherine confronted Lucie.

--It's not true. It's not true. You're making up nasty songs to frighten the children. Only I have the right to speak of Michel and his house. And who told you all this?

--Everyone in town talks about it. And they talk about you too, as a silly little fool who is pursuing grandeur.

Very early the next morning, even before they had opened up the house, Anita was knocking at the door. Her voice rang out, high-pitched, insinuating:

--I've picked up two golden, dead leaves, perfectly shaped, on your doorstep, as large as a hand and flat as water lilies.

She handed the leaves to Catherine and no one saw the letter that lay hidden between them.

"I don't see you anymore, Catherine? Is it possible that I've lost you? Come quickly, the garden may wither any day now, battered as it is by wind and ice. It shall be as you wish: if you come (and you shall come, I beg you so much) I will receive you in this world of my childhood, there where you already entered without my realising it. Do come, Catherine, here, nothing has changed (in appearance), neither the garden, nor the house. I do nothing but wait for you. Michel."

Anita left the door open.

--It's mild, Catherine, let the sun in.

"How can I visit Michel? Catherine was thinking. How can I take this long trip without my father finding out?"

Anita handed things to Catherine across the table.

--Here's a necklace and this long, embroidered shawl that belonged to your mother . . .

Catherine didn't dare touch anything. Suddenly, she inhaled a whiff of iris which pierced her to the core. She

buried her head in the shawl which she began to nibble so that her mother's scent would enter her mouth, cling to her teeth, her palate.

Anita stood before Catherine, humbled, wounded by the child's passion. She thought: "Little one, little one, how warm and eager you are, and me, I'm a woman who has received her reckoning and nothing more is going to happen to me, and so it is that I have nothing to teach you . . ."

--Aunt Anita, how can I get to Michel's?

That very evening, the father, who never went out except to revive his mourning, announced that he would spend the evening keeping vigil over a young woman who had died, the wife of a colleague at work.

As soon as the father departed, Catherine climbed into the car beside Anita. The girl did not recognize the smooth road, nor the hewn down woods. When they came in view of the house she was astonished that they had arrived so quickly and she was disappointed not to find any turrets, balconies, or barred windows. The garden seemed small and disorderly to her. Anita deposited her niece who remained alone for a moment by the iron gate until the ringing of the rusty bell subsided. The house of stone lay there, massive, its closed windows barring any rays of light.

Soon Michel appeared, treading warily on the sandy laneway as if trying to avoid puddles. He hesitated before opening up the gate seeming not to recognize Catherine, who murmured:

--It's me, Michel!

She began to despise the shawl that was hampering her movements. Michel opened the gate, let the girl in, and closed it after her. He repeated: "It's you, Catherine", then did not know what else to say.

The sun was beginning to set, the garden scents were turning acrid. Something stirred near one of the windows. Michel started:

--Let's not stay here, Catherine, come, I'll show you the garden.

Michel edged his way around the house, dragging Catherine to the end of the garden. Then, he leaned on the stone wall and began to stare at a window on the first floor, there where a light had just been switched on. Suddenly, with an abrupt movement, he turned towards Catherine.

--Catherine! You can be seen from there! Bend down! Good! Like this, behind the hazel-bushes.

Michel knelt beside Catherine, his head raised towards the window, perfectly still, alert as an animal on the watch.

Catherine pulled off her shawl with tiny, quick movements of her hands and arms, brushing Michel's shoulder, of which he seemed oblivious. She felt like crying out, crushing the dry branches. She could hear each beat of Michel's heart, while the violent breath of the autumn earth and drenched leaves was filling her nostrils: "As if I were eating rotting grass!" she shuddered.

She shook her starched skirt which crackled. She thought of her scratched legs. Michel, at her side, did not move, fascinated by that solitary window shining in the night. Then, someone up there closed the shutters which creaked interminably. Michel stood up, and signalled Catherine to follow him.

Catherine could not tear her eyes away from this singular, unwieldy dwelling swallowed by the night. She

thought perhaps it was there that the obscure heart of the earth resided, along with Michel's piano, his palette of paints, his bitter leisure, and all the château life. She evoked those cruel and idle women of a splendid race, now lying among their chalky bones, and suddenly the vivid, sharp features of Lia, Michel's sister, rose in Catherine's heart. Michel called in a half-whisper:

--Come quickly, Catherine, please.

Michel opened and closed the iron gate with infinite care, holding the bell, still, in his hand.

"Nothing in the world could make me look back," Catherine repeated to herself as she drew further and further away from that house into which she had not been invited. She swore to never again see Michel, hardening herself as if she were afraid of being turned into a statue of salt at the least sign of regret.

The silence was broken only by the steady beat of their footsteps on the pavement. The shadowy countryside began to terrify Catherine who drew nearer to Michel, casting occasional glances at that face half-hidden by the night. Michel started to speak, at first in a half-whisper, then more loudly:

--Cast out! I am cast out of my own house by shame! I will never return there, now. Everything is filthy, wasted, destroyed . . .

Catherine's voice, inert, seemed to echo the words devoid of any meaning.

--What do you mean Michel? What is wasted, filthy, destroyed?

--Filth, that's what she's become, that girl, sacred among all woman. Evil has descended upon us with her.

Michel's manner of speaking tortured Catherine like a raw wound. In her tiny, colourless voice, she murmured:

--Who has hurt you, Michel? What has done this?

Michel's words were almost inaudible and, for the first time, he seemed to speak to Catherine:

--Lia came back this very evening and that man, her lover, is with her.

When they came to the town, Catherine wanted to leave Michel right away so they would not be seen together. Michel tried to hold Catherine back, repeating that "he was all alone and miserable". She wheeled around like a pale, angry, little rooster.

--And me, Michel?

--You, Catherine? But what's wrong with you?

--Nothing, it's nothing, I'm caught in a trap like a mouse.

She forbade Michel to try to see her again and spoke of her father's anger. Michel froze with astonishment. He spoke hesitantly as if he did not quite know what he was saying:

--But, Catherine, you're too small for anyone to hurt you.

She began to run towards her home.

He caught her at the doorstep, just as she was going in. A light was shining in the living-room window.

Michel begged Catherine to listen to him. He spoke of the solitude of the stony town, of the wind howling across the square, of the man without a home or friend, of the violent blood of girls who damn themselves.

The young couple were now standing under the neighbour's dark and shuttered windows. Michel was whispering his strange words against Catherine's face which remained stony, turned towards the wall. "He speaks, he breathes upon

me, she was thinking, as if he were warming his fingers." Soon, she no longer heard anything, conscious only of this moist warmth against her neck, her cheek. "I'm feeling rather dizzy," she thought.

Someone stirred in her father's house. The girl started, wanting to escape. Michel barred her way. He stammered:

--Don't leave me, Catherine, I've no one but you now. He spoke feverishly, gripping her wrists with his fingers.

--Stay with me, Catherine, I'll take you to Paris, to that apartment we keep for the concert season, Lia and I. I shall flee her, she and that man who is with her.

The door of the house swung open. Lucie called out:

--Is that you, Catherine?

--I must go . . . I must go, she breathed, trying to free her wrists.

--Catherine, stay, please don't leave me alone. I'll go and ask your father for you if I must, but don't leave me alone.

He had slowly articulated those final, astonishing words; each spoken word visibly bringing him immense peace.

His calm hands were now stroking Catherine's neck, her waist, her throat, her face, as if Michel wanted to arouse in the night, without haste or passion, a body that was solid and sweet.

PART TWO

There was, first of all, that whole day in Michel's apartment, a vast and sonorous day, among the suitcases, cartons, dust, the congealed disorder of the past year, the comings and goings of the movers, the bitter and cold coffee, the dry sandwiches, the fire that would not start, the musty odour of closed rooms, and mingling with all this, the long wait for the night, the anguish of that night, anticipated, half-heartedly, like a slow, sad train in a deserted station.

Catherine lay down in Michel's bed which was as narrow as a dormitory cot. She snuffed out the lamp while a voice murmured humbly as it drew away:

--Good night, Catherine, sleep well, my little one, I shall sit up in the next room.

And Catherine did not move, listening to the slow retreat of her husband's steps.

When Catherine awoke it was broad daylight. She did not open her eyes right away, trying at first to locate with her fingers the nearest signs of her new life: the eyelets embroidered on the sheets, and there, on the night table within reach of her hand, the fine, polished ring that a man in a dream had slipped on her finger.

But, all at once, it occurred to her that she would have to find some coffee, a grinder, matches, milk, cups, bread, butter, plates, knives, and she hurriedly got dressed.

Upon entering the large kitchen which was also used as a dining-room, Catherine discovered Michel, asleep, rolled

up in a blanket on a small, low couch, limp as a wet rag.

She knelt by the couch. Softly, she called to him, disconcerted at being so close to this nocturnal and mask-like face. She called out several times, her voice becoming louder and louder. The sound of her voice died away, and then, seemed to reach Michel long afterwards, like a sling shot. He started but did not wake up. Then she shook Michel by the shoulder, uncovering his naked, defenceless chest. In his sleep, Michel uttered a heart-rending, sensual moan. Catherine laid her head on the heart of this man who was being transported by his dream to desire and anguish.

Catherine inspected the apartment which was in complete chaos, as if madmen in a terrible hurry had thrown in cartloads of furniture and incongruous objects.

She tried to tidy up without disturbing the silence. And, suddenly, Michel was in front of her, with the face of a sleep-walker, streaked by the bright light of noon. In a faint voice, he demanded coffee and insisted that Catherine draw the curtains.

The young man drank his coffee, smoked a cigarette, stretched and began to delight in the dim light filtering through the closed curtains. Then, he sought Catherine, calling her in his ringing voice:

--Catherine, where are you? What are you doing that I don't find you?

--Here, Michel, I'm here.

--I don't want you to work. That's the servant's job.

--And me, what shall I do then?

Catherine remained motionless, her arms dangling.

Michel asked for more coffee.

There were many more such days and nights. The night unleashed its anguish upon Michel like a fiendish bitch that has been chained up all day. And the days of Michel, half-drowned in sleep, slipped by, as if deaf and blind.

There was, however, an hour between day and night when Michel would appear before his wife, appeased of all emptiness, all fears, his face clear and handsome, his hands freed and compassionate. Then he would happily caress Catherine, all over her skin, right to the edge of her underwear. For a moment, he would remain immobile, his features drawn, his long eyelids closed and she would think: "I'm subjugated to him, but please God, let him take me without hurting me!" But soon, all warmth receded from Michel. Catherine was deserted in his arms, like a young sacrificial victim laid upon a stone altar.

In the evenings, Catherine stayed in the dark, alone. Michel would sit at the piano in a distant corner of the room, behind a folding-screen of straw, playing quietly. He would only light the lamp when his wife was asleep. A little before dawn he went to sleep in the kitchen.

One night, Catherine dreamt that Michel, without ever reaching her, was setting out towards her, coursing raging rivers one after the other that suddenly merged, crashing together in an extraordinary din. Awakening with a start, Catherine heard strident chords striking the piano, followed by the sound of shattering glass. She saw Michel's shadow

silhouetted upon the straw screen like the face of some unknown man glimpsed behind the curtains of a stranger's window. She called out. There was no reply. Just that motionless, bent shadow. Catherine hurried to the piano. She saw splinters of glass on the ground, on the keyboard.

--Go to sleep, Catherine, it's nothing, you see; I've broken a glass.

Michel was forcing himself to speak calmly, with deliberate slowness. As Catherine did not move, he wheeled around, and shouted.

--Go away, Catherine! What kind of habit is this, running around barefoot! Please go back to sleep. Don't I have the right any more now to some solitude, to my own life?

Catherine went back to bed. A door slammed, and Michel went to sleep in the next room throwing himself on the couch, still fully clothed.

In the morning, Catherine let her imagination run wild, recalling images of that black land where furnaces blasted the sky, day and night. She thought at great length about this shame she was sharing with Michel of being able to sleep in peace without ever wanting for bread. And she contemplated her white hands and her nails now grown long like the claws of a captive animal.

Winter drizzled down upon the city.

When Catherine leaned out the window overlooking the courtyard, deep and narrow as a well, for a moment her face and hands, like a mirror of water, would reflect the pale shimmerings of mother of pearl and oyster.

Michel suddenly came to life, dreaming of uniting Catherine's pallor and the beauty of the city, as intricately as light and water.

--Come, Catherine, I want to set up my palette with your colours, the way they ought to be.

With energetic strokes of his spatula, Michel began to strip off the dried paint and created a palette as fresh as a moist beach: sky, water, sand, pearl, and sea-shells. Catherine stared for a long time at the palette held up to her with her own colours.

--What are you thinking, Catherine?

--Nothing, Michel, your palette is beautiful but I'm not sure I can look like that all the time.

Michel assured Catherine that it would be a long time before she stopped resembling her portrait. He promised to go shopping with her and buy her all the lovely things that would complement her.

When the rain hammered all day long against the washed-out windowpanes, Catherine would sometimes cry out to Michel in a raucous voice which did not belong to this calm, damp land:

--I want to run till I'm breathless, barefoot through the puddles, with my younger sisters, barefoot through the puddles, barefoot, do you hear, Michel?

Michel glanced severely at Catherine and asked her not to raise her voice.

Catherine already possessed several marvellous dresses,

fine lingerie, strange and colourful jewelry. Michel had also given her a high-backed chair and a huge bed of dark wood.

The young man had reclaimed his narrow iron bed and placed it by the piano behind the screen. Here he had a little house of straw for the night. He would only light his lamp when his wife was asleep. Sometimes when Catherine awoke in the middle of the night, she would notice as in a dream, a strange straw hut in a corner of her room and the shadow of a man bent over the music which often failed his fingers.

One evening, while tucking Catherine into bed, Michel pulled off her long nightgown. Her slender body seemed to him well-shaped with its barely rounded breasts and hips. Michel had not counted on the softness of her skin beneath his fingers or on the warmth of this adolescent flesh between his clumsy arms. He stammered:

--You're warm, Catherine, so soft and warm . . .

He moved his trembling, icy hands over her body. He dreamt of exorcising this tender flesh. In a scarcely audible voice, he repeated:

--It's nothing, nothing . . .

His hands grew calm again, gently stroking Catherine's body as if he were rocking a child to sleep or soothing an invalid.

Once Catherine was lying in her bed, the sheets drawn up under her chin, she began to weep aloud. Michel heard her sobbing through her tears: "I'm married to a man who doesn't love me . . ." It was then that his long body crashed down upon her, heavily, like a groaning tree. Michel kept begging her pardon and kissing her face, her breasts.

By morning Catherine had become a woman. Michel collapsed at her side like a drowned man, repeating: "You are the very devil, Catherine, you are the very devil."

Catherine asked for the house keys on a little silver ring; she wanted to watch over the deliveries of sugar, the consumption of coffee, the washing, ironing and folding of

linen. She asked for coloured brooms and black soap.

Michel beseeched her not to go out on errands. He insisted that Catherine stay quietly at home like a pampered white cat in this captive world under the rain. He opened for her all the treasures of the chests and cupboards not under lock and key.

Michel forbade his wife to look after the household accounts or dismiss the servant as she had wanted. He grew more and more taciturn, his gaze, golden and fixed like a burning sun and he condemned his wife to a like dream.

Catherine would happily lock herself in the tiny bathroom all walled in mirrors. The warm water, the perfumed soaps, the bathtub as verdant as a leafy hollow, the creams and the perfumes were ravishing her endlessly. She would spend hours in the tepid water under billows of soap. She would try to hold her breath under water, dreaming of fishermen who dove for sponges and of exotic fish.

Sometimes when Catherine found Michel's aloofness since their wedding night especially lamentable, upon stepping out of the bath, she would go so far as to wipe her feet with her outrageously perfumed hair wrung out like a towel.

And so, the young woman would try on her dresses, one after another, slowly promenading three times around the bathroom, greeted here and there in the mirrors by her own erect and grave reflections. She conjured up a ritual whereby she slipped off her skirts and petticoats in the twinkling of an eye, dropping a perfect round of precious fabrics at her feet. Then, Catherine would loop all these great swaths around her arm, like trophies before folding them away in her perfumed closets.

But Catherine was longing to go to the market for vegetables, flowers and fruits. Once the servant had left, cupping her hands around her mouth, biting off each word and imitating the rhythms and the crude intonation of the strawberry merchant who passed under her windows in June, she

would cry out:

--Strawberries, strawberries, beautiful strawberries!

Catherine marched around the apartment blaring away as if sounding the trumpet call to awaken the world fast asleep in the winter, in the rain. Then, she threw herself into an armchair. Burying her head in the cushions, she would grin happily as if huge wild hands smearing her face had bestowed upon her all the wonderful odour and taste of strawberries.

Michel would remark sadly:

--Catherine, Catherine, what a whimsical little girl I've married.

And he would lower his eyes to the pattern on the carpet like a weary embroiderer, struggling to recreate the obscure design of a rare flower. Catherine followed Michel's glance. With him, she would explore this forest, interwoven with lines and colours, as if by sheer concentration, she could capture the very features of Michel's anguish, lost among the motifs of the carpet. Michel did not lift up his head. Catherine was growing weary of this game. In one unbelievably empty moment the designs of the carpet were exploding before her eyes.

Hurriedly, she cried out, all breathless:

--How quiet it is here! Say something, Michel, please, speak, do something! I just know it, the tick tock of the clock is going to take over the whole apartment again!

--Just like a monstrous heart, Catherine, like the

enormous heart of this tiny, quiet place I've brought you to.

Michel had not moved, speaking in a slow even tone as if reading aloud. Catherine whispered:

--Michel, you are evil.

The young man leapt to his feet.

--It's you who are evil, Catherine, a filthy woman that's what you are, like Lia, like all the others!

Catherine protested gently, almost tenderly.

--Michel, my husband, it's you who are evil.

An intolerable silence hung between them. Catherine stood before her husband, her hands tightly clenched, not a sign of relentment in her eyes, no tears, no reproaches, nothing was weakening the resistance of this thin, severe, erect girl repudiated at the threshold.

For a long time, Michel and Catherine still lived in these two single rooms panelled in wood, furnished with antiques, rare knick-knacks, and objects of common use, either inutile or damaged. Between the two rooms ran a narrow, gloomy, bare corridor that led to the bathroom.

The bustle of the city: market-places buzzing with odours, drizzling days, clattering pavements, wide, humming squares, metallic landscapes soaring up around the river and bridges, loud and clamouring human voices faded away like ebbing waves under the high, closed windows.

Behind the curtains of this cigar-coloured retreat, replete with carved mouldings and the odour of books and nuts, Michel and Catherine kept fleeing each other, bumping into each other, pretending to ignore each other and, being forever locked together in such a tiny space, were fearful of growing to hate one another.

All the long day, perched in her high-backed chair, Catherine read, embroidered, sewed.

One day she pricked her finger on purpose, crying out as if she'd been stabbed. Michel hastened to her, alarmed by such a piercing yell. He sucked the blood that dripped from her wounded finger. Falling to his knees, he clasped his arms around Catherine's legs and buried his head in the folds of her dress, inhaling the warmth of her lap. Without raising his head, muffled against Catherine's belly, he spoke as if from the depths of the earth:

--Catherine, are you there? Are you there, Catherine?

--Yes, I'm here, Michel.

Catherine's thimble rattled along the floor, interminably.

--Don't leave me Catherine, I beg you.

--I'm your wife, Michel, as you well know.

--Catherine, it's terrible, I don't love you.

--I know, Michel, I know.

Catherine's voice, apart from her heart, sang out its little, light, solitary song.

--Don't leave me all alone, Catherine.

--I'm right by you, Michel, so close that I hear you breathing at my belly like a baby that I could be carrying.

--I can only hurt you, Catherine, and yet I long for you.

Michel leapt up abruptly, took two steps towards the door and said curtly:

--Sit up, Catherine. Rest your head on the back of the chair, let your hair fall onto your shoulders. I don't want you to cry or laugh. Ah! How you can sew and embroider! What potent hands you have!

Catherine looked at her hands, fervently, respectfully. She pleaded:

--Michel, I beg you, let me do something else! The shopping, the meals . . . yes, that's it! I would love to bake a huge cake for Twelfth-night!

--You're confusing everything, Catherine. What is this

nonsense about cakes? I haven't married a cook, have I?
What about your cheeks flushed by the oven, your hair
smelling of bread? I want to paint you in monochrome, all
white, odourless, pale and fresh like virgin snow, still
as water in a bowl.

But Michel did not paint Catherine or anything else.

By now, the sound of dry and monotonous scales being hammered out on the piano all night long began to irritate Catherine even in her sleep.

But, during the day, she strove hard to become what Michel desired. She learned fables and poems by heart. This would keep her amused during the long, silent hours bent over her needlework. And sometimes, the fables and poems, in their bewitched existence, would burst like coloured veins, spilling over the whitest embroideries.

At other times, the needle was continually drawing the threads of the rediscovered childhood which she was restitching with lively, regular, little strokes, hoping to ward off the immobility of the days.

In the evening, the young woman carefully braided her hair before going to bed. In the morning, after loosening her braids, she would search in the mirror for the resemblance that Michel so eagerly sought, ~~the~~ a portrait of an infanta, pure-blooded daughter of kings.

But, in the shadows of the early morning, Catherine often discovered, not infantas, but four clear and lively sisters with combs in their flowing hair, milling around the lamp and exuding the fragrance of coffee and toasting bread. The youngest one would cry out whenever someone approached to comb her hair. The oldest had dusky curls and bore on her the whole shadow of the father.

The servant has tidied up everything and aired the room. She was an elderly woman, haughty, with a blue gaze, wide and lashless.

The odour of Michel's tardy sleep has been pursued and dispersed along with the dust and ashes. Fresh sheets have been put on the beds and all the air of the city has wafted through the wide open windows like billows of sea water. From the bathroom, Michel was shouting that he would die from the cold. Catherine then asked the servant to close the windows. But the servant who had served Lia, despised Catherine and would never obey her.

This angular woman with her insect eyes had huge hands the colour of tobacco which would smooth out Michel's messes. A few brisk and thorough gestures every afternoon would suffice to replace all the objects, furniture and knick-knacks thrown into drunken disarray whenever the young man passed by.

The servant then pushed the high-backed carved chair against the wall, saying in a distant voice which seemed to address an absent deity:

--If Madame would care to sit down.

With ceremony, she handed Catherine a basket with books, linen, spools, scissors. Catherine sat down, rearranged by the servant like everything else in this place that had been misplaced or picked up inadvertently. Resting against the woodwork inlaid like a bas-relief design, the

young woman read, or sewed until the evening meal which she would eat facing Michel's silence, as soon as the servant had departed.

The meals were difficult to plan and prepare for Michel was irritated by all cooking smells.

When, after a long succession of days and nights, Michel raised his head, his owl-like eye fastened upon Catherine with astonishment:

--Catherine, my little Catherine, what's happening, you've become so beautiful, so poignant?

--It's a slow death, Michel, it's nothing but a very slow death.

Catherine's words both surprised Michel and ravished him. He stammered:

--How well you've learned to say atrocious things, Catherine.

Catherine, standing near the window, her nose pressed against the pane, the muslin curtain falling on her back, was staring fixedly at that bare, grey wall behind which the world wove its vehement, tumultuous life.

--Why do we never go out, Michel? And all those concerts you had promised me . . .

Michel's face darkened. He seemed to be seeking something cruel and exact in the blue spiral of smoke curling up from his cigarette. Then, in a low but distinct voice, he uttered:

--That's exactly it, Catherine, not a single concert . . . And the season is drawing to a close . . . not a single concert; that's nothing, Catherine, it's only the desire that's missing.

Catherine turned around sharply. The curtain rippled over her in a lively effervescence of silvery light. Michel, dazzled, covered his eyes with his hand. He begged Catherine not to stand there anymore and to draw the curtains to shut out the sun. Catherine did not budge, her eyes wide open, crowned with light from head to foot.

In the enormous void where Catherine drifted, Michel felt there was nothing better for her to do than to lapse into childhood fantasies. He began his story:

--I will reclaim the house and garden for the whole summer and fall. I'll chase Lia away and that man who's with her. Together we'll cross the threshold, your hand on my arm like the true lords and masters of those grounds.

Catherine didn't know whether to believe Michel's words but the young man's voice became so enticing, enraptured with its own sound that she would listen, her elbows on her knees, her chin cupped between her hands.

--Will we really go there together, Michel? And I'll be able to pick all the flowers I want in the garden?

--All the living flowers will be placed in our power, Catherine, even the sensitive camomiles that quiver after they've been picked.

Catherine's silence lingered upon the mystery of plants and upon all the vulnerable things in this world. Michel was speaking slowly, without looking at Catherine, his eyes staring into the distance as if, at that very moment, he were seeing those things.

--There the piano resounds like a thunderstorm. Neither the house nor the garden at night are strangers to the beautiful tune rising from the mere touch of my fingers . . .

--And me, Michel, what do I do in your house?

--You, Catherine? You listen to my music and enjoy it, you make it sing out all the more beautifully because your little life so closely allied to my house and garden weighs upon my heart, continually mustering it . . .

At that moment, Catherine started to speak, the whole burden of her life pressing upon her words.

--Am I fine enough, Michel? Fair and delicate enough? Have I grown sufficiently pale and have I languished long enough in these two wood-panelled rooms? Have I read the most beautiful poems and learned by heart the most bitter fables? Am I not your wife and don't I have the right to the servant's respect?

--You are fine, Catherine, and fair and delicate. You shall enter the seigneurial home by the gateway and the servant will bow to you.

Catherine's voice broke:

--Michel, what shall I do in the hot summer sun?

--You must avoid the sun, Catherine, which colours and burns. I'll teach you nocturnal games of fever and anguish.

Michel was growing animated, excited, drunk with words believing that the breaking of his solitude was imminent. He ordered Catherine, right then and there, to don her evening dress which was the colour of camelias and threaded with gold and misty strands, scarcely visible in the soft fabric.

When Catherine appeared, proud, innocent and elegant, Michel insisted on circling her eyes himself, with a fine,

black line.

--How strange, Catherine, you look like an idol, now, with your blue eyes set in black like precious stones.

Michel knocked over the straw screen as if cutting down a hedge. He made Catherine sit by the piano and began to play with great abandon. Catherine remained seated for part of the night, attentive to Michel's presence singing within her. Slowly, drowsiness overcame her as she snuggled cozily in the armchair, her hair tumbling down, her feet and hands tucked under the folds of her voluminous skirts.

Suddenly, the fury of a dissonant chord startled the young woman. She opened her eyes and saw Michel leave the piano, come towards her, lean over her. She felt his long hands smooth the hair from her face, sweeping the strands into a knot on top of her head, like a bunch of obtrusive leaves.

Michel was scrutinizing her with fierce attention and his terse features hardened under such intense concentration. He smelled of liquor and sweat. He was holding Catherine's head, gently, by her long curls. He spoke to her in the third person, reproachfully, with fascination:

--This woman is so beautiful that I want to drown her.

The next day there was a knock at the door. Catherine opened it, immediately recognizing Lia despite the darkness of the stairway.

In that moment's silence, the odour of the apartment monopolized the whole space, like a family dog noisily and insistently manifesting its presence. Lia took a deep breath, then crossed the threshold.

--I forgot my key and I didn't want to ring the bell and wake up Michel.

Catherine, confused, stepped aside to let Lia enter. The young woman was wearing very high heels which rang out clearly, sharply. She entered the kitchen and asked for a cup of coffee. Catherine prepared the coffee and served it to Lia in Michel's dainty cup, while Lia's piercing gaze studied her every move. Lia remained standing, drank her coffee, then lit a cigarette in a way reminiscent of Michel's elegant mannerisms.

--So you're Catherine . . .

The low, husky voice sounded surprised, disdainful.

--Yes, I'm Catherine, and you, you are Lia . . .

--I am Lia for eternity just as you are Catherine for as long as you can be. Doesn't it seem strange to you not to be able to be anything other than oneself, until one's last breath, and even afterwards, so they say?

--Yes, said Catherine, turning the full force of the tap over Lia's cup, but I've never thought about it.

She swung around to face Lia:

--And so, what does it matter that I'm Catherine without ever changing? I'm Michel's wife and I like it that way.

Lia blew a puff of smoke to the ceiling.

--Really, you're Michel's wife and you believe that?

Catherine stared at Lia in a stupor, at that long, black and narrow eye in profile, that aquiline nose, that small, firm bottom set high on long, thin legs, all that noble and bizarre carriage of a sacred bird.

Lia then said:

--When does the servant arrive?

Catherine did not answer and started to leave the room. Lia, who had just settled herself in the armchair, drawled in a deceptively gentle tone:

--But what are you doing? Michel mustn't be awakened; the daylight irritates him, wounds him, the less he has of it, the more alive he is. Surely you're aware of that?

Catherine, taken aback, sank down on the stool used for peeling vegetables.

Lia spoke of the pain that the light had inflicted on Michel in his most tender childhood years, when the servant would take them, both wearing large straw hats, to pick strawberries in the ardent July heat: Michel was already complaining with the weak voice of a sickly child about the sharp song of the cicadas and the scalding summer heat. He wanted to stay in the cool shade of the house till evening.

With a deep sadness, Catherine was recognizing the charm of Lia's speech so similar to Michel's. She spoke in a half-whisper, overcome by the awkwardness of her speech and the urgency of its truth:

--Me, I've always loved the daylight and the summer time . . .

--You seem rather pale for a girl of the sunshine. But I see my brother dresses you well . . .

There was a lengthy silence during which the women became acutely aware of the objects and the furniture in the kitchen, just as if they had, in turn, thrown them at each other. Catherine's arrangement leapt before Lia's eyes who mentally restored everything to its original disorder. Catherine's gaze followed Lia's, settling everything back in place.

Then Lia started to smoke again without lifting her eyes away from this silent and small girl, hunched up on a stool, facing her. When the servant's arrival was imminent, Catherine could sit still no longer. She jumped to the floor and said to Lia:

--You're out of cigarettes. I'll go get you some . . .

Catherine hurried to ask the servant not to come that day. She was afraid of being humiliated in her own home, before the servant.

The servant's suspicious surprise when Catherine told her not to come in, the cigarettes at the corner cigar store, the storekeeper's grin, the huge, blue sun over the dusty city, then again the dim stairway and the odorous wood-panelled rooms.

At the doorway, she realized that Lia had awakened Michel and was speaking quietly to him. Catherine began to rinse the lettuce under the tap, then she decided to peel the carrots and leeks.

The brother and sister were arguing bitterly. Words, snatches of phrases flew about, winging through the door, piercing as arrows, immediately retracted, chewed over, whispered in syllables, confused, buzzing, plaintive. Each reproached the other of the same treachery. Lia pointed to Michel's marriage as equivalent to her own mistake.

Catherine let the water from the tap flow over her hands as if over wounds. Not for a second did she pause in peeling the vegetables.

She prepared the meal and meticulously set the table.

Michel and Lia appeared, still quite flushed with the explosion of their quarrel in a similar excited rage, like two long animals, alike and fraternal, from the same breed, lean-shanked, self-sufficient.

Was not even that peculiar mark of a small vein in the shape of a Y on Michel's forehead also found on his sister's? Michel had once told Catherine that this was the

sign of poets. And this sign was upon Lia, like a tiny claw mark.

Catherine was afraid that Michel would reproach her for her flushed cheeks reddened by the oven. Michel saw nothing. He didn't notice the servant's absence. It was Lia who was surprised.

Catherine answered that in such a tiny apartment there was no room for another person and besides she really preferred to look after her own household. While saying this, she was watching Michel carefully. But nothing stirred in that faint, yellow light filtering through his long, lowered eyelids. Catherine promised herself that she would dismiss the servant.

The summer was drawing to a close and no mention was made of returning to the seigneurial home.

Michel and Lia never spoke about it. Catherine was surprised by this. A tacit agreement seemed to exist between brother and sister about the place of their childhood, condemned to the solitude of that summer which scorched the trees, while brambles and grasses grew wild in the garden.

The evening meal found Michel, Catherine and Lia, around the same table, served by Catherine. Brother and sister gave vent to a witty exchange of words, light, elliptical words from which Catherine found herself excluded but which were inscribed in her heart like wild and sacred signs of the mystery that was Michel.

The hooded voice of Lia sometimes carried unexpected inflections, arresting, sensual, and Michel's voice would answer, smooth, pure, weary.

The summer exhaled its nocturnal breath, like a warm muzzle rubbing against the closed windows. With the shutters enclosing the apartment, there reigned a freshness of cool cellars. In defiance of all seasons, Michel and Lia seemed to want to institute a kind of time, theirs exclusively, motionless, retrospective.

Their conversations had neither beginning nor end. They resumed them each evening with a passion, without apparent pretext until they gradually died away or else ended abruptly in the middle of a sentence, a word. Brother and

sister would confront each other, face to face, like fighting cocks, having, without paying attention to it, reached the ill-guarded approaches of each other's furious hearts.

Lia threatened to leave. Michel begged her to stay. She would shrug her shoulders, impatiently. Then, Michel screamed at her to get out immediately. The door slammed, Lia's heels clattered away in the deep silence of the carpetless staircase.

A week passed and Lia did not return to the apartment. Michel was very worried. He blamed Catherine for Lia's absence.

Lia came back, silent and stiff, a tall girl, with a narrow, bony body, moulded from baked clay. There followed interminable evenings when no one spoke, amid the cigarette smoke and the light chinking of glasses.

Brother and sister busied themselves with playing endless games of solitaire upon the patterns of the carpet. This game seemed so serious and sad that Catherine thought that this must, undoubtedly, be the way exiled kings and queens whiled away their time. Catherine worked at her needle-point, slowly, with huge, sleepy sighs. She would lapse into fragmented dreams where Michel and Lia were continually appearing as the king and queen of cards, setting crowns upon each other's heads, repeating this gesture endlessly, for this was eternity.

Not once was Michel astonished by the novel dishes that Catherine contrived for him, leaning anxiously over him as if surveying the effects of a magic potion.

--Do you like it, Michel?

Catherine's hands were bustling from the table to the oven, passing under Michel's nose, a little cut darkening the root of her right thumb, where the palm swells up like the throat of a bird.

Silence was enclosing Michel. Lia, too, was quiet,

oppressed, abandoned, like a stone urn, powdered with sand, that had leant upon the earth for a long time, merging with it.

Catherine's eyes darkened with concentration as she watched Lia invaded by a kind of melancholy stupor which was slowly tarnishing her, drying her out like a fading sunburn.

Catherine was finding life stranger and stranger. The next day Lia refused wine, meat, coffee and all the condiments. Catherine prepared a little rice for her, like an offering to the dead.

Lia had just broken off with her lover.

Michel soon complained about the intolerable aggravation the strong odours of the kitchen caused him. He participated in Lia's fast and did not want to eat anything exciting or colourful anymore.

Catherine carefully noted the names of the herbs the servant had taught her. And occasionally, in the evening, when time was dragging, she would name them, one after the other as if they were living companions. The names leaped forth, one by one, breaking almost immediately on her tongue, dispelling their intact perfume: marjoram, basil, rosemary, laurel, and sage . . .

--What are you winging there, Catherine, in a whisper, as if you were calling up spirits?

And Lia let her book fall onto her lap. Her beautiful strange eye, that thin, black stain of wet ink, paused for a second on Catherine.

--I'm not singing anything, I'm not singing anything,
I'm bored.

Lia returned to her book. Michel was also reading. One would have thought one was in an austere study hall guarded by silence. Catherine began to think that, with all this severity, the brother and sister could well betray the little blue star engraved in the middle of their foreheads.

It all seemed as if the world had grown insentient, until the day Lia suddenly stopped reading, buried her face in her hands and wept and wept between her thin fingers. Michel had stood up. He was looking at Lia, stupidly, reproachfully. Catherine grew very pale. As Lia's chagrin was continuing without any solace, she approached the young woman, speaking to her as if she were a sick child:

--Lia, you musn't cry, you're so beautiful, just like an Egyptian queen.

Catherine gently raised her hands to Lia's face. She pulled away the clenched fingers, kissed her hard, burning salty cheek.

The young woman was greatly taken aback. Then, violently, she grabbed Catherine's small, fresh face towards her, murmuring in her ear, "that she was sick with love . . ."

Catherine was upset by the anguish of Lia's passion. It seemed to her that even the air in the young woman's shadow became livelier, lashing her heart. The entire apartment began to stir with the tumultuous rhythm of Lia's sorrow, of Lia's anger, of Lia's tears and the memories of Lia's burned flesh. And Michel faded into the background, paling before Catherine's eyes like someone who has never loved.

She would have liked to question Lia about the delicate face of lost love. But she did not dare and kept quiet, being content to watch Lia eagerly, interrogating the brown, dry, young body, searching it for traces of the fire, the secret of the being who had given herself and who had been received.

Catherine was particularly happy, and at peace, when Lia, without smiling or speaking, let down her long, black shiny hair. Catherine would bring combs and hair-pins. Holding the mirror, she remained motionless during the whole lengthy hairdressing. Lia said:

--Give me something to drink, Catherine.

Catherine brought her water in a clouded glass. Lia's lips remained dry as if she were feverish. After gulping the water down, she pressed the glass slowly to her cheek, her forehead.

--Ah! how good it is, how fresh . . .

Then she shivered:

--It's so cold, Catherine.

Catherine then bent over the fireplace and relit the fire. Soon Lia was holding her hands over the flames to warm herself and also, she would say, to see her skeleton in the glowing transparence of her fingers.

Catherine began to embroider linen with Lia's monogram. She loved the leathery smell of Lia's luggage so colourfully splashed with the names of foreign lands she had visited with her lover. Lia gave Catherine two crude pearls to make into earrings.

One evening when it was raining heavily, Catherine begged Lia not to return to her hotel. She invited her to spend the night on the grey sofa in the kitchen and brought her a woollen blanket and two sheets. The next morning, Catherine awakening early, had to stay in bed a long time, not daring to move for fear of wakening the sleeping brother and sister.

Michel kept out of the way. With a gloomy eye, he watched the comings and goings of Catherine and Lia; harbouring in his heart the anxiety caused by such friendship between the two women, he was careful not to intervene and take Lia away from Catherine.

Sometimes Lia would ask Catherine to read to her. Catherine read badly in a monotonous voice, either stumbling over the difficult words or lifting her eyes from her book to catch, were it only for a moment, that kind of ecstatic death which occasionally passed over Lia's face, tightening her eyelids, pinching her nostrils, stiffening all her features.

Catherine wondered what sovereign power would possess the young woman thus, in the midst of such barren evenings and, quietly, right under the eyes of Catherine and Michel, carry her off to the other side of the world.

One evening, Catherine called to Lia, as if she were afraid of losing her in the bottom of an abyss and along with her the secret of that deep enchantment which possessed her. Lia blinked her eyelashes and the colour slowly flowed back into her cheeks. She stretched and very wearily, asked Catherine:

--Little fool, why are you bothering me? I know very well you read badly. I've not been blind to any of your faults, you can be sure of that. But I was so far and so well away that nothing could hurt me.

Lia wanted to take the book out of Catherine's hands. But Catherine held Lia's arm.

--Lia, please, answer me, it's him you're thinking of, isn't it? It's him who all of a sudden causes your face to turn as pale as if he were dragging you to the end of the

world?

--To the very doors of death, Catherine. If I were to tell you that, you wouldn't understand. But aren't you rather forward this evening?

Lia seemed to swell up with anger. She was looking at Catherine, who without lowering her eyes, persisted, repeating in a clear voice:

--Lia, Lia even if you're angry, answer me. I want to know so badly. Why did you break off with this man you love?

--How dare you ask me such a question? Too bad for you. I'm afraid my answer won't satisfy you at all; we're not of the same world, you and I. Listen carefully. I left him, freely, because of my pride, for an offense he committed towards me, without being aware of it, and neither his heart nor his body had anything to do with it.

--I don't understand. I don't understand, Catherine repeated desperately.

--Remember the tale of "The Princess and the Pea", said Michel, who had drawn near. His face was beaming. He leaned towards Lia, offered her his arm, and slowly, as if for a dance, led his sister to the piano.

Lia began to play with quiet confidence in her art. Michel was wounded by this perfection he could never attain, and yet, at the same time, relieved as if Lia had discharged him from an effort beyond his ability. Lia played in his stead.

She also started to paint, after scraping off the palette that Michel had covered with Catherine's colours. Lia did not tire of evoking the red ochre of the land of the seigneurs devoured by the black heart of the pine trees. But she never finished her great chaotic canvases, coal-black, bleeding.

Lia's canvases so greatly tormented Michel that he begged her not to paint anymore. Lia looked her brother straight in the eye and hurriedly announced that she would soon give a concert. At this news, Michel felt such great bitterness in the depths of his being that his face seemed stricken and aged on the spot.

As the date of the concert drew near, Michel complained more and more about the fever that was attacking him in the evenings, simultaneously freezing and burning him. Lia spoke of nothing but pianos, concert halls, acoustics, critics. Then she sat down at the piano and practised till morning.

Michel listened to his sister, searching for faults, tracking them down, foreseeing them, creating them, all with acute attention, as if he were supplicating a destructive god.

Up to the last moment he hoped that Lia would not give this concert. He was anticipating that she would not be able to cross that formidable passage that separates the best prepared plans from their complete realization in the light of day, that point at which he himself, always balked, like a rearing horse.

The evening of the concert, several minutes before her departure, Lia, composed herself, pressing her hands flat against her skirt. Michel sharply reproached her for having destroyed the palette with its seaside colours that he had prepared for Catherine's portrait.

Lia restrained herself from leaping on him. She turned around slowly, subduing her will in a sinuous movement of her long neck. She was in perfect control of her face which remained impassive and of the hard and heavy burden of her heart, but her hands began to tremble.

--My poor Michel, it's not really worth the pain of working yourself up into such a state. You'll redo your palette when you can, and as for Catherine, you'll invent her all over again, as pale, sweet, transparent, and empty as you want; you have a whole lifetime for that. But me, I'm going to play now. And I ask you not to set my nerves more on edge . . .

Michel had drawn close to Lia. He was breathing heavily, anger seemed to emanate simultaneously from all parts of his body. He was speaking through his teeth, cracking each word like a nut.

--You won't play at this concert, Lia, will you? Please. See how your hands tremble . . . You know very well you'll never be able to do it . . . Look, but look, your hands are trembling . . . You feel them trembling, don't you? . . . Lia, your hands are trembling . . .

Lia stepped back, sprang forward, and slapped Michel twice with all her might. Her long brown hands grew calm again. Gently, with great care, she drew on her doeskin gloves and departed.

Michel bathed his burning cheeks in fresh water, then lit up a cigarette, which he immediately extinguished.

Catherine startled by this extraordinary scene did not dare to move when, suddenly, Michel's voice sounded right by her, dry and rude. He had had to call her several times already and was growing impatient.

--Catherine, I'm speaking to you, do you hear, Catherine, my wife?

Catherine could not move or speak. She heard again the sound of the slaps whistling through the air, exploding in her head. She cried out and lifted her hands to her face.

Michel was standing before her, she who had just slapped him. He dragged her to the bed and possessed her, awkwardly, furiously.

Lia did not come back the next day or any of the following days. Michel pretended not to notice. His main concern in the minuscule apartment consisted of fleeing Catherine: Catherine's eyes, the rustle of her dress, the sound of her steps, the noise of the comb in her hair, even the murmur of her sleep. Michel would have wanted to drive out his shame like one throws a girl onto the streets. His shame fell upon Catherine and by a thousand subterfuges, he avoided being in the same room with her.

Michel pored over the newspapers and musical journals, feverishly searching for any articles on Lia's concert. Sometimes, mention was made of a tall dark girl with bronzed hands, of her piano lesson, well learned and well repeated, properly, without flaws, but, also without any heavenly gift.

When Michel was convinced that nowhere was there mention of "genius", of "sacred correspondence", of "inspired medium", he could not restrain his joy and sought to be reunited with Lia.

She came back one winter evening. She was very weary. Once she had taken her coat off, Michel and Catherine saw that she was still wearing the black dress of her concert, fitted over her thin body like the sheath of a sword.

Then it was Michel who played for Lia, with a kind of light-hearted peace. Lia crossed her hands, leaned her head on his shoulder, flicking ashes all over herself.

She no longer wore any rings or bracelets, she seemed

to forget about her lilac dress and the other one, saffron-coloured, which fitted narrowly over her hips like bandages covered with black scribblings. Lia continued wearing her concert dress which grew shiny and wrinkled. One Sunday she added a little linen collar after having asked Catherine to iron it.

Lia settled permanently in the apartment. Just before dawn, she would extinguish her cigarette, stretch out on the sofa in the kitchen and sleep, an immobile sleep, until late in the afternoon.

After dinner, Michel played slow, serene pieces for Lia. Lia, resembling a calcinated raven, did not seem to hear anything. Michel spoke animatedly about the purity of rediscovered childhood. Growing impatient, Lia begged Michel to be quiet. If, occasionally, Michel addressed Catherine, it was only to praise Lia's thinness which he compared to the pure lines of the spirit. One evening, Catherine heard him saying to Lia:

--Lia, you are washed like water, my sister water, it is you, Lia.

One single time again, Michel's embittered body fell upon Catherine, fired up with a brief light of pleasure, only then to complain like a destructive, receding wave that "love was corrupt".

Order seemed to reign. The roles were cast, once and for all, clearly and neatly between Catherine and Lia:

"Martha and Mary," thought Lia. "The innocent one cleans the

house, her humiliated body ignorant of love. The shame of Michel is upon her. And me, Lia, I am the honour and the higher life of Michel. The world of childhood, infinite leisure and wild anguish is ours alone."

But Lia was wasting away, sealing off her life, and her lips grew thin like those of very old women.

One day, mention was made of a visit from the notary. Michel was surprised by it and Lia seemed to go berserk. She begged Catherine to help her find her jewels which were scattered about the apartment. When she had found them, she threw them in a handkerchief whose four corners she folded together. The jewels clattered about like marbles.

Catherine began to think with delight about the notary's visit. Wasn't he the first visitor that she had ever seen since her marriage?

The notary did not come. It was Lia who spoke to Michel.

She dropped her jewels on the table with a brusque gesture and told Michel that she was giving them to him.

Michel recognized his mother's jewels. He recalled all the bitterness that he and Lia had already experienced concerning these jewels. Without looking at Lia, he murmured:

--What are you doing?

--Take them, Michel. They're yours.

--It wasn't really worth it to have argued with me so bitterly about them the day our mother died.

Lia backed towards the door. She spoke drily as if nothing she said could harm her.

--Michel, remember the illuminated book of hours that mother loved so much and that couldn't be found after her death? Well, it was I who had hidden it. But I'm giving it

back, I'm giving it to you along with the rings and the emerald bracelet. Take it all, Michel, and the silver cross from Italy . . .

--Lia, what's going on? I don't understand.

Lia lifted her arms like someone hastily throwing his things about before hurrying off.

--Take everything, Michel, everything and the piano and the rare books. I'm going to hurt you, Michel. But you understand, once two people have begun to hurt each other, sooner or later, they reach the limit of the pain they can cause each other. It's inevitable, it happens, it has happened, it's atrocious and then, it's over.

Again, she lifted her arms, she was trembling, a great fury crucified upon the door.

--You can take it all, Michel, father's gun, the red boots he gave me for my tenth birthday, all the walking-sticks, the hunting crops . . .

--Lia, what's happening? You're drunk, it can't be? Why are you stripping yourself apart in this way? I don't want your gifts. There is only one thing still close to my heart, that estate I own jointly with you, our mutual childhood, cruel yet sweet.

Lia spoke quickly, leaning against the door.

--It's over, Michel, there isn't anything anymore, no more childhood, house, garden, park, they've all been taken, even the stagnant pool . . .

Her tall body shrivelled like a parched, broken reed,

Lia was running her bony, trembling hands over her face.

Violently, Michel seized her hands.

--Lia, what are you saying? Are you going mad?

Angrily, Lia jerked herself away.

--No, not mad, but lucid, clear-sighted, hardened . . .

--Tell me everything, what happened?

Lia cried:

--The house is going to be sold!

Michel's voice dwindled like a thread on the verge of breaking:

--It's that man who's done this?

Lia drew herself up, speaking with dignity as if relating a dramatic story which did not involve her.

--I was subjugated to him until the final humiliation. Do you hear me, Michel, subjugated like a whipped hound, and I begged him on my knees to keep me and take me one more night, just one more night.

Michel turned away:

--That filthy man, Lia, no, it's not true.

There was a moment choked with silence broken only by Lia's breathing, her chest heaving like a gasping patient.

Michel lifted his hands towards Lia with the distraught gesture of an alarmed hypnotist.

--Wake up Lia, you're dreaming, it isn't possible. How could this be?

--Don't you remember the terms? The notary will explain them to you. That if one of us wants to sell the

estate that's all that's required.

--But you can't want that, you, Lia?

Lia burst out laughing.

--Me, Michel, want or not want? You know very well I no longer have a choice. There exists a man who possesses me to the very marrow of my bones. I can only do what he wants. And what he wants, he wants very badly, I assure you. He had only to touch me for me to surrender him everything in one instant of dizziness. From our first encounter he coveted the house and the garden. From the first pressure of his fingers digging into my shoulder, I gave him the estate.

Lia had sat down on the carpet, right next to the fireplace, her hair dishevelled, her head on her knees. With his hand, Michel pushed away the jewels that were on the table. A ring rolled onto the ground. Lia was sobbing and calling to Michel.

--Michel, Michel, please forgive me.

Michel did not move, groping for contemptuous words. The words hissed weakly through his teeth.

--You, so proud, so noble . . .

--I'll tell you everything, Michel, everything. This man has gone. He has abandoned me like a loaf of old black bread that one throws away after breaking. He has sailed away on a decrepit boat. After each departure the flags are changed, and the name of a different woman is painted on the hull. Once that boat was called "Lia", and that man was mine, and I was his, entwined together like two vines twisted

in a single tress.

--Shut up, Lia, shut up. Please!

--I'm so cold, Michel!

Michel pushed Lia aside. He bent over the hearth. The odour of dead ashes clung to his face dampened with tears. He lit a pathetic little fire. He got up, laid his hand upon his sister's shoulder and she raised her ravaged face towards him.

--You know, Michel, on the evening of the concert your wish was granted. Because you had truly wished it, that fear, from the bottom of your heart. I played badly because of that fear paralyzing each one of my fingers. . .

--Forgive me, Lia, please forgive me.

Michel gently stroked Lia's hair as if afraid of hurting it. Lia lifted her head, defying Michel, breathing heavily like a trapped animal.

--And your little girl brought over from the blast furnaces? You continually wash her and polish her like a fresh-water pebble. But what of her pale heart, what can you do about that? Soon you'll resemble your wan little girl; you'll tell me that the weather's fine and that love is calm and limpid like a glacier lake.

--Be quiet, Lia, you musn't talk about Catherine.

--I will talk about Catherine! It's only fair that our childhood home be taken away from us, didn't we betray it, both of us?

--It's you who began, Lia . . .

The fire was drawing poorly and filling the room with smoke. Lia closed her eyes, speaking in a low, surly voice, like a tired story-teller, dreamily scolding children.

--Oh! how badly this fire draws! The mother has been dead now for five months. The father hunts all day, the servant has fled away, and the two children, alone, crouched by the wood fire in the abandoned house, make a pact and swear fidelity to each other!

Michel had knelt at Lia's feet:

--Lia, Lia, how far away everything seems, how ruined and soiled. What are we going to do now?

--Nothing, nothing, Michel, we are nothing, absolutely nothing, just two poor lost children. Oh! this smoke burns my eyes. My poor Michel, we haven't any power, look, you don't even know how to start a fire.

Catherine came in, saw the brother and sister weeping, leaning on one another. She crossed the room, lit the fire and prepared the coffee. Her hands were trembling. She concentrated on not dropping, upsetting or breaking anything, as if the very safety of her life depended on the surety of each of her movements. She stared for a long time at the tiny trail of steam escaping from the coffee-pot. Perhaps for the first time, a great rage submerged all her sorrow, wildly seeking an issue in her childish, subjugated being.

That night she dreamt: "The seigneurial home was cursed and destined to flames. The tall building was flaming to the sky and collapsed with a loud din. For some time, a

glowing splinter burned on Catherine's wrist, then completely disappeared once the young woman had moved off down the road."

Time slipped imperceptibly by Catherine, Michel and Lia.

In that confined corner by the fireplace, alternately powdered by ashes and burned by spitting logs, the brother established a kind of baroque camping-ground where he invited his sister. Glasses, books, cigarettes, ashtrays overflowing with butts accumulated on the carpet, marking Michel and Lia's places. They hardly ever moved and, twice a day, Catherine would bring them white fish and rice.

Autumn passed, then, in the middle of winter, Catherine fell very ill.

First, her hands failed her, refusing all contact with the things and the people of that house. The young woman no longer interfered in the brother and sister's litter. Soon, the apartment resembled a chaotic bazaar. There was no one to go shopping and carry provisions back to the wood-panelled rooms. The brother and sister grew hungry. Lia nagged Catherine who did not budge.

The servant had to be asked to look after the shopping and the cooking once again. She went about it all the wrong way, grumbling continually for she was aging and wanted more than anything else to relax, dreaming of giving vent to the lamentations of a woman born into servitude.

Catherine, folding her idle hands, soon found that the odour of the apartment was becoming unbearable. She threw the windows wide open. Michel and Lia were horrified because it

was so cold. But Catherine would not listen. She was choking like someone on the verge of death.

Brother and sister wrapped themselves up in shawls and blankets. Lia declared that she couldn't live in a public square exposed to the four winds. Angrily, she slammed the windows shut. Catherine immediately opened them again. She leaned out to catch any passing odour of the earth that was not cursed.

All night long, offensive smells kept Catherine awake: old half-extinguished butts, dried-out woodwork, paints and turpentine (for Lia had begun to paint again), boiled fish, stale beer.

But by morning, one odour particularly irritated her: the acrid stench of brown flesh smothered in wood beside a tiny fire which exhaled black smoke and soot, as it rose and enveloped the whole room.

Catherine sat up in her bed, crying out "that she was fair and white, that deep inside her, she was smelling fresh snow and that she did not belong to the alien race of two impotent gypsies, the colour of saffron."

No one heard Catherine's cry. It was just before dawn. The steady breathing of the brother and sister echoed from one room to the other, in almost regular intervals. Catherine covered her ears with her hands. Her heart was beating to the point of breaking. Her palms were throbbing loudly, two recent memories pressed against her temples, echoing the plaintive sounds of Michel's sleep, while Lia's

raucous voice hissed furiously into Catherine's ear.

Catherine did not sleep. It seemed as if she could never sleep again.

First, Lia's breathing altered, subsided, developed into sighs, then yawns. Catherine imagined she was violently slamming the door between Lia's awakening and herself. But Catherine no longer seemed capable of any movement in that state of acute attention which was seizing her whole supine body. She would anticipate each sound. When Lia first stepped to the floor, Catherine's ear was already exploding with this light sound. One never knew exactly when Lia was pulling on her slippers. Her feet seemed to leave the bed shod in felt.

Michel's sister glided along the little corridor, her long hair trailing down her back. Catherine longed to smear the bathroom mirrors with soot so that no thin, bronzed image would be reflected there that morning.

Feeling Catherine's eyes fixed upon her, Lia turned around, surprised:

--Not up yet?

Catherine didn't answer and turned her head to the wall.

When Lia came back, her hair fastened on top of her head, Catherine shut her eyes, all the while retaining the precise silhouette of her surprised and irritated sister-in-law on her lowered eyelids. A second later, in the dark, Catherine was sensing each of Lia's movements: as she slipped

on her lingerie, pulled up and fastened her stockings, drew on her faded dress like a glove.

Then Catherine so accurately counted the click clack of the approaching high heels that she opened her eyes at the precise moment when Lia was pressing her face to the pages of an old psalter book which she was eagerly sniffing like a bouquet composed of leather and ink. Conscious of Catherine's gaze, Lia quickly spun around like a child caught in the act. She muttered through her teeth: "Aren't you asleep?", left the room, slamming the door so sharply that Michel started in his sleep, behind the screen.

Catherine was suddenly afraid of being closed in near Michel's inert body. The darkness seemed intolerable. She got out of bed, barefooted, each step an effort. "How all this here tortures me," she thought as the stench of Lia's first cigarette wafted under the door.

After opening two windows, onto the courtyard and onto the street, Catherine paced nervously from one to the other, like a tracked animal seeking an escape. She was trembling with cold and was ceaselessly measuring the courtyard and the street in some grave and mysterious comparison as if her whole life suddenly depended on an elusive balance.

The curtains flapped in the breeze. Michel snuggled down in his bed. With a drowsy movement he pulled the blankets over his shoulders, uncovering his delicate feet. Catherine turned away.

When the pallid winter day had faded away, Catherine measured the anguish invading all her senses. The young woman had spent this miserable day stretched out on her bed, suffering from the sounds and smells, from all that was to be seen, touched, tasted. The servant would call her "Madame" and found her to be very ill. Twice, the old, somber hands remade the bed, turned over the pillow.

Catherine allowed herself to be taken, lifted up, laid down, her hair tumbling over her white nightgown; a thin, malleable girl. For a moment, her head rested upon the servant's ample chest and Catherine felt a longing to return to the tender country of mothers, where she could sleep. She begged the servant to watch the door so neither Michel nor Lia would come in. The servant guarded Catherine's room. Brother and sister argued with the servant because there was no fire in the other room.

"Not a single fresh spot left on the pillow," Catherine was thinking.

The servant returned and addressed Catherine with great deference as if she were mistress of the fire. Without waiting any longer, Lia strode in, walked resolutely to the chimney, knelt down and foraged in the fire with much poking about of tongs and the poker. A log rolled onto the carpet emitting a shower of sparks.

Brother and sister returned to their stations before the fire like two figurines of blackened wood. Michel recalled

those silent autumn evenings when two children's capes were smoking as they hung over a blazing fire in the immense kitchen.

--Lia, don't you think this is extraordinary? What, in fact, is the present? Don't you at this very moment smell that irritating stench of singed homespun cloth? You've burned your cloak on purpose, in the hope of finding intact in "that devil of a scent" as you used to say, all the pungent and humid flavour of a long day's duck hunt amid the fog and swamp . . .

--Strange scent, it's the rug I burned.

No movement disturbed the stillness of Michel and Lia. The sound of their voices would surface, calm and monotonous, bereft of any vibration or expression. They didn't look at one another and seemed to be speaking to the dead heart of the fire.

--Lia, remember the bursts of light flaming on the copper pots and the walls polished by that beautiful time-worn sheen, dark as your mat skin.

Twice, a little muscle twitched furiously in Lia's cheek, a scratch on the smooth skin tightly stretched over her bones.

--You annoy me! I have other very clear memories of that huge kitchen with its calcinated wood, with its magnificent fire, with its heavy, shiny and ancient pots and pans. I remember other patinas, other pigments and I feel all warm and eager again. Please be quiet. Don't speak to me

of that cursed house.

Michel bowed his head. Lia quickly continued:

--And your wife, what will we do with her?

--Are you speaking of Catherine?

And Michel's voice changed:

--She's sleeping, I think.

Catherine was playing dead. All the troubles of the world were piercing her flesh, as if she had been cast under a spell right on the spot.

Soon the sheets burned Catherine's skin, her nightgown felt as heavy as lead, her hands and feet grew numb from the terrible chill invading her beneath her nails. In this frenzied state beleaguering all the parts of her body, Catherine was hording up her tears like the last possible death not to be released.

She couldn't bear any food. And when she had refused to drink, tightening her dry lips, the servant told Michel to call a doctor. Catherine protested that she wasn't sick but there were really too many things in this house she could not bear. She ordered the piano to be locked up and she asked the servant to throw the key into the street.

The servant obeyed all her orders, captivated by this revolt she was discovering in Catherine, ravished that she would be allowed to perform such a rare service in her old age.

Catherine had the paintings of the brother and sister ripped from the wall. The servant was ordered to knock down the straw screen, to sweep away all traces of ashes and fire.

Catherine threw off her sheets and her nightgown, twisted her hair on top of her head in a chignon hard as a nut so not a wisp would drag in this place of misery, closed her eyes, fell silent evoking deafness like a balm, while her nostrils grew pinched, rejecting all smells.

Catherine's nakedness worried the servant for it was very cold in the fireless room, with the windows wide open. Catherine accepted the servant's coat that was thrown over

her. But soon the smell of the poor, old woman became unbearable. She was suffocating and the servant hurried off to fetch a doctor. In her mad haste, she forgot to close the bedroom door.

Catherine lay exposed in her passion as if lying in state. The light from the open door was falling upon her closed face. She knew that the children of the seigneurs, there, close by within reach of her hand were watching her, stupified. Michel approached the bed, weeping. He murmured in a scarcely intelligible voice:

--Catherine, is it that you are going to die that you're so ill today? How beautiful you are, you've never been so beautiful, Catherine.

Catherine was thinking: "How my death pleases you Michel," and she longed for the comfort of death. Michel spoke of painting Catherine's death-mask immediately. In her weakened state, the young woman dreamt that she was eating ripe peaches, alone, in an immense orchard where thick trees were casting shadows deep as holes on the warm grass. Then, as the dream continued, she heard, within herself, once again, the tone of Michel's adoration mounting, mounting like a wave about to submerge her. Soon her life would be ended. She struggled against long, elegant, weightless hands caressing her face like sensitive leaves stirred by the breeze. A distant voice repeated wearily, summoning fleeing, obscure powers: "Don't move, don't move, stay still, there, there, see how she rests . . . Don't move . . . Don't move . . ."

The young woman was growing limp, languid, worn out, weakened; she was about to dissolve into a flood of tears when the voice of her own delirium soared again, clear, precise, rising from the bottom of her alarmed heart: "This woman is so beautiful that I want to drown her."

Catherine uttered a piercing shriek, opened her eyes, saw the terrified face of Michel leaning over her. She pushed her husband away, hitting him right in the chest with both her hands.

The young man recoiled, thrown in a panic by Catherine's violence. Lia watched her brother disdainfully.

Just then, the servant announced the doctor's arrival. Lia was dressed up in a beautiful cashmere shawl no one had ever seen on her. She whispered to her brother, barely moving her lips:

--That little one is possessed by madness. If you let her continue, she will destroy you. She has already had the piano locked up, and your paintings torn from the wall. She can't bear any noise or colour that emanates from us. Beware of your little female with her five uncultivated and irritated senses.

Finding Catherine's painful likeness as fascinating as a mirror, Michel did not hear what Lia was saying. He drew near again, seeking in vain a glance from his wife. Catherine had sworn not to open her eyes, not to respond to the mute pleas of Michel. That complicity with death in Catherine's flushed face Michel was claiming as his right

and pleasure. The lost love of Michel suddenly welled up in her heart. Catherine was struggling for her life against the peculiar love of this man.

PART THREE

. . . and a very tiny
ring for the dream

Jules Supervielle*

* my own translation

The servant parted the curtains, leaned out the window, and remarked that the weather was still fine.

Peeking out from under her eyelashes, the young woman caught a glimpse of her tanned hands upon the white sheet. She plunged back into the darkness where, for the first time, she could envision the peppery colour of geraniums without feeling any fear. She called the servant and asked her how high the sun was.

Angular and aging, the servant was moving slowly and abruptly at the same time. She went back to the window, peered out, frowned and answered "that soon the sun would have risen; the whole ceiling of the terrace would light up, radiant with sunshine, just as Madame likes it."

The young woman came to the window in her transparent blue nightgown which adorned her slight body like the reflection of a river. She craned her neck and saw that the whole tiled ceiling was shimmering, gradually permeated by the light as if by its own rich, salmon-pink colour. She imagined a beautiful watermelon and she felt thirsty and hungry.

Complaining all the while about the violently windy morning, the servant served breakfast. The young woman hardly listened to the servant. She was thinking of the geraniums that she wanted, yet, at the same time, she was apprehensive about the pungency of their scent.

--Do you think that the perfume of geraniums could

harm me?

--Only Madame can know that!

Catherine wearily closed her eyes, pondering those smells which ravished her and those which irritated her.

She murmured:

--Ah! How strange all this is and how I've suffered with all my senses!

Not knowing where, amid the stony planes of her broad face, to focus the expression of her solicitude, the servant drew closer to Catherine. She smoothed the pillows.

--Does Madame need anything?

--Nothing, Aline, nothing, I assure you.

And it seemed infinitely sad to her not to have anything more to ask on such a fine day.

The servant hesitated for a second, then deftly fastened to her bodice a pin she had just picked up. She left, carrying the breakfast platter.

Catherine returned to the window and leaned upon the sill. She scanned the sea with her eyes. For a long time, she remained there, surveying the neighbouring house, with its little hanging balcony, where between the charcoal-black bars, the vermillion warmth of geraniums was pointing skywards. Someone had just watered the flowers; their aroma rose like incense to the sun.

The corner houses were leaning upon each other, crowded like in a populous city. And all around was stretching the vast solitary space planted with olive trees, rising in terraces to the edge of the sea.

Towards evening the sea grew stormy. All light vanished from the earth and sky, seeming to rise like mist from the solitary rage of the sea.

Catherine went for a long walk on the pier, whipped by the wind which was snatching at her black cape and at the strands of her blonde, tousled hair. She paused for a moment by the pavement in front of a café. The tables were sticky with salt, the chairs rusty. Very soon, she wanted to resume her place in the procession of strollers battered by the wind, inexplicably happy about the fact that every fate seemed to her, at once, anonymous, simple, and pathetic.

When she returned, the lights were on in the room. The grumbling servant was waiting for the young woman. She reproached her for bringing seaside odours, potent as bundles of algae into this house all dried out and closed up for the night.

--And after I have carefully gotten rid of all the smells so Madame can sleep in peace.

--I shall sleep, Aline, don't you fear, don't worry any more about closing up the house, leave the window open so that I can hear the waves more clearly. Also, I want to see again that wicker armchair and the yellow table which are in the garden next door.

The servant turned her back to Catherine, speaking with reluctance, in her haughty voice, amid the din of clattering dishes.

--There are two chairs, Madame, and two people, an

old lady and a young gentleman. They drank tea in the garden and ate cakes. They didn't seem to know each other.

Catherine lifted the curtain, leaned against the window.

--They've gone in now, Madame.

And Aline left the room carrying Catherine's damp coat.

A window lit up on the second floor of the neighbouring house. Catherine dropped the curtain. She went to sit near the table, under the lamp, attentive, as if she had sought to touch the mystery of other people in the night.

Often, in the evenings, as she lay in her vast, calm bed, Catherine was seized by a desire to be cradled. She detained the servant using all sorts of pretexts: the sheet which was dangling to the left, the night light shining as brightly as day, the cretonne curtain flapping against the windowpane, the glass of water she had forgotten, the poorly fastened shutter. She loved to follow the comings and goings of this large woman celebrating with her strong hands, the rites around her bed.

One moment, the heavy-set, rigid form was passing in front of the open bay window, dispersing the shadows of leaves shimmering on the floor tiles, the next moment, she was approaching the bed. Catherine was anticipating this brief moment when, without demonstrating any visible or tender magic, the servant would bend towards her, her impassive face, her chest as spangled with pins as a panoply, and brusquely wish her good-night.

Each evening, Catherine would thus encounter, impalpable and unwavering, the rigid faith of the servant who was choosing her for mistress.

The first time this had happened was during Catherine's illness, a little after the doctor's visit.

Michel and Lia were discussing his recommendation that Catherine leave those narrow confines as quickly as possible. It was a matter of deep depression, of convalescence, of a change of air, of space and sun. Michel's tears, his livid

pallor, his panicky movements all reminded Catherine of the unhappy child that, one day, she had promised to console.

--You aren't going to leave, Catherine? Please. Both of us are pierced by the same wound. I don't want you to leave me. And where would you go, fragile as you are? Look, I beg you, see how alone and miserable I am.

Catherine was trembling. Her shaky will, straining towards a demanding salvation, could crumble from one moment to the next. The servant stood by the bed, like a statue of justice, weighing within her rigid heart the strengths of the man and woman confronting each other before her eyes. She refrained from betting on one or the other hoping to correctly gauge who was stronger.

Catherine spoke, her head turned to the wall. Michel had to bend over the bed, straining to hear this semi-subterranean answer, escaping from her oppressed breast. She murmured that she was suffering terribly and that Michel's breath on her cheek was scalding her. Michel stood up, his hands stretched in front of him, like a blind man feeling the reality of the world. Then Catherine said in a clear, slow voice: "that she wanted nothing more than to go far away from here and never return."

The servant stepped forward and said "that she would accompany 'Madame' wherever she wanted to go." Lia swung around sharply, her shawl slipping to the floor. The servant pretended not to notice Lia's anger or Michel's tears. She sat Catherine up, helping her to get out of bed.

Lia found nothing to say to the servant, so astonished was she by the tall figure Catherine suddenly revealed upon rising from her bed as if emerging from a tenebrous adolescence.

The seaside air was wafting through the spacious room where amid the furniture polished the colour of wood ants, the servant has finished her nocturnal rounds.

--Does Madame need me any more?

She paused a moment. Encumbered by all her weight, she turned around and slowly left the room.

Catherine extinguished the lamp. She waited several seconds until she could make out, in the shadows, all the objects and furniture in this room of hers. With delight, she located again the gleaming chest of drawers with its brass fittings and the little creamy carpet lying flat on the red tiles. Occasionally she would also feel apprehensive of the fumbling return of the servant thinking the young woman to be asleep and worrying about her exposure to the night air.

The sun was already long high in the sky, the ceiling of the terrace was glistening with light. Catherine walked to the railing. She closed her eyes, momentarily dazzled by the sun, while the strong scent of flowers caught at her throat. She leaned towards the neighbour's garden. A young man was sitting in the hot sun, straight, still, stubborn, dedicated to a lengthy, voluntary baking in this ceramic oven. His back was turned to Catherine.

The servant passed by, without pausing, carrying a basket of freshly washed linen on her arm. She mumbled in her harsh voice:

--That man has a dull and obstinate air, a real peasant.

Catherine followed the servant into the courtyard and helped her hang up the laundry. For a moment, Aline was tempted to admire the young woman's skilful movements but instead gave way to contempt. "This girl knows how to work and betrays her origins," she was thinking. And she added aloud, "that all masters rotted in the long run."

Then suddenly she ran inside, abandoning her basket on the lawn.

Towards noon, Aline who was preparing lunch came to tell Catherine that there were four people eating in the neighbouring garden under the olive trees:

--Are you quite sure of what you're saying, Aline?

Embarrassed by the servant, Catherine's voice suddenly

cracked and rang false. She ate slowly, striving to hide from the servant her great excitement at the thought of the neighbouring garden suddenly inhabited by unknown men and women. She would grow impatient now and again, repelling the flaming image of a strong head with thick, cropped hair, the powerful neck of a dumb stag, which flashed before her eyes like a red spot when one has stared too long at the sun.

The next morning the servant counted five people in the garden. Catherine recognized the young man, sitting a little apart from the others, mending a fishing net.

All day long, Catherine walked around barefooted, rejoicing in the smooth and the rough as if all the earth beneath her feet was becoming pleasurable. Under Aline's haughty eye, she busied herself for a long time in the garden:

--Madame is pattering barefoot around the flowerbeds,
And she is ruining her nails with this weeding!

Catherine looked down at her hands and feet, matted with dirt. "Here I am, as grimy as my father at the end of a day's work!" she thought. And she prayed that she be granted once again the grace of life, humbly, gradually through the revival of her whole, patient body.

That evening she wrote to her younger sister whom she had not seen since her marriage to Michel, describing at great length, the tending of the soil and plants in this country.

Since leaving the wood-panelled apartment, Catherine, very carefully, fearfully had allowed the summer to gently colour her.

--Madame is becoming as brown as baked bread, observed Aline.

And, just as on the day of her separation from Michel, Catherine stood before Aline, straight and tall. But a moment later, she was losing all power over Aline's soul, incurring her contempt because of a long visit she had paid a peasant family dwelling in the mountains.

She had returned, a little breathless, with some black bread and olives and began to talk about a little child she had held in her arms. Aline stiffened with anger, denouncing through her teeth the abasement of the poor and the acrid smell of their children which clings like the plague.

Catherine retorted with a sort of joyful fury that this odour of poverty reminded her of her childhood. She added that "once the holidays were over, as soon as she returned to the city, she would look for a job." She refused to eat the dinner prepared by Aline and, standing on the doorstep, munched her olives and bread.

Then, she went out for a long walk on the pier. Near the harbour, she met the young man who was returning with some fishermen. He stared at Catherine for a long time, intensely, without smiling.

The servant once again called attention to the neighbouring garden.

--There are too many people there. All the shutters are open now. Chairs and umbrellas have been set out. Madame can't avoid all this. You'll have to go down to the sea in full view of everyone. It's a pension, Madame, who would have believed it?

Catherine went down to the sea. She felt uncomfortable as if someone were watching her.

Two lovers had taken over her favourite cove. She watched them for a long time, finding them neither beautiful nor shapely in their bathing suits, astonished that love could be bestowed so gratuitously. She bathed, dried herself in the sun, bathed again, tarried on the beach, staring at the sea, the rocks, the bathers, the flat horizon.

Upon returning home, she met the young man, as on the previous day, by the harbour. At first, she avoided his eyes. But his bare chest seemed to bar the way. She raised her head. A smile flashed so fleetingly over the man's face, was it perhaps that he too was so serious or was Catherine trembling, that she only saw an indistinct wave suddenly blurring his features.

The servant was waiting for Catherine, she was surprised by her tardiness and remarked on the coolness of the night falling down upon the day in a sudden shower. She explained that the summers in this land were never completely

unveiled until the cicada's song was rustling through the treetops like a crackling fire.

--Who's told you all this, Aline? You don't belong to this country and you hardly mingle with the folks around here?

Aline replied that nothing escaped her and that she sensed all the things around her closing in like swift troops that are being threatened. And while saying this, she was watching Catherine with her hard, shadowless eyes. She took the flowers out for the night as if leading silent beasts to water.

Catherine picked up some mimosa buds that had rolled onto the ground. She was still amazed by their colour. Hadn't she always thought that mimosas were blue? And she reflected uneasily upon the servant, an old, worn-out woman with a gaze as sharp as a shower of hailstones. And she promised herself not to lie even if her whole face had to reveal the shamelessness of her joy.

The cicadas rent the air with their chatterbox song, the heat of the noonday settled upon the land.

Catherine and the young man were now meeting each other everyday on the beach, never exchanging a word. Distinguished by similar signs: oil, sun, water, salt, they would camp quite close to each other, not missing any of the other person's comings and goings, united in the wind like taciturn sailors.

Catherine enjoyed watching the youth swimming in the open sea, and as soon as he stepped onto the pebbles, she looked forward to the moment when he would pass close by her. A boyish smile revealed his strong teeth, lighting up for a moment his face with its snub features.

One morning when Catherine had arrived at the beach earlier than usual, hoping to avoid the heat of the day, he approached her, greeted her awkwardly, introduced himself as Bruno, talked about his holidays that were drawing to a close, about deep-sea fishing, and excursions to the mountains.

Catherine was vexed because this man had called her "Madame". The flat sound of this constrained voice irritated her. Ill-humouredly, she observed his intense features, now quite close to her. For a moment the young woman believed that all complicity between her and this stranger was suddenly fading away like a drawn-out dream. She spoke confusedly of the sun which causes headaches and of the pitiless heat of the sky.

--Excuse me, Madame, but I'd like to say good-bye to you. I'm leaving tomorrow.

Catherine's pale eyes widened in her tanned face. In a sort of stupor, she stared at this man who was going to leave. Desire was stirring within her, awakened, threatened, soaring over the tranquility of the dream. She stammered:

--You must never say good-bye, Monsieur, that brings bad luck . . . We will undoubtedly see each other again since you're not leaving till tomorrow.

She held out her hand to the young man who shook it abruptly. He strode off towards the city. For a while afterwards, Catherine could still feel a small callous that was on the fourth finger of the young man's right hand. Then, lifting her eyes towards the pier, she recognized the servant, hurrying away.

That afternoon, Catherine did not go to the beach. She settled down in the cloth lounge chair under the olive trees on the side opposite the neighbouring villa. She stretched out her legs, closed her eyes, feigning calmness, while her heart was beating as if about to break in her chest, in her throat, in the pulse of her wrists. She feared Aline's gaze and at the same time she would have liked to seek refuge with this old woman who had been Michel's servant.

--What a lovely dress! Is Madame expecting a visitor?

The servant had drawn near, without a sound, speaking through compressed lips, holding a long strand of thread between her teeth. Catherine spoke with an effort:

--Do you want me to thread your needle, Aline?

The servant replied that she didn't need anyone. She fumbled for a long time before finding the eye with her thread. "My hands are no longer steady," she thought.

Catherine told herself it was undoubtedly just as well this way for nothing could happen to her, neither happiness nor grief, if she were to remain immobile under the trees, guarded by the servant. Suddenly, the rasping noise of tearing cloth made her start and wince.

--My God, Aline, what are you doing?

--This sheet is only good for ripping apart. How pitiful, really, this rented linen is! I who have known linen woven from faultless fibres, embroidered with monograms.

Catherine had stood up.

--Be quiet, Aline, you're setting my teeth on edge with this terrible tearing of linen!

--Such a sad, twisted, little face all on account of the noise of tearing cloth. Madame is really nervous today.

Catherine moved toward Aline, slowly articulating in a hardening voice:

--What an old witch you are, Aline. But all this will be of no avail. I will leave you when I want, just as I left my husband . . .

Then she lifted her head, quickly, in the direction of the olive trees.

--The song of the cicadas!

Her voice rang out as if announcing a plague of grasshoppers or a storm.

The servant clapped her hands over her ears, exclaiming that: "This was a cursed song," dropped her sheet on the grass and began to hobble painfully down the laneway, an old stubborn goat, dragging her age under the parching sun.

Catherine tarried late in the garden, not daring to move, holding her breath, like someone inflicting futile ordeals upon himself.

At dinner, Catherine ate meagerly, hurriedly, under Aline's piercing eye. Then she climbed the stairs, dressed herself and combed her hair very carefully.

With her hair pulled back from her temples, swept up off her neck, and the sheen of her skin reviving the dull violet shadows of her blue dress, Catherine stared at this woman posing before her in the mirror. She recalled the little, uncultivated girl she had been when Michel had taken her and set her to ripen in his closed-in apartment.

--Is Madame going for a walk?

Aline had come up without a sound. Catherine swung right around. The servant retreated a step, turned her head away, murmuring painfully, almost fearfully:

--Madame is too beautiful.

--Look straight at me, Aline, please, and say that again . . .

--Madame is too beautiful, it can not last . . .

--Touch me, Aline, I'm alive and it will last as long as God wills it!

She grasped the old, knotty, trembling hands between her own, laying them on her cheeks, her forehead, her eyelids. The hard hands lingered on Catherine's forehead which for the space of a second was girded by a narrow iron crown.

The young woman fired quick sentences like stones hurled in a hurry.

--Don't worry, Aline, I'm going to the seashore. Just for

a walk on the pier. Don't bother waiting up for me this evening. It would be better for you to get some rest.

She lifted her hand in a gesture of friendship that froze in mid air. The servant was watching her fixedly, abandoned, without reproach, anger, forgiveness, without any signs of life, enclosed in her solitude, her face lifeless, clinging to her bones.

Catherine left without shutting the door.

The servant's presence shadowed Catherine for a moment, mingling on the way with the fragrance of dewy gardens. And then there was the boardwalk by the sea with all its strollers. The young woman leaned on the railing. Bruno came up to her.

--Do you mind if I join you?

Catherine replied "no", adding that she would love to walk a little bit.

They walked for a long time, side by side, sometimes losing, then finding each other in the crowd, like dancers resuming their steps in a number. They did not stop anywhere. The cafés, the dance halls, the open-sky music halls, were melting into one noisy and colourful dream.

There were fewer and fewer people on the streets. Bruno and Catherine entered the old part of town. As they strolled along the narrow, arched streets, aromas, voices occasionally surged up from a stream, from a window where laundry was drying. Catherine was frightened by a small white donkey who, at the corner of an alley, rushed towards her, clacking its heels, its thin knees collapsing at each step, laden down with vegetables, fruits, and flowers like a huge, bushy bouquet.

The lights were going out one by one. With each step, the young people risked tripping over a stair or a culvert. Here and there, dogs were baying. The young man preceded her. Catherine, struggling to keep up, was

following upon his heels. Their greatest concern in the night was to avoid bumping into each other like two sleep-walkers whom the least shock would precipitate into empty space.

They arrived at a café where a light was shining. The door was closed. Someone opened up and offered them bread, cheese, wine and two miserable little peaches. Bruno tore at the bread hungrily, tossed off the wine in great draughts, half-closing his eyes. Catherine, feeling hungry and thirsty, followed suit. Someone mentioned that it was two o'clock. Catherine vaguely heard the patron offering Bruno a room for the night. The young man asked if they were still far from the sea. They were shown the way and someone with a lantern led them to the doorstep.

"I'm tired," said Catherine, lying down on the cool, moist pebbles. He stretched out beside her. The strident song of the sea was sweeping over their reclining bodies, each receding wave leaving them exposed, vulnerable and weary.

They waited for daybreak. Bruno asked Catherine if she loved her husband. She motioned "no" fascinated by that pallor, those dry lips, all that beautiful ravaging thirst flooding the manly face bent over her. Bruno also said in an abrupt manner "that he was free, that he loved Catherine and that he wanted her to be his wife".

Catherine turned her head away, murmuring in a barely audible voice that, "that was asking more than she could give." A sort of rage was mounting in her, subsuming all

gentleness: "It could have been so simple between us. Why must this man speak of love and marriage? What a demand. All or nothing. Too bad. He will have wanted it."

The young man's obstinate voice continued on, adding "that he had not had many certain things in his life but that he knew how to recognize the truth." And his hand gently touched Catherine's face as if it were the most astonishing thing in the world.

She pulled herself away abruptly. "As long as I don't tremble," she was murmuring to herself, all the while assuring Bruno that it was time to go back and that she wasn't interested in becoming attached to anyone.

They walked up to the olive trees. Catherine fumbled over the good-byes, avoiding Bruno's hands, his eyes, the very sound of his hoarse voice.

Catherine hurried straight up to her room, abandoning her shawl on the stairs where it had slipped off. She tried to tiptoe by the servant's door, firmly determined to see nothing, hear nothing except the tumult of her own life. "I had only time for happiness," she was thinking.

The servant was calling Catherine in the raucous, plaintive voice of a furious and wounded animal. Catherine went into the room. Aline, half collapsed in an armchair was panting, tearing exasperatedly at her linen collar with her right hand. The young woman loosened the black bodice.

--My God, Aline, what's the matter?

The servant complained of pains in her arms and of lack of air. Catherine opened the window. She kept repeating: "You must lie down, Aline, you must lie down right away. I'll help you and then I'll go fetch a doctor."

In vain, she tried to slip a pillow under Aline's head which felt hard and heavy. She was thinking desperately how to immediately help this old woman who was perhaps going to die. She cried:

--Wait, Aline, wait, I beg you, I'll be right back!

Catherine rushed down the stairs, crossed the house, turning on all the lights although it was already broad daylight. Once in the garden, she gathered a handful of gravel, sought out Bruno's window and hurled her pebbles like a volley of hailstones.

Catherine and Bruno watched over the servant for two

days and two nights.

Sometimes Aline would angrily push Catherine's hand away. But a second later, her eyes closed like those of a corpse and whimpering softly, she would let herself be lifted up by Bruno while Catherine changed the pillows. Catherine was amazed by the surety and tenderness of Bruno's movements. She was grateful to him for having delayed his departure.

They would both stay by the servant's bedside for hours at a time without speaking, attentive to the weak breathing which alternately faltered and rallied in her battle against the enveloping death. In the night the young people would take turns, each snatching a bit of sleep in the warmth left by the other in Catherine's bed.

When the doctor had told the servant that her heart was very weak, she answered that it had always been thus, that no one had known about it and that it concerned no one but herself. She spoke about her heart of flesh which was suffocating in broad daylight as if she were describing the whole of her life which she had always kept fiercely hidden. She now spoke about it with the terrible freedom of the dying:

--My heart has known much hardship, that's all I can say, she murmured, then she would complain as if in a dream about how all the masters had betrayed her through their lack of grandeur. The first master ravished me when I was thirteen. He has put me to work under his wife who hates me. Every night he wakes me up and possesses me. The house is a

deep as a chest; no one knows what happens there. Michel and Lia, little ones, little ones, my poor lambs, sleep in peace. Your father is omnipotent, your mother is beautiful, little ones, little ones, little ones . . .

Catherine was trying to pacify the servant who would furiously push her away: "This last great lady in whom I believed, Catherine, Catherine, is false like all the rest, she's a trollop, like Lia, like Madame, her mother, my lords, a real little trollop, and a workman's daughter, hear that!"

Catherine, wept, her head in her hands.

While sleeping, the servant would, from time to time, weaken as if she were going to die, then she would wake up calling softly for that little girl she had born and who had been torn from her: "Marie, Marie," she would cry.

Catherine or Bruno were then able to give her something to drink and to bathe her face dripping with sweat, she let herself be nursed, weeping incessantly. Then she would violently refuse to go to Paradise to serve God, the Virgin, and the saints: "I've finished my service, release me, please release me . . ."

She called again: "Marie, Marie!" Catherine drew near, kissed a cheek already smooth as a dead woman's. The woman looked up at Catherine, murmured again, "Marie", her face lit up for a moment as if her daughter had been restored to her, and she died.

All the flowers in both gardens were cut and offered up to the servant. Pale and swarthy native women, all dressed in black, came to pray over Aline's body. Veiled in their mantillas, they followed the procession under the sun, behind Catherine and Bruno to the church, then to the cemetery.

It was thus that the old town would convey its dead, under the scorching sun, across the maze of narrow, steep streets, beyond the walls to the summit of the mountain. And the dead buried on the crest of the land against the violent heart of the sun, pointed upwards like spears in that narrow, rocky space, evoking the stone of the altar, would entreat the thunder of the heavens in favour of the living.

Catherine took advantage of Bruno's absence to tidy up the servant's room. Among the starched aprons, dresses and faded lingerie she found some letters which she tied into a bundle to be burned. Two photographs slid onto the floor. Catherine bent over to pick them up. In one of the photos, she distinguished the massive silhouette of the seigneurial house.

In the foreground, a young man with delicate features was standing, dressed in hunting clothes. Catherine examined that face which could have been Michel's reduced to its essential hardness and lacking the equivocal gentleness of his tears. "His father, she thought, how he resembles him!" In the other photo she recognized Aline with her protruding eyes, a chubby little girl in her maid's uniform, with two short braids jutting like horns from her fluted bonnet.

Catherine, bent over the photograph, tried to discern, for a moment, the interior of the hallway behind the little servant leaning against the open door: "Everything is black" she thought, evoking the childhood country of Michel and Lia from which she had escaped like a blind mole digging its passage to the light.

The young woman was roused from her reverie by Bruno's voice calling her from the garden. She did not answer right away, allowing his voice to grow astonished, repeating: "Catherine where are you?" Should not this

uncultivated man who had shared these last days of illness and mourning with her, learn from Catherine's very silence that secret part of her where occasionally would slip the devastating shadow of the rooms panelled with wood?

She wrapped all the servant's things up into a parcel, but not knowing what to do with them, remained standing, a big package in her hand, vague and lost as in a train station.

--Catherine, where are you?

His voice was fading away under the trees. She went to the window and called the young man. He climbed up, relieved Catherine of the package which he deposited on a chair. She burst into sobs. He pulled her gently by the hand.

--Come, Catherine, come. You mustn't stay here in this room with the dead.

He led her away to the olive trees, made her sit down on the grass and sat beside her.

--What are you going to do now, Catherine?

Catherine was silent, thinking she should write Michel and tell him about the servant's death. She was imagining Michel in all his emptiness, reanimated for a moment by the grandeur of the news, tracking down the bitter poetry of death like a quarry, then, all of a sudden, retreating, feeling once again his own invisible and awakened grief.

Bruno thought Catherine was brooding about the servant. He murmured:

--Catherine you musn't worry about the dead, let the dead worry about the dead . . .

Catherine, horrified, looked at the calm face of this naive man at her side, speaking so lightly of the merciless truth: "Bruno!" she cried out as if from the depths of a nightmare. The young man took Catherine's head in his hands, gazing at her with a sort of sad eagerness. Catherine replied that she wasn't brave, that her heart had never decided anything on its own, that a new lease on life had been given her, that she constantly needed to feel the earth existing near her and by her. And while saying this, her fingers were caressing Bruno's hands, his shoulder, his cheek with little timid movements. She also said that Michel was unhappy, that he loved his sister Lia and that she would never return to them. She spoke also about the job she would have to find upon her return.

--That's for you to decide, Catherine; as for me, I would very much like you to be my wife . . .

He became confused, dropping the vous for tu. Catherine abhorred this bewilderment, wanted to transform that patient face, to stamp his resemblance to a wounded bull upon his low forehead. She drew the man's head toward her with both her hands.

They decided to stay together until the young man's departure the following day.

He spoke at length of his work. Catherine understood that Bruno's work consisted of raising and lowering the level

of rivers by hand. She was pleased with that.

The young man burned thyme in the servant's room. He took Catherine shopping. On their return, he settled the young woman in the middle of the room with all the provisions in reach of her hand, worrying lest anything be missing. He also offered her some small bitter lemons, violet sea-eggs, wild berries.

Catherine described the strawberries of the north which ravish quite unlike any fruit in this hot land. "Nothing ties me any more to Michel," she was thinking, and if I'm committing an injustice, it's towards this man here. How can I repay his generosity with simply my delight in being with him, among living things?"

The two young people left the stone house with its dairy-like coolness. They performed the usual summertime rituals, walking side by side on the pebbles, among the barbaric people of the seashore. They swam together. Bruno licked the salt from Catherine's ankle. Then, once again, silence, the slow fading of light over their reclining brown bodies.

She fixed her hair, crouched on her heels, Bruno facing her and holding the mirror. Then she slipped on her skirt, pulling it up over her feet, like a clumsy child.

The dinner was cooking, exuding savoury odours. Catherine climbed to her room, changed the sheets, arranged some flowers on the chest of drawers. She came back into the living-room.

"How serious everything is all of a sudden!", she was thinking, setting bread, salt, and wine on the table, while Bruno, standing on the doorstep, his head high, seemed oblivious to all but that scarcely audible trill of a nightingale lost in the mountains.

The room faced the sea. The large French window was clattering in the wind. It all smelled of floor polish and laundry. Catherine stood by the window, straight and elegant. Bruno came to her, gently pulled her by her hands towards the bedroom. He lifted her onto the bed as if he were carrying a dying child.

He sought her with his hands and lips, beneath her clothes and her elaborate hairdo. She spoke of the wind and the sea and turned upon her side, her hair tumbling down in one long cascade. The man loved the frail body, painstakingly unearthing delight in spaces browned by the sun and tender places reminiscent of snow and moss with their secret scents.

The violet dawn was slipping along the black trunks and the grey leaves. The olive trees in the field were swaying at the mercy of the wind on their sombre and weathered pillars. The grass was sleeping under the dew. Catherine and Bruno went outside, slowly, clinging to each other. They were going to part that morning, under the trees, while the cocks were crowing at almost regular intervals.

Not a word passed their dry lips, not a sign illumined their blank foreheads. Reluctantly, they detached themselves. For a moment they stood apart, heads lowered, under the olive trees, like solitary monks bowing

to each other. Words failed them. Catherine was aware that this man was awaiting a sign from her which could change both their lives, but her heart was knotted in her chest. A voice repeated inside her: "It's up to you to decide, Catherine!"

Suddenly a jubilant chorus of roosters rang out like the crash of brass and it seemed to Catherine and Bruno that they were being penetrated by the very cry of the world at its birth.

Again, the chorus piped up, closer, in shrill unison, so close that it seemed to perch upon their shoulders. "I'm trembling!" thought Catherine, and it was as if the heart of the earth had summoned her to surrender.

She moved towards Bruno, touched his shoulder, murmured softly against his chest, "that she wanted to become his wife".

The young woman was wearing a travelling coat, smart gloves, a hat which shaded her eyes. She climbed up the flights of stairs. The odour from the wood-panelled rooms seized her at the threshold. As if she were a stranger, she rang the doorbell. They took their time answering. Silence was buzzing within the oak door like a lost insect. The brass had tarnished, the doorknobs and the doorbell were already green and blue. Someone inside started suddenly, there was a precipitate clatter of high heels towards the door. Then, once again, silence. The young woman felt as if a snarling dog were sniffing at her through the door. She said:

--It's me, Catherine . . .

There was a muffled exclamation, then an unsteady hand pulled the bolt, opened the door. Lia leaned on the door frame as if she were afraid of falling. She was looking at Catherine without seeing her, repeating in her lowered voice:

--Catherine, Catherine, really, this isn't possible . . .

--May I come in, I'd like to see Michel?

Lia slowly stepped aside to let Catherine pass. It took two tries before she could close the door.

Right away Catherine noticed fallen objects, misplaced objects, dirty objects, unclaimed objects. And suddenly, as when one sometimes isolates a motif in a

complicated abstract design, she recognized amid the chaos of the room an order peculiar to them, that sort of encampment established upon the rug by the fire, that circle of dirty glasses and ashtrays overflowing with butts around an open book.

--We were reading, said Michel by way of excuse.

--It's really not worth the trouble! added Lia.

She kicked the book shut and left the room, trying to retie her hair which was falling down in great tangles while pins kept dropping onto the floor.

Catherine and Michel were left alone. Catherine drew near and seized Michel's wrist like one grabs a wandering child.

--Listen to me, Michel, please.

Michel was neither looking at her listening to Catherine. He said with a sort of mournful ecstasy:

--We were reading, it's the first time since Lia's return . . .

Catherine informed him that the servant had died. She told him that she was in love with another man and that she wanted her freedom. Michel was listening to Catherine, distractedly, as if she were one of those story tellers who babbles on through long evenings. Then he began to speak of Lia's last fugue.

Just then, Lia came back into the room, her damp hair sticking to her shoulders, that gaunt body of a chastised woman protruding through her clinging nightgown. She

said: "I'm going to bed," and slammed the door behind her. Michel spoke in a low, terrified voice:

--She came back this morning, her colouring ashen, angry, ravaged, starved, her shoulder hurt. Now she's sleeping. She'll be like that for days and nights on end, lying there uncovered, with no discernible dream, like a dried-up corpse thrown across the bed.

--Tell me about yourself, Michel.

--About me, Catherine? It's not worth the trouble, I assure you. I've spent atrocious days in waiting and shame. But I know she always comes back; she can't help it. We fast and pray together. One day, I think, she will again become as pure as her bones. We'll renew the childhood pact and no one will reach us.

Michel had raised his voice. He was looking at Catherine without seeing her, seeming to defy someone behind her.

--My poor Michel, how bitter all this is. Look at me a little because I'm going to leave you forever.

Michel turned quickly towards Catherine as if noticing her for the first time.

--Ah! Catherine, how you've changed! You seem like a grand lady on a visit, you trouble me. Why that hat, those gloves? How elegant you are, beautiful and cruel.

Catherine took off her hat and gloves. She unbuttoned her coat and stood before Michel, neither evading nor concealing anything, neither the fullness of her figure,

the roundness of her cheeks, nor the plenitude of her joy spreading over her skin like a capucine in bloom. Michel covered his eyes with his hands and reproached Catherine for the impudence of her life.

--What a wounded little girl I've lost along the way, he kept repeating, and who will keep my company throughout Lia's heavy sleep?

--Kiss me, Michel, because I'm going to leave for good.

Michel fearfully kissed Catherine's cheek. His fingers stroked her tanned arm. Catherine submitted patiently, and with pity to the stranger's touch.

--Here is the ring, Michel, the ring you had given me. And she put it in his hand.

Michel looked with astonishment at the gold ring lying in the hollow of his open palm.

--But what will I do with this ring, Catherine?

Catherine remained silent. She closed her eyes for a moment, recollected her past like someone on the verge of death, was unable to detach Michel's singular gifts from it, discovered there a poem he had taught her, and replied:

--"A very tiny ring for the dream," Michel, only a very tiny ring.

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