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The Waltz of the Immortals

Novel

Translation by Richard Clark

My son, he left
as a man all alone
and he returns
as a multitude!

PAUL CLAUDEL, *Tobie et Sara*

Preamble against terror

Before recounting a journey like this one, the end must be explained from the beginning, for otherwise one is seized with terror. This is called "philosophizing", from the verb to love, love in order not to die of fright. For we are walking barefoot on a scarcely frozen ocean, and, to fall into a depth without limits, a lack of distraction is enough.

All depends on the film of ice that supports us, all depends on the heat of awareness that can soften it at any instant. A moment lasts only as long as a distraction. This can be long, this can be short. If it is long, the water freezes and merry-go-rounds are set up on it.

These merry-go-rounds are called "Modernus", from the low Latin *modus* which means to measure, because on them, people devote themselves to measuring the time where being remains precisely the same. It is a very long distraction. So Modernus goes its way and the more it changes, the more it is the same... Except perhaps when awareness catches on fire.

So then, I was walking on the film of being, so distracted that I was convinced it was hard and would last and pow! Everything cracked.

Me, it was death that made me crack, not mine, no! the death of everything. It really does happen that one death kills everything. It might have been something else. Any blunt instrument might have done the job. In my story, it was a grief you come out of alive only if you die.

The fact remains that the ice did break and I passed from nothingness to an immeasurable immensity. Between the two, I recognized some of the merry-go-rounds of modern times and I cried out. It was then that you came to hear me.

I recognized the merry-go-rounds of modern times because they resembled my husband's merry-go-rounds: seductive, reassuring, numbing but ever so destructive.

So I fell beneath being, I died, I was swept away, I glimpsed Modernus and I cried out. You came and it was sublime. I don't know why, but when you are more than one but less than two, the sublime arrives and changes everything.

There are three kinds of sublime.

The sublime of Mozart where the soul is subjugated by the music that emerges out of its depth. It is the immeasurable immensity of beauty. Out of the gulf of

silence springs a song of astonishing beauty. Such a music lets us understand that the soul is more than itself.

The sublime that Plato called Eros, the touching in which the body of the soul begins to sprout in a series of little laughs that go from nothing to too much. This is the immeasurable immensity of joy. Out of the gulf of desire springs a child, a people, a history, a beginning without end.

And the sublime of death, the one I am going to tell you about.

These three sublimes make a single one. They form movement and this movement has neither duration nor hardness, it is a simple and pure overflowing. Some have called it God, others, Nothingness. Never mind the names, it makes them all tremble.

The sublime is the source of the greatest fear, for it plunges us into emptiness and yet it is the only thing that makes a soul enjoy.

But before my passage through modern times, I knew nothing of the sublime. I did not know the end, so I touched terror. It was my first touch. I cried out and you came. Sit down; I am telling you...

Departure with no return

I was making circles, life was buzzing. We were like bees, we didn't stop, we didn't have time to stop. It was very serious, we were doing... I no longer remember what we were doing. No matter! We were doing a lot of things, really a lot.

Ah! I remember. I was a teacher, a professor, from the Latin *profiteri* which means "declare", *de* for undo, *clare* for clear. My task, then, was to trouble the clear like the wind troubles the clarity of water. In fact, if water remains perfectly clear, no one can see it, but if you stir it with a stick, everyone can perceive it. God shakes himself in his bath and makes a face, he goes off and looks for a mirror. Thus the first principle of knowledge consists of troubling the intelligence with questions that put the evidence into question.

I liked my profession, the profession of Socrates and Plato, the profession of midwife of souls, the art of troubling what appears clear. Music troubles the silence, stained-glass windows trouble the light, the professor troubles the mind. Each word I taught the children attracted their attention to an object which as a result passed from meaningless to marvelous.

Plato said that it is knowledge which produces being and not the reverse. God is knowledge, he troubles himself, then being appears... But not for long.

To make children be through doubt and wonder, isn't this the most beautiful profession in the world! To make children spring up out of their questions as gravity makes the stars appear suddenly out of the darkness, this is to experience God's profession.

I was happy in my work, but I didn't know it. So the little children made a lively and perilous fog be born in me: the desire to be the beginning of someone.

My country, the Gaspésie, is made of round mountains and a stormy sea. It is a clown's nose that sniffs the sea and grimaces, a geographical way of making a class of little ones laugh.

A very beautiful country crumpled with age, bristling with dark and dense trees, with scaly summits covered with moss and lichens. A wild country, a country of thorns, resistant to plowing and which does not yield very much to eat. So, when a valley opens out on the edge of the sea, people quickly build a village. The men go to sea and return with fish. Babies are born and children run on the beach.

One has to know how to take it, my country. It is irritable. But if one slips softly into its wounds, it quiets down for a time, the sun shines and good-looking young people come walking on its shingle beaches.

On the other hand, when the wind of autumn begins to break down the oats, to shake the houses, to throw the lean-tos and fish-racks to the ground, when winter makes the ice floes knock over each other and the frozen sky becomes like a window on infinity, a dull terror threatens and the village grows silent.

Fortunately, spring always returns, late but joyous, and it reignites the fire and the word. Around the boats, they insult a neighbor, they praise the dead, they wink at the girls who have become women over the winter, they gossip about everything but mostly about nothing. Make a beautiful storm out of a drop, throw pepper into peace to bring out the flavor, cast dreams in the sea, this is the game of my country. It is because in the spring, between the new shoots, a strange sap arises with pungent odors that torment the blood.

But as for me, I had quarrels enough at home, I kept to myself, nose sniffing the wind, hair as untidy as a torn veil. My flowery dress rolled between my thighs. My feet were in the seaweed. I was gathering mussels and it happened. The sap of the country gripped my thighs and electrified me. One might have said it was a half-stunned lightning bolt wanting to climb back on its cloud. The country was in the act of making me a country.

Everything rigid in my body was on its edges. I had claws and teeth. I must not be touched. In the middle, however, my belly grew as soft as garden soil. My uterus beat as much as my heart. There was an infinity of little suction holes that hurt me. I didn't desire a man, my desire was deeper, more profound, more imperative. I wanted to feel a being grow and take on weight within my womb.

A country is the beginning of a history, it is more muted than the trembling of a cape beaten by the sea. But that opens flowers, that breaks stone, that makes the mountains sigh. It is so full of the need to fill that it cannot be endured. If I didn't become a country, a nourishing substance, I was going to explode in a thousand pieces.

I was no longer seeking my husband's awkward arms nor the hasty assuaging of his desires, I was seeking his seed. I had to have seed. I caught it on the surface of his body like a bee gets hold of a nectar. It was the most precious possession he could give me. Moreover, it was the only possession he gave me. But no matter, his seed seeped in and I was going to become a country. It was my privilege and my vengeance.

In the oven, the bread took life, stretched out, made its place. I was remaking the world, I was participating in the mystery of the nothing that becomes

everything. The most beautiful thing in the world was happening in me... But I didn't know it. The verb "to touch" was being conjugated in my flesh... But me, I was touching nothing.

My life was so full of my new maternal self, so satisfied, so stuffed that the wind could not filter in, disturb and trouble, and as a result I knew nothing of what I was full of. Thus my little girl passed from my womb to my nipples without too much pain. She was still filling me.

I had a beautiful life brimming over with my little girl and with all the children that I was teaching. A very busy life, with no cracks between the moments... But the chain broke.

It's not right to destroy such a beautiful fabric. It's not right to call a woman to the impossible. A woman is made to make alive, to bring a tiny nothing to everything. To ask her the opposite, ask her to accompany it in dying, that's asking the impossible of her, that's cheating, that's going over the limit.

It was my only daughter, you understand! I had carried her with so much hope, I had composed for her an infinity of futures; I had given her my breast, my nights and my days, I had given her my body, my heart and my tenderness. I had protected her from every danger, I had answered all her needs, I had totally abandoned myself to all her sucking.

I made a hoop with my body, with my heart, with all the love I had; I made an orbit to shelter her. She took all the space on the disc. I was the country of my country.

I had opened my thighs, my womb, my arms, the surface of my skin; she stretched out there, shook herself there, stuffed herself there. I had become her nest and in that nest, she steadied herself, woke up and wriggled.

Yet she too had to wait, to accept the time between thirst and milk, between pain and relief. And this she couldn't do yet. She cried and screamed with all her guts. She made time unbearable.

But I was in a state of grace. My little girl made a halo and protected me from my husband. To shelter me, I now had an ordinary time at my disposal. I barely heard the father's angry outbursts.

A child is time that seems endless, that stretches like melted marshmallow. This is so true that if you mistakenly begin to want something else, time becomes unbearable. To take care of a child is to lose the time in which you want something else in order to gain the time in which you are nourished by the ordinary.

The mothers go to the park with their little ones. They walk, they have the time. They borrow their tots' eyes and find that the ordinary surpasses the imagination.

I was in the park with my tiny little girl and I was on the lookout for ordinary time. When it arrived, I rolled it between my fingers and ate it in little balls. Villon said that "the ordinary serves as a meal". It was my milk and my life.

There is not a single little twig of time that does not contain its little ball of life and there is not one of these balls of life that does not possess its own flavor. Yes, when I had my little one in my arms, I went from flavor to flavor.

She too learned to have fun with time. She slowly took in the art of waiting, that is to say the art of living, of sucking the milk before it arrives, of seeing her Mama before she goes through the door, of keeping her with her after she has left, of nibbling life's little thorns. She succeeded in taking minutes where a few months earlier she demanded seconds.

We were teaching each other ordinary time. Our hearts were speaking directly, understanding each other without vocabulary. There was a harbor, I was no longer alone; we were responding to each other.

So I opened everything and, between our smiles, there was the cosmos and the stars, incommensurable lights and depths. Little by little life lost its joints, its walls and its ceilings. A child is great, terribly great, immeasurably immense. She is like a funnel: small on this side, infinite on the other. I covered her with my eyes, with my watchfulness, with my concern. My heart had no life not modulated by her and she, she stretched over infinite horizons.

She went off but always returned to me, threw herself on my stomach, on my breasts, piercing me with her eyes and returning into my flesh. She dove into it in order to come back out with cries of joy that brought me to tears. I gave birth to her a thousand times a day. I didn't know that there were so many births. Mine resulted from hers, hers resulted from mine. I was maintained by this game. Without this game of pursuits and new beginnings, I would have died in all the openings she made in me.

I was her space, she was my contents; I was the vase, she, the plant; I was the sky, she, the stars. She began to sparkle, to run, to sing, to laugh. She was growing up with so much joy. She was sucking life without losing anything. She made the ants run, she twisted the noses of her dolls, she made the kittens climb on her curly head, she emptied the cupboards and composed symphonies with cauldrons.

I had forgotten that a single moment can contain enough happiness to sustain a whole day. It had slipped my mind that caterpillars have a far more beautiful

than the ones that warm princesses, that frogs sing Mozart better than anyone and that grasshoppers leap over mountains. I had forgotten that the universe is a too-grand immensity, profusion, and overabundance. A child teaches us once more the art of enjoying the perpetual enchantment of the universe.

She was growing, my little one, and her eyes were becoming universes. She ran, defying the sea's waves and threatening the mountains which answered her with echoes. She threw sticks in the sea so that they would return, rolling right to her feet. She made stones skip on the water's surface, she climbed to the treetops, she made whoever she wanted laugh.

The universe had no other occupation than that of responding to her. The sky itself with all its constellations became her playmate. Her confidence and her assurance had no other limits than the horizons which fled before her as she approached them.

And then she began to lose her balance, to stagger as she walked. Oh! very slightly, but there it was, the brain was affected. The verdict was unshakeable, she had no more than six months to live and I, I didn't have time to cry or even to flee.

I would have so much wanted to be offered a single moment to sink into my grief, but time had precisely contracted to its extreme and all of her life was infinitely compressed into six miserable little months. She had to find there the time needed for learning how to die. She had to run through a whole life in six months... The departure had to be tamed even before we had truly disclosed ourselves to each other.

I had to prepare her for this mystery I knew nothing about. I had to find the words necessary for covering this enormity, this outrage, this gross excess of cruelty. But there were no words big enough, simple enough, right enough to veil such a gaping abyss.

How to answer a seven-year-old child who asks: "Is it cold in the ground, Mama?" Who can say something? Who can explain? I couldn't. And yet I should have.

I had to live on the active side of tears and use them as a fuel. Go into the abysses to scrape off shreds of hope and with them sketch a bit of moonlight I hoped that she would know how to walk on.

I had taken her back to where the film of being tears and chooses whom it wills. I had watched over her until her last breath, until she let herself go at last. She let herself go... And I, scandal and ignominy, my lungs had dared to inhale after she had expired. Her body grew cold in my arms, nothingness had left me on the shore.

It was not death that seemed cruel to me then, it was life which brought me back, that took me away from where she had gone.

I didn't want to close her eyes. I didn't even want to blink the eyelids for fear of sealing a pact I rejected with all my being. I didn't want to close the space she had opened. I didn't want to loosen my arms in the hope that death would carry me off with her. But someone put his hand on my shoulder and I fell in my sorrow into a well with no bottom.

The space she filled had become infinitely empty; the emptiness, immense; the immensity, black; the blackness, cold and the cold, alas, remained immobile. I shed so many tears there and my heart spilled so much blood there, that I was going to join her, no doubt. I was going to die... But the death that was mine stopped neither the breathing nor the beating. My own death was entangled in life and held me on this side, the side of dead lives.

The seconds should have stayed there, but they flowed away with my tears and my blood. And all that space was too much now. My heart had become a gap, an abyss, a gulf in which I never found a wall, a word, a bottom.

For heart I had an infinite emptiness my tears could not fill. There are too many open spaces that never close. Time is a wound of eternity, space, a rupture of infinity. The stars give just enough light to glimpse the unspeakable darkness and life provides just enough time to tremble in the face of eternity.

It is no good raging, all this still exists. It is no good rejecting, this still persists. It is no good tearing out your eyes and your heart, all this remains. And the mountains in front of the house hadn't even blinked a small rock, and the wind continued to whistle in the trees, and the sea rolled its insolent waves. They all lied, they no longer had anything to say and did not shut up.

Why did time continue everywhere when it had stopped on my child? Why does space remain just as vast when it had evaporated precisely there, exactly where she was? She didn't take up too much room, my little girl! She wasn't any harder to maintain than a fawn, a seagull or a rabbit.

Why did the world pursue its course everywhere when it had missed so small a spot? Who allowed the universe to disappear here and remain stable elsewhere? Why did it start everywhere if it is to end bit by bit?

But there it was, I was breathing and the universe persisted. Time passed and the hole did not close.

Exile

I couldn't stand the sea, which didn't stop its moaning, the trees, their whistling, and the mountains, their being silent. They had no right to continue their stupid game. When a child dies, it is not right to go on forever with insignificant things. Besides, this has lasted for too many years, too many years that black holes swallow stars, that foxes attack hares, that coyotes cut sheep's throats and time digests children. That has to stop. We have to send all this circus packing.

The country had betrayed me. It had used me and its game went over the limit. No way could I forgive it. Forgive what gives hope, kills and then turns around laughing... Never! It should have buried itself alive in its shame and its ignominy. But it was laughing in my face, so I left for the city.

At least a city shouts, yells, gesticulates, shakes its fists, brandishes tons of cement in infinity's face.

It's the festival of death. They die there in the open sky. They don't give a damn about the sky, they spit ashes in its face. They die everywhere without shame. It's death's joyful round. The crouching death of beggars, the enraged death of hoodlums, the deadened death of the tightrope-walkers of finance and of jobs...

The city doesn't tell stories, it is enough for it to echo the clamor of the night. It staggers on the rim of the well: drunk from its own darkneses. Sheer ravings on the edge of an abyss.

They exhaust themselves there without reserve. They run as fast as their legs can carry them, pursued by clocks, devoured by gods of paper. They sacrifice themselves completely in front of cathodic screens. They fill with noise the smallest fractions of silence. They defy heaven: "Yes! we can rival in stupidity any god whatsoever." The solar systems fashion iron and flesh, the city responds with sweat and soot. "There is no reason up there, oh well! there won't be any down here."

I leaped through the revolving door of the city in my eagerness to sacrifice every minute to study and to work. I went through three universities and five faculties. Courses which I never finished, payed for dearly in the darkest bars of that part of town, where I dispensed the liquors for the funeral wedding. For there is a wedding in this world: the soul weds nothingness. It prepares for it all during life, makes itself beautiful, dilates its virtues, fills its mind, does up its hair... Finally, the kiss and dissolution. Nothing any more! So it has to get drunk. Me, I got drunk with study and work.

I slept between the end of the night and the beginning of the day. I ate almost nothing. This was my way of running on the waves swiftly and lightly enough not to sink.

I read everything from Socrates to Nietzsche. It was a murmur, a complaint that lengthened like a bridge of lace over the abyss. A reason which by force of reason tries to stop and submit to reason the confusion of nothingness lost in its own void. Words that sparkle on the surface of the pages before disappearing in the acids of the paper.

I pitied the human soul in its ephemeral calligraphic cauldron. A fresh fish plunged in sizzling oil screams before its skin explodes and its flesh opens up. Man, for his part, writes. It is his riposte and it deserves to be read. It has a right to eyes like the scream has a right to ears.

So I read the forgotten books, those no one wants. It's not right to let a soul's cry fade on a wooden shelf. It's too much solitude. Books must be read while they are weeping. I captured some of the world's tears here and there before they were lost in oblivion. To lend my heart and my memory in this way in order to collect a little of this world's rain seemed to me the most beautiful and the most noble of compassions.

It was logic that led me to work for almost no wages in a Latin café where two musicians were lacking an audience. One was blind and the other, too fat, remained glued to his enormous iron chair. The first made a violin weep and the other, his voice.

As a child, the violinist had known the terror of the Nazi camps. Horrible images still haunted his memory. His companion had been terrorized by his own mother and remained a prisoner of his art. He refused to do anything but sing. Through stubbornness, he had made himself an oversized body that served him as an instrument and pretext. His troubling song emerged from the depths of the abyss. He harmonized with the violin like the bird with the river.

It was the only thing I could endure, to hear a human heart gush out of its own soul, the most naked possible, naked like the scream of a mother who just lost her baby. A pure suffering.

But their suffering smiled. What a mystery! What an enigma! After the atom had overcome the void, the amoeba had finally surpassed in complexity its mother the water, after the fish had supplanted the amoeba, the reptile had passed the state of fish, and the mammal had emerged from the reptile; to hear the howls of the primate attain such a smile... It was impossible!

The spectacle of these two men in the night was a living impossibility. And that impossibility seized me just in time, for I was going to die in my pain. Already I weighed only forty kilos and my heart was precarious.

They were dressed in black and sang the exile of the soul and the exodus of the people. Only the blind man spoke because his companion could only sing.

They refused to tell me their names. But each time they started their show, they began with an extract from the book of Job:

[He is called Job. For when he readies his violin and his voice]

The princes stop there speaking

And put their hands on their mouths.

[...]

The ear who hears him calls him happy

For the blessing of the unhappy comes upon him.

[...]

He is the eye of the blind and the foot of the lame.

*He is the father of the wretched and examines the cause
of the stranger.*

[...]

So he will die in his nest [...];

Water will penetrate his roots,

The dew will pass the night on his branches.

(Jb 29:9-19)

I decided then to call the one who spoke, Job, and the one who sang, Silence.

Job said that if Yahweh had not driven his creation *almost* outside of him (he put the accent on "almost"), it could not have survived and God would have died of loneliness. But creation groans in its exile and the heart of God is touched. He wants to take it in his arms but he cannot, for if it returned to him unreservedly it would disappear forever in his love. Tobit the father of Tobias was looking at the sky. When he was about to catch hold of God, a bird passed and its droppings blinded him. The angel intervened to protect him.

It is the suffering of a great fire that loves a little spark, if it takes it into its flame, it consumes it and kills it. If it goes too far away from it, the spark grows cold and dies. So it breathes on it to keep it warm, but at the right distance. It is the exile of the soul and the exodus of the people. Through the exile, the soul becomes itself a fire and its love for the fire leads it to produce its own sparks. Through the exodus, the people succeeds in governing itself... But this is a very long story, a heartbreaking story.

Silence sang of the lover who exiles himself from the loved one in order to let her live in her own way. He keeps her in his love, however. The first act of Yahweh was to separate light and darkness so as to allow unity to become fertile and multiply.

- But the nature of the exile, I said, is to want to return to his own place.

- Yes, they do return, Job answered. But when the interior returns, the exterior goes off again even further. A child dares to go as far as he can still hear his mother's song. In this way he searches for his own existence. But if inadvertently he passes the limit beyond which he no longer hears her, he is in great danger. The art of exile consists of developing the keenness of the ear so as to compensate for the blinding of the eyes. The sage is a great keen ear.

- But God has abandoned us, I replied. It's proven, the mountains don't give a damn about humans.

- Yes, it's true, God did lie, Job conceded. If God had said absolutely the pure truth, his word would have been exactly Him and it would have fallen back into Him like a fire into a fire. It is radical: to speak is to lie.

- And why? I abruptly demanded.

- Because words have limits while what they speak of don't have any, he gently replied. The word is the bird droppings. It protects us from the dazzling a direct view would cause. However, God's lie is the smallest lie possible, like that of a mother when she tells the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

- One more riddle! I exclaimed, raising my voice.

- When my mother told me that story, he continued without changing his tone, I laughed even before the wolf ate the grandmother. I knew that it was only a story. However I pretended not to know it and that amused Mama. We were both of us accomplices in a harmless deceit. But the day when I saw my mother enter a shack covered with soot that I knew she would never go out of alive, I had to make a choice.

His voice trembled, almost choked, but he succeeded in adding:

- She said to me "be seeing you" and not "goodbye". So I either believed her or I trusted the only facts accessible to my eyes. I was so shattered! On my knees in the mud, I struck my forehead against a wall. I remained blind, but I had confidence in my mother. I survived. It was the smallest lie possible, the one that allowed me to survive.

A tear ran down his cheek. It was not an ordinary tear, it had a long memory. It carried a feeling that seemed to summarize all his life and this feeling appeared without consolation and at the same time full of hope. But as for me, his story appalled me.

- But what good is it, this crazy game? I asked without even expecting an answer.

- It's the game of the right distance, the game...

I didn't want to hear anything more and I broke his impetus:

- It's not funny at all, this shitty game!

I was boiling. I searched for the fatal argument. Only one came to my mind:

- So, according to you the lie would be the first creative act...

- Ah no, not the lie, the smallest lie possible, the smallest exile possible, the one without which every thing would fall back into its source...

I turned a deaf ear, but he persisted:

- Exile, don't kid yourself, is very difficult. It begins with a refusal and it ends with a fire. So stop this stupid way of dying and die like everyone else...

I couldn't stand any more of it:

- It's false, it's totally false, your exile, it's shit. I need to die...

I left crying. I slammed the door as hard as I could and ran. I collapsed in I don't know what park under I don't know what tree. I felt as if all the tears of all those who have wept in this world wanted to pass through my eyes. I knew that there wouldn't be any end to this suffering and I was so exhausted. My heart wanted to break. I fell into a kind of comatose sleep.

A turbulent sea swept me away, then brought me back. I emerged into a semi-conscious state and sank once more into a sea of black ink. A wave surged out of the depths and slid me on to the shore for a moment. A strange but pleasant odor filtered into my nostrils. I plunged into the opaque ink once again. An even stronger wave threw me back to the surface. I opened one eye. A nearly formless light penetrated it. I fell back into the night. But the tide went out again and left me on the shore. The form became pulpy and warm. I was in Job's arms.

He was walking in the morning traffic. I saw the truckers grimace as they put on the brakes, the motorists hit their horns, but I didn't hear a thing. Job was zigzagging, sometimes on the sidewalk, sometimes in the street. Silence had managed to get out of the café and drag himself to where he could keep him in view. Leaning against a wall, he guided Job as best he could with vocalizations and whistles. I saw the movements of his mouth but didn't hear them. I fainted in the warmth of Job's arms.

When I woke up in the veranda of what must have been his apartment, I was completely deaf. Tobit had been blinded by the droppings of a bird from heaven; my eardrums had been punctured by the words of Job.

I don't know if it were my deafness that exacerbated my vision in this way, but colors had become so bright that shapes almost completely disappeared, merged one into the other. I had the impression that impressionistic paintings were dancing around me, as if Monet had reconstructed the city. In this blurred and flickering setting, strange visions suddenly appeared and faded. Job disappeared, reality escaped me, my solitude touched the absolute.

No, there would never be any scar on my wound. Some have children, I had a wound. I saw with this wound, I looked with this wound, I ate with it, I dreamed in the hollow of my wound.

It was then that I had the vision of the five carousels, the five hells of Moderna.

But what is a carousel, what is a hell? It is a death that does not die, a death killed point-blank.

"Let death ripen on us like a fruit", says the poet Victor Hugo.

Job was right and before my eardrums had burst, I heard him say: "Exile is the beginning of life". Birth is a moving away. We begin by being separated from God like little chicks from their mother, we begin in death, baptised in it. And then, death begins to ripen like a fruit. When the fruit is ripe, it falls of its own accord and becomes a tree, and the tree, a forest, and the forest, a universe, and the universe, a titanic overflowing of life. A good ripe death is a life at full speed in an expanse with no horizon.

So what had torn my eardrums was not Job's words, it was the terrible question posed by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

*For, Lord, the great cities
are lost and decomposing;
the greatest is flight before the flames.
there is no hope in their despair...
It is there that the children, on the window
ledges,
grow, forever sunk in the same
shadow,
ignoring that outside each flower calls
them...
Death is there. Not the one whose promise
had
miraculously caressed their childhood, -*

*but mean death,
their own death hangs, green and with no sweetness,
like a fruit which will never ripen in them.
O Lord, give to each one his own death,
the death that comes from this life...*
(R.M. Rilke)

In sum, did my daughter die from a well ripened and perfectly pure death or else had her death been killed by a terrible machination?

Did she die from all her life, or else had she been murdered, killed by a death which kills us well before our authentic death gathers us into its life? This terrible question haunted me. For I had a mission to protect her from every death that did not come from her and, if I had failed in that mission, all that I was would collapse.

The passage through modern times

The first hell resembled a great clock: belts, gears, pendulums, beatings, rollings, mechanical sidewalks which crossed, went off and returned on themselves. A swarming, an agitation, shouts, fanfares, whistles, a terrible racket... On their mechanical sidewalk, men, women, children with fixed smiles froze like candles without fire. Age, instead of ripening them, hardened them. At the time when they should have been releasing sap, they were nothing more than bright, shiny, loud china dolls. What a terrible carousel! Flesh-and-blood persons, prisoners of a linear, precise, exact and predictable freedom; of a freedom imprisoned in the fear of its desert.

Each one followed his or her course like bottles circulating in a brewery. Into the vials was poured a meticulously measured blend of petrifying syrup, stimulating drug and numbing soporific... As if to prevent it, death had been forestalled, to evade its hiatus, it was swallowed in small doses, so that when it did arrive, no one was there to receive it.

I regained consciousness. I was still in Job's veranda. The light entered in torrents, but the shapes were still only large spots of color that danced in each other. As for the silence, it remained total.

My inner universe was coming undone. I felt completely lost. I went from image to image without being entirely certain that I was still the same, that it was still me.

I was totally absorbed by the effort of preserving my train of thought. I walked straight ahead like an accident victim still in a state of shock and no longer able to connect events.

Fortunately, sometimes a shadow came toward me. It was Job, no doubt. He placed his hand on my forehead. That awakened memories and I went off again...

It was the second day after my little girl's burial. It was hot and the wind was hurling enormous waves against the cliff.

The house shook. It was my husband arriving. Our daughter's death had aggravated his old wounds of childhood. For some time, he had been wandering like a bear pierced by an arrow. He went into the bedroom and threatened me, so much so that I opened my blouse so that he could satisfy himself. It was a mixture of rage and fear, a kind of cathodic emotion like children with toothaches have.

It was too much, he had passed the limit. I came out of my lethargy and saw him in reality.

I had so much suffering that he couldn't add to it and when he stuck his iron in the wood that served me as a body, I remained impassive. I suddenly understood that I had never known either love or pleasure. He collapsed beside me like an ox stunned by a stone. There was an unbearable odor, I went outdoors.

My husband was a prodigious pain that had turned out wrong. He was born between a man of anger and a woman of submission. He was born as a consequence of a hate which he named "love". He slept now, swallowed up in the blankets like an island lost in the middle of a great emptiness.

For he was very much alone, that man. All he took, he assimilated, and all he assimilated increased his appetite. The desert around him went on getting larger.

Why had I entered this man's cogs and belts like a china doll, with greater obedience than a nun in a convent? I didn't know. Ever since my adolescence, I had been huddled up in myself like a little mouse in its hole. He had picked me up as easily as a cat catches a rodent frozen with fright. As if lightning had struck two feet away from me and I had been totally paralyzed. So much so that the most awkward of predators could have carried me off without the slightest effort.

He was the lion type: it is up to the female to feed the family. So I entered the cogwheels of work like a perfectly programmed robot. The faster the machine turned, the more I let myself be swallowed, sacrificing my childhood dreams in my soul's most secret recesses. My childhood had been killed in me as savagely as my little daughter, but by what cataclysm? I didn't know.

I had been thrown into too much solitude, no doubt. I had headed toward the first oasis. No matter the barking of the dogs, the weapons and the cost of slavery, I wasn't going to be alone any longer...

No! worse. I was going to know the greatest of solitudes, that of being separated from my solitude. For I no longer had the right to withdraw, no longer had the right to be silent, no longer the right to speak, no longer the right to be sad or to weep, no longer the right to lock the bathroom, no longer the right to rebel, not even the right to simulate submission. I had to embody the happy image he had of me even while convincing him that I truly was that image... Until I had convinced myself of it.

It is true that in fleeing one misfortune, one jumps into a greater misfortune. It is also terribly true that the exile from my own original exile opens on to an

infinitely dreary solitude. To be compelled to live in two versions, one happy and hardworking, the other infinitely sad and withdrawn, to not have the right to bring together these two versions, is to die the worst of deaths.

Nonetheless my buried dreams had formed an egg my soul had known how to hatch without me. I felt it, it was like a smooth but warm stone deposited on the snows of my heart. It was a very small hope: a lukewarm egg in a white desert. But when one is dead, that nothing is everything. One curls completely around it, attentive to the slightest signs.

Happy the day when he finally passed the limit. He had torn my clothes. That was the sign I was waiting for. The belt had frayed. I had gotten out, this time of my own accord and for my own survival. There were no longer any cogwheels under my feet. For the first time I was walking without being pushed, by the power of my own legs alone.

Like a small child, I improvised each of my steps. Each movement was mine. It was frightening, it was intoxicating.

I was never going to return anymore. All around me, the solitude was astounding, but it was mine.

The human soul is something like a marine mammal: it has to put its nose out of the water each time it wants to breathe. Why? Because it doesn't live in its own substance. To be sure, there is a little air in the water, but it needs more. This is what happened to me after my daughter's death. I began to lack air. This gave me another point of view, the point of view of an exile.

"Thanks to irony," Jankelevitch said, "thought breathes more lightly when it has seen itself dancing and creaking in the mirror of reflection." This is the vision of those who search for their own place.

Only the prospect of true death makes philosophy hatch. When you hold in your arms the inert body of your child, the tinsel of words and things collapses outright. You find yourself in the primary state. This is the vision of the badly burned.

And me, I was asking: "Did she die inside her life or had she been removed from her life by an unbearable violence?"

And I had my second vision.

Oeconomus, which had become a collective animal, though no one could say exactly when, had taken refuge in an enormous two-story shell. This building with neither windows nor doors was sealed with a layer of concrete. On its

back: the emblem of a serpent eating its tail. People buzzed around it with a self-giving appropriate, I thought, to the beatitude of insects.

The lower story of the pyramid was divided into three large sectors: directed dreams, directed work and directed consumption.

Houses, cars, and clothing served to classify people in a strange hierarchy where the most servile occupied the upper story; the most rebellious, the lower story. In fact, the most submissive had no other pleasures than to parade around, loaded down with possessions. They were totally dedicated to this task: to have a look that takes the breath away. Those who hesitated, doubted, asked questions, put less heart into their work found themselves at the bottom of the ladder.

The torture of this hell consisted of making oneself one's own slave. To work in order to squeeze out of one hour as many goods as possible, so as to parade around the following hour with the most weight possible, such seemed to be the obsession of these wretches. Here was an exaggerated form of self-mastication. In serving themselves, they wore themselves out so much that they didn't have time.

But where did all this time go that slipped between their fingers?

It was pumped to the upper story. The image of this story, as it came to me, was so vague and so improbable that it was hard for me to form a picture of it. There was neither object nor person, only a few enormous masses resting on a black marble floor. Keeping my gaze concentrated and motionless for several long minutes, I gradually noticed a kind of respiratory movement that permitted these disgusting things to slowly move like slugs. One might have said they were enormous larvae resembling queen termites, except that instead of laying eggs, they excreted numbers.

They murdered time. They accumulated so many dead minutes in their bellies that their weight threatened to bring down the whole building.

A warm liquid entered my mouth. It must have been Job who was taking care of me. Sensations came to me as if filtered and diffused. The light alone was bright but almost without form.

A very dark spot grew larger and larger and began to sparkle... It was my mother sitting next to her wood stove. She never stopped rocking. Her skin resembled a thin layer of white wax on a wooden doll. She surrounded us, she enveloped us in a kind of unspeakable sadness.

There were thirteen of us on her drumhead. But when we heard the knocking of heels my father made as he came in for supper, we froze like squirrels at the approach of a hawk.

She had carried far too much, she had borne far too many children, she had never had any time for herself. The old wooden house that cracked in the wind had trouble containing us. It was too much for a single sadness and a single drum. Take care of the garden, cut the vegetables, milk the cows, wash the underwear, scrub, serve...

In the evening, time slowed down a little. To wash us, she sat us down stark naked in a line on the table and with her washcloth lathered first the series of faces, then the series of shoulders, finally the chests... It stung us until we were rinsed off.

We slept four in a bed, two at the head and two at the foot. We jumped, we danced, but the steps of my father beat the drum. The night became thick as soot.

The house was always clean and the silence, always heavy. The effervescence and the lightness, it was we who brought it with our mischief. But the drum got busy as soon as my father's steps crossed the threshold.

My mother had never had a man in her life. She had had shame in the place of a man. A shame that was unknown but which hovered at night. In the girls' room, the oldest one in each bed regularly counted feet to be sure that all four of us were still together. I didn't know why, but we had to be sure that the numbers didn't diminish during the night.

Shame, as it beat every night on the sadness of the drum, came to kill my mother piece by piece. She died next to the stove, half an hour at a time, from the inside out. First the heart became like a big dark and silent wooden cylinder, then the mind was transformed into a drumhead stretched to the breaking-point.

When he returned, his staggering steps stamped and my mother gave a start. One day, the drumhead broke. My mother died in her shame for him.

We were born in an unknown shame and when my mother left us, there was a great terrifying emptiness. I was fourteen. I was much too young for so much shame and emptiness.

When my father saw my mother in her black grave, a tear formed in the corner of his eye. It was the only tear left to him, because as a child, he had shed them all in a single night when his mother had kicked the family dog to death. He wiped his tear and came out with this sentence: "It's not long, a lifetime, it's

really not long." That almost commonplace sentence, without my knowing why, cut the final thread and I was lost in an unbearable solitude.

Then I was captured. I said to myself: a strong man, all muscles, will protect me from my father. Alas! he turned against me and dragged me into the terrible machine of his needs.

I had to do the housekeeping at full speed so as to rush as fast as possible to the school to "win" the living of the household. More money was always necessary because the man consumed a lot. During breaks, I phoned him to make sure all was going well. I no longer had time to enjoy either my little girl or the children in my class. Their antics annoyed me, their laughter grated on me.

Life is rather short and if you subtract the time spent sleeping, already little of it remains. But when you attempt to retrieve from your memory the moments of real awareness, of complete awakening, then the whole of life is counted in minutes rather than in days.

I was "winning" life, I was losing it.

The only thing that truly remains with me is the time, tragic but fully conscious, when I accompanied my daughter to death's door. While my heart was crushed in a suffering no one in the world would ever know how to describe, my mind was strangely alert. I was so broken that I was not aware of this state of grace. But when she passed away, or rather several days later, I found that I had two bereavements: the loss of my child and the loss of a consciousness pushed to the extreme.

Strange and terrible paradox: the six most cruel months of my life were also the most awakened.

She must have died within herself. It was I who had died to my own true death and who, because of this, could not join her. But she, she came searching for me, she gave me back my death and now I'm in the center of my death. My death is ripening slowly, I feel it, and if I'm not killed by a sidelong gust, a whirlwind that takes me off my base, I will die in my death, and I will be in her death, and we will re-form the world.

Three days after the burial, I began to bitterly feel her absence. I hugged my pillow with so much force that it tore, but nothing helped. I no longer had a child. Everything was infinitely smooth, the same and deadly boring.

But what was most painful came from a strange impression: what I was experiencing, I would always experience. Death appeared to me to be the world's normal state. A stone rests on the ground, it is thrown toward the sky

and falls back on the ground. A line, a throw, a line. A circle, a life, a circle. A point, the universe, a point. The same story in the short or prolonged version.

There are moments when our personal existence blends with Story, the only story possible: the story of a breath. We then become so much the Story of everything that we find ourselves totally alone.

I alone had stayed next to my daughter. I alone had hesitated in front of her grave. I alone no longer knew why this was the only story possible. Her death was not on anyone's program. No one had time for this mystery. And me, I lingered too long in front of that all-white gravestone lost in a dark hole... I could no longer manage to get back on my horse. Everyone was turning on the merry-go-round, I alone stayed motionless.

A solitude like this one kills and, suddenly, I had my third vision: the vision of Stella, the planet of stars.

From a distance, I thought it was a six-armed gorilla gesticulating in the hope of being rescued. The animal seemed so big on his planet that it was not unlikely that he was starving to death. But I couldn't succeed in interpreting his gestures. At times I saw in them an expression of anguish, at others, an expression of exuberance.

The form of that immense solitary primate was as strange as his movements. The animal had in fact no legs: his titanic belly rested directly on the ground, covering as it were all of its surface.

As I drew nearer, the vision changed. It no longer really was an animal, it was a crowd instead, a multitude that rose very high by all sorts of tentacles. At the ends of these tentacles extraordinary performances were unfolding.

On one of them, a singer, under laser lights of every color, projected an extraordinary voice, capable of arousing extreme emotions. The beauty of the star, the sensuality of her dance, the flaming colors of her clothing, the perfection of her voice produced an extraordinary vibration in all of the arm supporting her. When she wept, all shed tears, when she laughed, the entire arm was shaken to the bones.

On another, gymnasts, acrobats, comedians and tightrope-walkers took off on trapezes, swings, trampolines and bungee cords. It was wonderful: perfect bodies, inconceivable feats of balance, exploits defying the imagination...

In another place, orators, sophists and rhetoricians could be heard. They manipulated rootless words, unequivocal as razor blades, with which they cut into ever smaller pieces all they could devour...

Further off, men and women rose with big words full of promises that said, in essence, that all would go very well if only people would let them do what they wanted...

On the opposite side, there was an arm, immense in strength and thickness, which monopolized the greatest mass of Stella's people. It was a gigantic limb that never weakened, that absorbed all the cerebral mass, that mounted toward the sky with a desire to fill it, to cover it, to liquefy itself in it, to lose itself in it with no return. On the stage that it held, illuminated by a red and flickering light, a show of sexual acts was being given, extraordinary in the loudness of the moanings, the disproportion of the phalluses and mammary glands. Titans were making love with simulated orgasms which, one might have said, poured out all the rage, all the pain, all the despair, all the thirst of that pathetic humanity.

Torture in Stella consisted of making people live vicariously. A small number of living persons was sufficient to provide others with the feeling of existing. By the force of their fingers, nails and tendons, the stars climbed to the tops of the tentacles. But down below were the great majority of men and women: fat, chubby, soft and apathetic. It was a horrible way of dying.

I gagged and awoke. Light entered the veranda. I felt Job's hand on my shoulder. I would have wanted to emerge, to look at him, to hear him... But I fell back into my memories.

Autumn that year was without light, letting flows of brown mud slide on the thin snow of the mountains a little bit everywhere. The sea wept sadly, and at times gave out dull moanings. It was the season of the highest tides.

Since my husband didn't work and everything was so dark, he bought an enormous television. And because the television was enormous, I now had to work more. It was pure logic.

My daughter was still very young, but I had to resign myself, facts are facts, what has to be has to be. He was going to take care of it. It was the best solution. I had diplomas and he didn't have any. As he so well said it, he hadn't had any luck.

I had, then, to abandon my little one, alone in this worrying house my husband was a part of. A house away from the village, in a wet woods on the edge of a terrifying cape. A house that he had made and that was falling to pieces.

Not one door closed correctly, not one pipe didn't drip, nothing stayed in place. The wind penetrated there as if it were at home and came to numb everything with cold, except for my husband who was always hot.

And the television ruled.

Everything I managed to put in the refrigerator disappeared into his stomach and the list of bills swallowed not just the monthly check, but those of the months to come as well. I could no longer call anyone whatsoever, he had taken charge of the telephone. To save on hot water, I went to do the washing in the brook. But all the savings disappeared for the cable TV, the sofa, the popcorn, the chips and the chocolate. And my little one was most often in his arms, on his good warm stomach, enjoying candy.

The abyss of debts and the wall of solitude formed a fortress around the house. There was no longer any way out. The horizon had totally closed. I no longer had my place, any other place than that of necessity. And necessity was money, so that all that could subsist.

My little girl was resting in the center of an infinitely fragile vase and now I had to make sure that the vase passed through time without breaking. So I had dressed her warmly, turned the television on, closed the door of the room where she was sleeping and left for work.

All day, all evening, anxiety. I was drowning in that anxiety which paralyzed me, which froze me. I no longer dared to change anything in the circle my little one lived in.

The few hours I was at home, I scurried on tiptoe like a little nervous and worried squirrel. I was coming to nibble a moment of tenderness next to my little one. He held her hostage and the ransom was me, my salary, my absence, my total collapse.

The hour before I left for work, she fidgeted, sang, jumped, ran, but never looked at me. I discreetly slipped away so as not to break the precarious balance in which I left her. I would have wanted to stop time and, on my return, take up life where I had left it. To act in such a way that nothing happened summarized my job.

I was broken in all my body, broken by fear, broken by anxiety. Every week, at an unpredictable moment, he threw his fit to clearly mark his territory: the cyclone in whose center we had to remain. The village feared the storm and stayed away. No one came. And me, I feared the people with good intentions more than all the others: when you swim in methane, you're afraid of sparks.

I was like an animal mobilized by the dull but urgent need to avoid catastrophe, to delay the detonation, to soften the explosion. What did it matter to me, the villagers' sarcasms and sidelong glances! Provided that no one came to wake up the bear.

And while I guarded the perimeter and hunted for food, she danced between him and the TV screen.

Then, she died. And when I returned to work, with my flesh in rags like a soldier burned with napalm, all I had for consolation was this scathing sentence: "If you had left the house with her, she wouldn't have died."

That day, I lost the battle. I had been ejected from the other side of the world. Everyone is sheltered in a house. But me, I wander outside in the night.

I have my visions of horror as companions.

I thought I had reached the bottom of my madness. "The insane man's first difficulty," Job told me one day, "is distinguishing his own madness from the world's. The prophet is the one who, after having separated the one from the other, tastes the Wisdom that just this discernment has allowed him."

But me, I was banished to my own madness as much as to the world's.

Job and I were now advancing on two sides of the same solitude: he from inside the carousels, I from outside them. I had my fourth vision.

I saw four unbridled white horses drawing a chariot of fire. I saw neither driver nor passenger. The animals ran wildly, terrified not by the fire, it seemed to me, but by the planet in front of me: a planet on which an enormous cross was planted.

The chariot's flames, its whirlwinds, its firebrands, its thunders formed trains and ribbons which testified by their zigzags to the frenzy of the escapade. It went in every direction, puzzling, unpredictable, incomprehensible. And yet the team lit up the sky more than all the other stars.

It was magnificent, sensationally beautiful. The team fled faster and faster, faster than the surrounding meteors and comets. At the pace of the pulsars and still more rapidly, an infernal galloping of light, so much so that it disappeared in darkness.

When an unheard-of thing disappears to never return, it is customary to say that it is a vision, an image, an illusion. The status of being is granted only to what persists and is repeated. Time nibbles at being and if it swallows it too quickly... What was it? Ashes, an impression, a confusion? Who can say? If the thing never returns to confirm itself, it is better to affirm that it was nothing.

Lovers want to seize the time, for fear that their love might fall back into its original illusion. And yet, if they succeed in freezing it, their hearts take the form of a stone and they sink straight to the bottom.

Strange contradiction: what passes is a mortal life, what remains is an eternal death! Could it be that being demands contradiction, ambivalence, incoherence, combination and confusion? Could it be that truth has reality only to the degree that it is hidden? That beauty has charm only when combined with some ugliness? Could it be that all is intertwined: the worst and the best, death and life, the present moment and the course of time? Could it be that we are swimming against life all the times when we try to dissociate these two inflexible partners, becoming and being, these two lovers who sink back into nothingness as soon as we dare to isolate the one from the other?

My meditation was suddenly brought to an end by the fourth vision: Tekhnikos, the planet of the cross...

The horizontal axis resembled a river. This river crossed the vertical axis and came out on the other side in the form of a keen-edged sword. The vertical axis appeared to be formed of brains, grafted together with their neurons entangled in each other. Strange electric arcs came splitting the sky and falling on the cross like bolts of lightning strike a lightning rod. I didn't understand anything about it. The machine began to speak.

- My principle is very simple but my mechanics, subtle. The horizontal axis is the river of time. The past enters by the left, the future exits by the right. The vertical axis is that of desire. What you want, in a flash I make. I modify the course of time so that it conforms to your desires.

I thought that this was heaven. But why wasn't anybody there?

I suddenly understood what the torture consisted of. A man who arrived in front of that machine was condemned without mercy to everything he wanted, to all that he felt to be his good. It was an infinite solitude. He nourished himself out of his own substance, so that he became smaller and smaller, minuscule, to finally disappear completely in the emptiness. This is why I was alone in front of this inviting and infernal machine.

If I had let it know a single one of my desires, it would have caught me. Seized in the trap, I would have begun to want ever so many things. The universe I desire would have little by little taken the place of the universe that desires me. My desires would have become realities. The desires that were in me would be all around me with bodies, matter, movements. In the end, my internal organs would be substituted for the sky and the stars. My interior would have become my exterior.

But I am still chaos and contradictions.

That is exactly what a city is, human entrails still in a jumble that find themselves outdoors in the form of constricted streets, crazy buildings, iron machines: a death that answers our desires.

The veranda's windows wavered. A gust of wind must have woken me up. There was something like a hollow in my stomach. It was the first time since my daughter's death that I felt hunger. I didn't want Job to arrive too quickly because I liked this sensation. It led me into a pleasant corner of my memory...

He was named Raphaël. He was forty-eight. He was handsome like a mature tree. The boys in the class laughed at his old-fashioned name. He replied to them that the angel Raphaël had been sent to cure the blind. But it was a story from the Bible and the Bible didn't interest anyone.

I was sixteen, I no longer had a mother and I had never had a father. My heart was making a racket and my body was growing inflammable. The goddess Sororia, responsible for the birth of budding breasts, was still hesitating to make mine rise, but amused herself by raising them up and numbing them every time Raphaël arrived in class to give his course.

When, with his melodious voice, he entered into dialogue with Socrates, walked beside Plato and commented on the *Timaeus*, at the moment when, at the end of certain sentences, he plunged his wild eyes into mine, my breast-buds quivered to the depths of my belly. I would have given my life for him to hug me.

I had, then, a thousand questions to ask him just before the end of each class and he stayed with me till the following class. We were talking about *Phaedo* and the *Banquet*. With him, sentences and ideas had nothing cold and rigid about them. On the contrary, when they pressed in their darts, galaxies of feelings exploded like fireworks.

Plato, the disciple of Socrates, had understood the essence of Eros, the god who, between the question and the answer, established a link of love able to give birth to the soul. This is what Raphaël practiced. With him, neither questions nor answers aimed at satisfying; nourishment came only from their embracing in the deepening of the paradoxes of existence.

Consequently, our conversations had no end. I was the one and only person who didn't laugh at him, who drank in his flights of inspiration. We weren't in class or even in school, we were strolling on the square of the Academy with the greatest of the great and in the evening, at the agora of Athens, we harangued the crowds until the wee hours.

I took him away with me. He accompanied me everywhere, even at night. It was me that he slept with, it was me that he covered, it was me that he penetrated. Had he been physically there, he would have made me explode, but he didn't see me. He didn't realize that I was melting for him. Raphaël was a

man, I was a child; he didn't make the connection between my eyes that drank him in, my pestering questions, and the swelling of my breasts.

But one day, there was a rather long pause between two sentences and, without my really wanting it, the trembling point of one of my tiny breasts touched a quiet little hollow of his right shoulder... And there he realized that we were alone in the classroom. Socrates and Plato had left us. A powerful electric discharge passed through us. He rushed into the corridor faster than if the fire alarm had gone off.

The following Saturday, he phoned me to arrange a meeting at the college where a remarkable exhibition on Gothic cathedrals was being held.

I was very excited. My sister had a devilishly short and tight red dress, which she kept hidden in the chiffonier. There was no one at home, so I hastily slipped it on and rushed to the college without even taking the precaution of even once looking in the mirror. I was Héloïse, he was Abelard and mirrors couldn't do a thing about it.

When I arrived, he was alone in the midst of the graphics, the models and the reproductions: completely absorbed by two massive columns in real hewn stone that were joined, almost over my head, by an arch that appeared to me dangerously fragile. He scarcely looked at me, said nothing about my dress, made sure he kept me a good distance from him and in a trembling voice pronounced a series of paragraphs that froze in my memory without ever fully delivering their message.

"This will be difficult," he said, "but listen to me until the end." He repeated that he was my teacher, that he was forty-eight years old, that I was sixteen, that we mustn't see each other any more, that we must become memories one for the other... But me, I didn't want memories, I wanted him. But he insisted on saying that memories aren't just memories. I no longer understood anything of it. He spoke to me about the heavy columns in front of us that made me afraid.

"Look closely at those columns," he said, "they can hold up an enormous vault." I told him that this made no sense, that he ought to step aside before they collapsed on him. "No, no," he continued, "they are very solid because of these flying buttresses that support the columns." But me, I didn't look, I hid my face with my hair and refused to come closer.

"Thanks to these flying buttresses which reinforce them," he insisted, "these columns are very sturdy." According to him, we must accord a great importance to the making of memories "which", he said, "solidify the columns of our lives and will one day make possible vaults, steeples and spikes that are impossible today."

Raphaël said that I must accept his being transformed into memory.

I told him that this was nonsense. That memories like that were only stab wounds. I told him that scars were ugly, horribly ugly!

It all depended on me, he asserted. For a memory to become a flying buttress, I had to discover its meaning. If I succeeded in this, I would be able to keep this memory leaning solidly next to me and this would allow me to stand up, to rise up good and straight and support an impressive vault. "The fascinating thing about flying buttresses," he continued, "is that they make use of gravity to allow columns to rise very high, even though it attracts them downward. The heavier the flying buttresses on a column are, the higher it can rise. What could crush it raises it."

I saw him through the curtain of my tears and hair. He had no right to talk. You don't talk when you don't know the shreds of a heart in front of you. But him, he didn't stop talking.

"There are memories that are written with blood," he said, "that are heavy with wounds and pain and that will however, later, at the proper time, permit inexpressible joys." And he finished by saying: "I don't know if you will succeed in making a flying buttress out of the present moment, but I will. I will keep you as one of the most beautiful stones in my cathedral."

I threw myself on him and hit him as hard as I could to make him shut up. He got away and I remained alone between the two columns, immobile in the hope that they would tumble down on me. But they did not tumble down.

When I returned to the house, my brother began to roar with laughter. My dress was much too big, the shoulder-pads fell to the chest and halfway down the arms, the cloth made ridiculous pouches. My heart was in little pieces and I didn't know what to do with memories cut with the blows of an ax.

If children die, if men suffocate in their own machines, if time cares nothing for the poems inscribed on our graves, there must then necessarily be a planet of answers. If not, men would have long ago stopped existing. This was my fifth vision: Idolators, the planet of refuges.

Its banner waved in a solar wind that, in this spot, created thousands of auroras, colorless, alas: black and white, no shades. As I drew closer, something appeared on the immense flag. There one could read, in a language that seemed obvious to me: "There at last."

The planet of answers opened up before me. It was entirely covered by a calm and perfectly white sea on which four large islands emerged.

I landed on the oldest of the islands, the one on which the Circular Wanderers lived. A serene old man ruled there. Every man listened to him. A beach went all around the island without encountering any cape, shoal, or even a single rock. The men went around it one after the other behind their master as if they had lost the ability to doubt. They constantly retraced their steps, exclaiming: "Oh, someone has been walking here, let's follow his tracks."

On the second island there were large black or white churches each as magnificent as the other. They seemed to rival each other in their thrusting toward the sky: some by spires, others by bulbous domes, some by cupolas, still others by square towers. Whatever Church a member belonged to, he never left his Book. He asserted that in his Book the pure Truth was found. The inhabitants of the island were called the Swallowers of Books. But it was the opposite that happened. They fixed their eyes on their volume and little by little the text swallowed them. The Book fell to the ground, and another took it, saying: "Ah, look at that! There's a beautiful book", and the Book ate him. The third island was called Extasia. On its flower-covered surface, men and women glided over the ground as if in ecstasy. The perfect symmetry of their faces expressed a total serenity. They were so much the same in their vacuity, between themselves and over time, that one would have said they were statues. They were called the Bliss People. They drugged themselves in all sorts of ways: by suffering, by hyperventilation, by anorexia, by herbs, by pills or by gases. And as they were dying this way, ravens came to eat their brains.

The fourth island had the name of Athea. The people of Athea had no fat, they loathed all superfluous things. They were strong and dry. They scrutinized their own entrails very carefully, but even more so those of others, and if they discovered anything useless at all, they dissolved it in their powerful acids. They cut up the contents of their plates so thoroughly that they no longer had anything to eat. They were called the Worshipers of Nothingness. Their faces were pale and huge amoebas came and enveloped them in their stomachs and digested them down to the bones.

Between these four islands, in the middle of the ocean, I saw a great chimney descending into a terrible hell. To the burning coals, powdered blood, vermilion or ochre, was blended. If on the surface of Idolators everything was white or black, in the interior everything was red and shadowy. Wandering here and there through a crowd in raptures, fakirs were transported, suspended on iron hooks. At another place, volunteers were being crucified. Here and there, impassioned speeches were heard. There were men who struck their skulls with stilettos. They danced, singing the name of their God, and their blood ran on their clothing. From time to time all of these martyrs threw themselves on each other and killed each other in the exuberance of their faith.

Around this cavern where hyenas were let loose against lions and dogs against wolves, men wearing suits and ties went around with smiles on their lips, watering the fire with naphtha.

After that vision, I went into an immense depressive state. The entire universe had fallen in, its whole mass crushed me, smothered me. Job's hand grew distant. From now on, my body was nothing more than a stone, a solitude, a grave.

I raised my eyes and there was nothing. Night, just night, a night whose breadth, whose height, whose depth could not be known. I was sitting in the middle of this abyss and nothing happened, nothing could happen. The abyss remained immobile, this was its first state.

But time passed and it deepened the silence. So much so that little by little I heard a small distant drop that fell at regular intervals. A tiny pulsation in a dark abyss, followed by the resonance of emptiness...

It was strange how a little drop can succeed in giving breadth and depth to nothingness, in producing an impression of presence.

No other hope was given me.

The drop of water fell and very slowly a thin trickle of sound became audible. It was the muddled voice of Job, in reality the memory of his voice:

- You have a very beautiful little girl, he told me.

- She's dead, I moaned.

- A child is a naked poem, a poem without words, he replied.

I didn't understand a thing.

The redemption of death

Job's face went away. I was in free fall in the abyss of my death. I was caught in the depths. My body sank into the darkness. This time, it wasn't a vision, but the stomach of a whale that was going to digest me completely. I wasn't Jonah, I was truly a crucified woman, my head in the bowels of the earth.

I would never get out of this chasm alive. It would be another woman who would get out of it. I knew this, but the hand of death was carrying me off and I couldn't do anything about it.

I landed in the mud of Miserere. My reason had left me and I was in a state of shock. I saw it as if I were a ship of steel stuck in a cesspool that paralyzed all its engines. It sank forever in a muddy marsh that seemed to have no bottom.

I was sucked into the depths like a comet into a black hole. I had to exert superhuman efforts to get back to the surface. The mud was so thick that I crawled more than I swam. With difficulty I headed toward what I thought was the edge. A fetid odor suffocated me. There was garbage everywhere. I tried to keep looking higher and further away to avoid becoming aware of the foul elements that surrounded me, that stuck to my skin.

In spite of all the energy I expended, I sank, exhausted. I was at last going to join my little girl in nothingness or in being, it made no difference. We would be on the same side...

The more air I lacked, the more I thought I felt her, my little one, heard her, touched her, so the calls of death gave me a great deal to hope for. She was there, but it was no longer I who was covering her, it was she who was surrounding me, who was embracing me. When my strength grew weaker and I was letting myself flow into the abyss, her hold on me tightened.

I was going to surrender to euphoria when the pain of suffocation formed a kind of wall that forced me back upwards. With difficulty, I lifted my arms to hoist myself to the surface again. I came back up and suddenly I caught hold of the hardened trunk of a rough bush. Disappointed and relieved at the same time, I grabbed it with a force I didn't think I had any longer... My little girl had flown away.

I miserably dragged myself on to the soft and muddy shore where I must have lost myself in an even deeper delirium. I was searching for my child who must be hiding behind the clouds, but I didn't see her...

I got up and walked in the dense and thorny brush, which lacerated me. I wanted only one thing: to find some water and wash myself. The smells made me vomit. I needed water, a brook, a falls, a torrent, a sea...

But there was no water. Everything was dry and dirty, burning and pestilential. I decided to climb a hill to examine the area more widely. Perhaps there was a lake or simply a pool, a well, a puddle... I couldn't stand the filth that was drying on my clothing and on my skin. It seemed to me that this mud was penetrating my mind, preventing me from thinking, from grasping what was happening to me. Under a blazing sun, I was going to be transformed into a putrid mummy. I was thirsty, infinitely thirsty.

Little by little the conviction got into me that I hadn't truly lived, that I had simply struggled along in a marsh of confusion and muddled thinking, in machines that had ruined me, that had dried up my heart and my soul. I had always been a mummy, I only knew the world of mummies, their murmurs, their metallic and circular thoughts. I had existed in a world without water, without waves, without undulation...

I was suddenly certain that if I washed myself in a living water, I would be able to see, to hear and to think.

However from the top of the hill, I saw no water, but the opposite of water. It was a horrible spectacle. In a dust of yellow sand that floated as far as the eye could see, a sort of human matter appeared that is difficult for me to describe. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't and, the more I stared, the more I saw that reality which sank into my eyes like a sword. Not a sword that blinds the eyes, no! a sword that opens them.

There were, scattered in the desert, as far as the eye could see, dozens of human groups, no, hundreds, no, thousands around smoking ashes, abandoned gas cans and iron stakes. Huts of planks, sheet metal and half-collapsed cardboard encircled what had been fires. All around were what one might have said were ghosts, but still were men. To see the hollow eyes, the bone structure passing through the flesh, the grayish and shriveled skin that stuck to the bones, it was difficult to distinguish the dead from the living. Only their movements, like those of insects, indicated that they didn't yet belong to death even though they were no longer in the world of the living.

They were millions. Without exercising my eyes, without a will to see, a determination to receive that terrible truth, I would have seen nothing but colorless trunks, shriveled branches, a cemetery of wood, a dump of overturned stumps. But I myself was in a state so much like what I was perceiving that the vision, rather than dissipating, grew more precise.

Children were struggling to walk, their eyes bulging, their gaze ghastly, their sides sunken and their bellies swollen with worms. They turned miserably in

circles like drunken dwarves before falling, finally, in the delirium and drunkenness of death. They didn't cry, there were no tears on this planet, not enough hope for a tear, not enough water for a single drop of hope.

The mothers, dried up as burnt tree trunks, didn't have any tears, cries or murmurs either. They watched their children stagger on the rocky soil in search of a few grains of rice, insects, or grubs. The fathers resembled masts that swayed in some unknown wind: they waved their arms a final time before giving up the ghost.

The sting and venom of this atrocious reality produced a sort of liquefaction in my chest and belly. I felt myself becoming spongy like an overripe fruit.

There in the bowels of the earth, the body did not deceive, it faithfully reported what was happening in the soul. These bodies told what had become of the soul. This is why the vision of Modernus was unbearable. There are mirrors you can never look into directly unless you have lost everything. This raw dry truth cracked straight through my heart. My little girl was sleeping in my arms. I felt a flow of milk slide from my breast on to her cheek. My breasts were weeping my heart's tears. My little girl fell asleep on my chest, she gently reentered my flesh, I felt her in my womb again. We never die in a mama's arms, we cannot die in a mama's arms, it is impossible.

Her name was... I can't pronounce her name, I would die of it. She is too much alive to be named, to end up in the world of names.

But the children of this planet were dying for real because they had no one to die on.

No, that's false! I saw a man advancing, his camel had collapsed behind him. He was carrying a child who was nothing more than bones and gaze. He was carrying with him so much tenderness, dignity and purity that the child could not die. But the man fell, for lack of strength. He dug a hole in the sand, put his little one in it and covered him, for night was coming and the cold was getting bitter. He lay down over him and died. The sand covered them because their death could not be true. It was not a death, but a tenderness become permanent.

That is what I would have wanted, to cover her, my little girl, cover her with a death which freezes life forever on the film of the eternal memory of things. But I had been swept away in the madness of Modernus. I had lost the thread. I had died when she died, there's the tragedy.

She, she died in her death, her big round death. But me, I had been torn away from myself by modern machines. No! I say, I was completely there and I died in her death.

What good are all these handles when a child dies? What good are all these iron merry-go-rounds if there are no more children? I prefer the mud of the marshes and the ashes of the dying to the handles of chrome. In this desert where I am dying, all is frozen; in the turnstiles of Modernus, nothing has time to be born.

There on that planet everything was going to finally die in the serene equality of the music of the spheres... The true death was going to ripen in me like a little girl ripens in its mother's organs.

But the flesh is more resistant than one thinks and always surprising in its sudden jolts. It continually remakes itself. A truck approached a village. Those I thought were dead mingled with the living. They gathered together and suddenly there were shouts, blows, hopes which crossed swords. Those being trampled served as footstools for those who grabbed on.

Men were throwing their cargo overboard... flour, corn, rice and a few cans of water... Once again, for one day, the thread of life stretched, hurried about, and collapsed little by little among the dead trees. In another village, it was a garbage truck that was being emptied. The unfortunate people rushed toward it... A few went back with a rotten fruit or some spoiled meat, others with a damp piece of bread or another leftover. Several fell dead, buried under the garbage.

It was the planet of consequences, the cost of machines. There lay the gutted soil that serves to make modern cities. There the excluded came to die. We always end up meeting the hidden face of our obsessions. We were afraid of the cruelties of nature and the serenity of heaven, we erected the civilization of the negation of time and of uncertainties... That is what I found on the other side.

It was impossible to count the drug addicts, the alcoholics, the vagrants, the itinerants, those who were seeking the last bits of human substance between the metal gears. I am not speaking of the child suicides, the desperate, the inner prisoners, the insane who in their frightening hallucinations frantically searched for Ariadne's last thread... No, I am simply speaking of the deserted surfaces of Mars or the Moon, of those who die in another place and who surface from time to time on our cathodic screens.

No! I am not speaking of those who die in another place. There is no outside in the human heart. All humans die inside of each one... No! I am simply speaking of my little girl's death. Of my own little girl, because my little girl could not be less than all the children of the world...

It was at this moment that I became truly aware that I no longer had any way of escaping this abyss: my reason had slipped away.

For the first time, I found myself stuck in an infinitely limited perimeter of the universe. I was going to touch my finitude. And what a place! What an abyss! What misery!

It was there that I was going to die, and it was only a matter of time. I had always been mortal. Since birth, I carried this verdict, but at times I forgot it. There on Miserere, it was impossible to forget. Death surrounded us everywhere. We could always gain a day, an hour, but like a mouse between the claws of a cat, we had just enough time to get drunk with suffering before being crunched.

The terminal sphere opened up before me. First, its natural resources had been extracted and its population exploited. Then men were replaced by machines. Finally they were abandoned on the dried-up soil.

Everywhere, a misery with no other hope than a truck which sometimes crossed the horizon. The miserably poor of this planet depended entirely on those who had condemned them. It was from them that they received the extension of their sentence. They waited for the trucks. Time consisted of waiting. But death, for its part, did not wait.

There were corpses everywhere. Sometimes a child began to run, tripped on a tin can or a stone, and, not strong enough to get up, died slowly as an autumn leaf.

And yet each child possessed in himself a million possibilities. Each of these little beings could have sung, played music, designed boats, tamed lions, invented drugs, given birth to children, made a lineage explode and, from generation to generation, advance toward the future, inseminate the future, multiply its hopes.

"Every child is the Abraham of a whole people," Job had said to me one day. "Every child has the power to go into the mysterious cavern of time, always further, always further to infinity."

Every one of these mothers was experiencing the same inconsolable pain. Was it possible that all these mothers had this still-moving sword driven into their hearts?

When a child becomes the absence of a child, life is reversed, everything that would have been a joy becomes a pain, everything that would have been a hope becomes a despair. The absence of her smile is a stab wound, the absence of her hands, like a hook of iron. We experience a maternity in reverse that plows our guts. We love with pain.

If only I could get my reason back...

In front of me was this desert of flesh and bones, this expanse of corpses. An unbearable landscape that I couldn't look at anymore, but that I stared at like a prey stares at a predator. By staring at it, studying it, looking up and down at it, the landscape lost its consistency. It bent its knees, pulled in its belly, lowered its tail and groveled, whimpering. It was no longer anything more than a thin sheet of paper, a fine snakeskin. A breeze, a simple breeze, lifted it and swept it out of my sight.

Space was suddenly naked before me. It was studded with cold and shivering stars. It was immeasurably great and empty, anxious, worried, frightened above all. But more than everything else, it was ashamed. It lowered its eyes. It was the cause, it with its nothingness of ice and its yawning soul, with its body of one atom per cubic meter, its body of nothing, too great for it. It was death, the thing that stretched the molecules and broke them in its thermodynamic cold. It was in order to cover it up that Modernus had been made. It turned and disappeared in its black infinity, sprinkling behind it little spots of light, just a facade...

I felt heavy now, so heavy, loaded with a leaden pain and an anxiety that was breaking my bones. I was going to be transformed into an asteroid, a comet forever wandering in the confusion of the universe. A comet of dust...

I had to have water. I was completely dehydrated. It was hard for me to remain standing. I had never felt the weight of my bones this much. They had climbed up on each other in unstable equilibrium, ready to collapse like a house of cards. Walking became an exercise in balance. I had to concentrate on the joints, the points of pain. I had to adjust pain to pain.

I caught sight of a strange man who was going down a hill higher than the others. He was a force of nature. He must have been nearly two meters tall; his shoulders and arms were like round and warm mountains. He walked like an animal, his mouth slightly open, his gaze unfocussed and untroubled like a calf's. His disproportionately large ears shot out of his tousled hair and scrutinized the horizon like radars. He must have perceived a sound I didn't hear. He was heading toward a hamlet. When he arrived on the scene, no one dared to move. The man sniffed the surroundings. He gathered up the corpse of a child which he placed in a large pouch. He found others which he carried off with him, went to another hamlet and did the same. His pouch was now full. He placed it on his back and disappeared behind the hill.

I walked in his direction. It was totally insane. He ought to have frightened me, even terrified me, and yet I went toward him. I followed him from a distance. He headed toward what I thought was a massive and bell-shaped mountain. Like a thief afraid of being followed, he stopped regularly to look

behind him. Obviously, no one was following him... Except for me, driven by a strange force. He disappeared behind an enormous crag of stone.

I waited for quite a while, then decided to enter the cave. The shaft rose as high as the nave of a cathedral. It opened on to a large lake of dried lava. What a marvel in this place I thought was sterile! On the periphery of this singular amphitheater, covering nearly a third of its circumference, a remarkable vegetation, flaming and multicolored, stood out from the greyness.

There must be water there. I trembled as much from hope as from fear.

A deep silence prevailed there, as in a church. However I thought I distinguished the faint noise of a little falls. When I held my breath, I heard it. It echoed dully in the enclosed space. I felt as if the volcano were weeping. Not with a stifled cry, but instead like a sorrow that was completely free and flowed off endlessly. The little falls had to be hidden behind the trees.

- Water!

My whispering took on a very special sonority in the stone enclosure. Had he heard me? How could I approach that forest without being seen by that man from the mountain?

It was impossible. The lake of lava formed one great smooth stone and the periphery rose like a vertical wall barely divided by a few masses of fallen rock. The man could be nowhere else but in that forest, there, right in front of me. I had no other choice but to confront him or turn around. But return to where? I cautiously went forward on the lake of hardened lava. I stopped from time to time to listen.

I suddenly became aware of my body. With every step I made toward the forest, I felt as if I were being transformed into a real prey... I pressed my arms against my chest. Did he perceive me as a female or as a meal? I was terrified but couldn't keep myself from advancing.

I felt I was more and more female. Watched, tracked perhaps! Dressed in stinking, dirty and disgusting rags, I should have been repulsive. But precisely because of this, perhaps more animal-like, more attractive to him! He was watching me, I felt it, but I still couldn't know which appetite I aroused in him: hunger or desire. Perhaps both!

I timidly advanced. I felt naked on the great lava stone. I was in a hurry to enter the forest. I finally slipped behind a bush. There were no other sounds but the falling water. I crept into the foliage. The trees were covered with flowers and fruit.

Fruit! The man must feed on these fruits. It couldn't be otherwise. If not, he would have devoured the villagers. Unless he ate only corpses! No, that was impossible! They were only dried-up bones.

I wasn't meat for him, and so...

It suddenly seemed to me that I was giving off female odors through my muddy clothes. I would have liked to have held them back. But all that was feminine in me began to tremble, to quiver. And the more I quivered, the more odors I must be giving off. I pressed my arms on my chest and walked with tight little steps.

In that fear was something that came to open up a secret hollow closed so long ago. It was frightening and sweet. It might have been said to be the original contradiction: to fear and to desire. Two opposites that distend a strange space, equivocal and moist. A nest, an egg, and suddenly, futures unfold their branches to infinity... That thought calmed me a little.

To my great surprise, I arrived at the little falls without meeting the man. The brook tumbled quietly into a round pool and, laughing, turned lasciviously on itself. What water! As clear as crystal! And I was so thirsty! Not just my mouth was thirsty, but all the pores of my skin. I couldn't stand this mud any longer, this stench, this dryness...

I took some water between my hands and drank it. And again and again. The water slipped down my throat like a flavorful wine. It was a life. Little by little, my mind lit up and my body also. I removed my clothes and, weeping, let myself drop into the pool.

My knees against my chest, I gently floated like a ball turning on itself. The water was soft and lukewarm, it enveloped me, it cajoled me, it blended with my tears, consoled me, reassured me.

I took a deep breath, stretched out and dove like an eel into the depths. I followed a circular wave which undulated between a cooler ripple and a warmer streak. The pores of my skin opened. The water seeped into my chest as if into a sponge, it penetrated my belly and inside each of my limbs. I danced with the water, I turned with it, I exploded in a thousand whirlpools, in ten thousand bubbles.

It is true that exile is a desert, but in the middle of the desert is a spring.

The water's dance was so sensitive, it undid the fibers of my memory and my identity. It followed the movement of the stars. I had the feeling of understanding the universe. Of grasping its shudder, the shudder of the finite in the infinite.

I had totally let go and dived straight down into the pool. I caressed the bottom of the basin. With time, it had become soft, dented, rounded and yet sclerotic and hard...

It was totally unexpected. A force slipped between my legs and penetrated me vigorously. My body arched and there was something like a spurt of life. Pleasure lit up my soul more than my body. A blade of light passed through me.

I had reached the bottom of the world, there where impossibility becomes a necessity. All began to desire as at the day of my birth.

Desire opens time, it removes the goal from the origin, it separates, it puts things at a distance. Were it not for this emptiness, the two sides of the world would close and there would no longer be anything. Desire had again opened a space, a time, a body, a call, an emptiness full of cries. And the walls of this emptiness had begun to tremble, to shudder, to want to touch and be touched, fill and be filled.

I had become a woman again, a desire, a will to contain everything. In this hollow, in this nothing, the image of all things was reborn, the need for people and for stars, for planets and for children's tops. The desire for this to exist.

But in nothing, nothing happens! So why then do all things happen in nothing? It was impossible and yet perfectly necessary. I had become the place of the necessary impossibility.

Who can believe it? In a hollow of night, there where nothing was any longer possible, there suddenly gushed an unlikely flow, a rising back of life. It is this that occurred in this hollow in the water: the birth of Eros.

I was certain, then, that the half-animal man who carried the children's corpses was totally harmless.

When I came out of the water and the first puff of air had clarified my vision, it was not the animal-man I saw, but another man, a strange disabled man who appeared to be looking at the sky.

Who can know how many philosophers have seen their ships run aground in the marshes of Miserere? If there are philosophies of suffering, can there be philosophies of utter, miserable poverty?

Suffering attacks and retreats, provokes and runs away. It unearths the heart of man, exhumes his value and validates his dignity. Its game is to scratch and sensitize, make ready for receiving. Its claw pricks and excites; it drives to action. Its blade uncovers and unveils; it leaves the true and takes the

counterfeit away. It lifts much more than it lowers because men and women are capable of opposing it with the best of themselves.

But miserable poverty does just the opposite: it hangs on and lasts, destroying all hope. It creeps into the heart and breaks it. It pierces it and injects its venom there. It imprisons, demoralizes, annihilates. Miserable poverty undoes man. It is incompatible with man. Once swept off into miserable poverty, man becomes a disgrace, not only for himself, but for all humanity, for it makes of it a laughingstock. Miserable poverty parades our impotence. It stops only when man becomes like it: acerbic, venomous and cruel.

In the face of miserable poverty, who can break the silence? Miserable poverty is a scandal, that's all there is to it. To seek to give it any legitimacy whatsoever renders us immediately suspect of atrocity. To belong to humanity is by essence to be indignant in the face of miserable poverty, to deny it the right to existence.

Man and miserable poverty are by nature two enemies. Why? Because the end of man is to banish miserable poverty and the end of miserable poverty is to banish man. Consequently a civilization is judged by the miserable poverty it produces and that it destroys.

But it happens from time to time that some people take the terrible risk of confronting it. Tob and his brother Bie, noble and wealthy citizens of Modernus, had, with a great deal of baggage, medicine and other weapons, ventured on to the planet of consequences and, like me, had lost their reason there.

When they saw the miserably poor, their goods and their weapons appeared to them as insults. Only an ascetic life and perfect nakedness make the encounter between the compassionate man and the poor man possible. They left everything behind them.

But their empty hands were rejected. With sticks and stones, they were beaten up. Bie, powerful as a tiger, managed to defend himself, but they succeeded in hitting him violently on the head. He lost his memory, reason and speech. Tob had his back broken, was paralyzed from his waist to his feet and lost his sight.

They had been left for dead. However, Bie regained consciousness and they survived. They crawled in utter misery, but by an extraordinary grace, misery never reached their hearts.

Bie became Tob's eyes and legs. Tob became Bie's voice and intelligence. Bie carried his brother wherever he wanted to go and, no longer able to think by himself, obeyed him in everything. The two brothers formed a single being.

With no more boundaries, their soul widened like a sea. Their mind crossed from one body to the other like a couple of lovers pursuing each other through the rooms of the same house.

It was fascinating to see this strange two-bodied animal leave a part of itself on a stone for a moment while the other went to get water, then to see them come together again in one big body with four arms and two legs. When in the evening he curled up in his nest, the two-bodied man only had room for a single dream and a single tenderness.

But the two parts were not at all identical. Tob had angelic beauty. He spread his wings but could neither fly away nor even move around. Without Bie, he resembled a baby who claps his hands, amused by the mischief of a kitten. Bie in fact was the kitten. He knew no restriction, not even that of reason.

On Modernus, Tob and Bie were exceptional musicians. But music needs a place to spread out, pure space, and free time. Now, Modernus lacked both of these. So music wasn't possible there, it was broken in the noise, the falseness and the self-importance. Driven by their nature, the two brothers had left in search of a place appropriate for music...

Here, they were broken. Unable to rebuild their limits, they saw misery. It was naked in front of them. It bit them, but its venom did not destroy them. Tob and Bie surmounted misery and survived it. Blind and sighted, mad and intelligent, immobile and mobile all at the same time, they succeeded in squeezing through it like two acrobats in a crowd. If they had been only reasonable, it would have destroyed them.

Bie, having lost his reason, followed his instinct. He found refuge in the extinct volcano. The hidden cave that gave access to it and the little spring which was then only a trickle of water assured the two brothers protection and life. Bie cared for his brother like a mama cares for her little one. As there was not yet any vegetation, Bie went to look in the dumps for fruit and meat to feed his brother and himself. Without Tob knowing why, he brought back in addition to this the corpses of children which he buried with his hands in the volcanic sand surrounding the little spring.

He did it with so much respect that Tob could do nothing other than sing hymns. This is how they slowly slipped into the essence of the sacred.

When suddenly we find ourselves totally powerless, our acts become symbols and they continue there where our reason can no longer accompany them. We can't do anything useful any longer, and we can't stay doing nothing either, so we do no matter what. and by repeating the act, we discover that we have advanced in a space that didn't exist before us, but does subsist behind us. We observe that we have created something starting from nothing. We realize that

we are the creators of something that is created on another level, something sacred.

A change of perspective occurs: what was an infinitely high wall, an obstacle, becomes a vertical sidewalk, a ladder. As long as one wants to advance horizontally, a mountain is an obstacle. But if one suddenly wants to get closer to the stars, the same mountain becomes an instrument. All along the climb back up, humans mate with their suffering and procreate a kind of being that never freezes and is called music, movement, history.

Every day, Tob and Bie buried numerous children. There was nothing more important for them. Bie acted as gravedigger and Tob took care of the singing. Each child, then, left his or her insignificance in the multitude and became, for one moment, humanity's only child: Tob and Bie's child. One might have said that they died with each one, that each burial was the first and the last.

They sang:

"When I saw death,
I cried out,
and my cry pierced the silence,
it was then that I was born."

In this way they became fathers and this paternity saved them from death.

It still is much more important to make death sacred than to make children. If death stops being sacred, life no longer has any meaning. Consequently it becomes heartbreaking to make children. Modernus no longer makes children, it makes labor and machines. Tob and Bie buried the surplus children, those who were too many for Modernus. They made them indispensable for the very existence of life.

It was an instinctive action to demonstrate that it is not death that comes after life, on the contrary, it is life that comes after death. But this is possible only if death is sacred, made into a living spring. Tob and Bie buried each child as if it were the only one.

One day, Bie brought a steel wire back from the dump. Following Tob's instructions, Bie transformed it into an incredible musical instrument. Stretched between a powerful vertical stick and the surface of the dry lava lake, this wire produced a remarkable vibration when it was struck. The volcano's walls resounded and the whole mountain sang.

It was a fabulous, wonderful concert. You would think you were hearing thousands of musicians. I felt as if Tob and the mountain were composing

together, playing in chorus, singing in a round. The symphony raised the soul to great heights and led it to run into the mountain and escape.

The children were not just buried in the ashes and slag of the volcano, they were enveloped by the music made by the heart of Tob and Bie in the heart of the volcano. Death was not denied, it was made sacred: offered full of hope.

I would have wanted my little girl to be buried in this way, but it was too late...

This was how the children of Miserere received a final moment of respect as vital as that which had given them birth.

In the humus produced by the decomposition of the corpses, the seeds of the fruit Tob and Bie ate began to germinate. Dragging himself along on his hands, Tob did his best to water the shoots while Bie went to get food and little children. The more the vegetation grew, the bigger the trickle of water became, pumped no doubt by the roots sinking into the earth. It was thus that the forest came to life.

Tob and Bie welcomed me without changing anything in their routine. In the beginning, I was so worn out that I couldn't do anything more than listen to Tob's music and dive into the water, weeping.

When Bie returned with his pouch full of children, I sank straight down into the depths of the pool. But Tob's music and his extraordinary song came and caught up with me all the way to the depths:

*And the poor suffer subjected under this yoke and
all that they see overwhelms them,
they roam in the night like souls in
torment,
they are rejected with all the refuse of the city
and engender disgust like carrion in the
sun,
by chance on the streets, all insult them and repel them.*
(R.M. Rilke)

Tears slipped from Tob's eyes and rolled down to the mysterious point of his smile. In the beginning, I hated his smile. It seemed to me inappropriate in the presence of so much suffering. But as the days passed I understood that a smile can go beyond what the eyes see. The eyes can see only what is; the smile perceives the being that is coming. The smile of the musician carries a little of the music he will make.

Tob sang, and with such sweetness:

*Out of my distress, I cried out to Him
and He answered me.
out of the bowels of Sheol, I cried
and you heard my voice;
you threw me into the abyss, into the bosom of the sea
and the flood encircled me;
all the breakers and the waves
have passed over me.*

[...]

*The waters encircle me up to my throat
and the abyss surrounds me;
seaweed has wrapped around my head,
at the roots of the mountains;
I descended to the countries of the underworld
toward the peoples of other times;
But you have brought my life up out of the pit. (Jon. 2:3-7)*

God is in the soul like a hole, the emptiness that allows the soul to turn itself over and produce itself. God is the one whose nothingness fills all.

Tob's music emerged from this hole. His mouth was the ear through which silence could be heard. Music is the developing of silence, silence is the enveloping of music.

And then I understood that they were burying my little girl. So I dug too. Facing Bie, I dug. They were burying my daughter and they were closing the womb. I told her: "Come back, come back inside me, it's much too cold outside." I buried her a hundred times a day. Bie seemed to understand perfectly. I told myself that by repeatedly burying her, she would surely end up by living.

I felt her just on the other side of the curtain. If I resisted the desire to touch her, she would stay there. She brushed against me and I buried my tears. Bie brought multiples of my little girl and he dug and he dug and he wept; he wept until he laughed about it. We were like two children.

We are all the children of children. There are nothing but children in this world.

Children know that there is too much emptiness in this world. So they spill out their souls on the world's nothing; there start to be rag dolls there, cardboard animals, a game, a framework and a texture. And on this framework and this texture, they run and they fly, they resurrect all those who aren't yet born and dance with them. A child could care less about impossibilities.

She was there, my little girl, on the other side of the curtain, she was having fun with Bie. She was climbing on his back all the time and he was galloping. He

swung her in a circle on the end of his arms. She never stopped laughing. But me, I couldn't touch her because I wasn't yet pure.

He didn't even see the curtain. There were so many children around Bie that you would have said he was an immense tree. There were children on every branch. And my little girl was playing, and by playing and playing, she ended up by cracking my own limits. I was pulled outside. Bie made me spin like a child, threw me very high in the air and when I fell back on his powerful chest, he hugged me and I lived.

Bie was not a man, he was a mountain, a force, a power, a tree of life. He extricated me from my distress. He gave me my daughter. He gave me my childhood. He gave me the end of the string of time and I began to want to live.

During the long hours when Bie set out to conquer food and children, I took care of Tob. Tob could move only his arms and hands. All the rest of his body was dried-up and twisted like the branch of a tree. I carried him to the little lake under the falls, went down in the water with him and made him swim.

Little by little, fear left him and he succeeded in enjoying himself in the water like a child. He was handsome in spite of his yellow eyes that followed the sun without seeing it. His words were infinitely gentle and I became attached to him like a woman to a man.

The years passed, the forest grew. In the evening, Bie lit a fire and kept silent. He kept silent so much that in the end there was a lot of silence. So much that Tob, who only knew how to sing, began to speak:

- In the beginning, I said to myself: What happiness can I still have? I no longer see the light of heaven, I lie in the shadows like the dead. But since I swim with you in the fountain, there is no vase large enough to contain everything happening in me. There is only the disproportionately vast in this world. The stars are countless. They dance by the billions in a single galaxy and the galaxies twinkle by the myriad. The universe has neither temperance nor moderation. The suns flame to pulverize matter while space is frozen in a cold that reduces everything to dust. No! Nothing is in proportion to reason. Everything is too big or too small, too heavy or too light, too hot or too cold... Our inner abyss itself is so outsized that no music can fill it. Man is too big for himself, that's the greatest of mysteries!

Tob stopped speaking. A shudder crossed his frail body. I took him in my arms to warm him, but I didn't want him to stop talking.

He turned his face toward me and continued:

- Why such a disproportion? Why too much and not enough? Why did we have to have the exact proportion of disproportion? The human soul has had enough of being small in the gigantic and gigantic in the small! There is nothing that suits it. In the infinite it dies from being too small, in the finite it dies from being great. Its unique characteristic is not to be able to be satisfied either with nothing or with everything. It is restless because it is incapable of the infinite and yet can't stand any limit.

Tob stopped again but this time the silence just continued to march on in front of him. I suddenly became aware of the total difference between the two sides of my life. When I was whirling around in the machines of the world, time was behind me and harassed me, its jaws open like a dog's. Now it was before me and inviting me.

Tob seemed to understand what was happening inside me and began to sing:

*When the Lord brought back the captives in Zion,
[...]
They went away, they went away weeping,
But when they carry the seed,
They come back, they come back singing...
(Ps 126)*

Not being able to do anything else, I bathed the whole day. I bathed with Tob. I caressed his face and his smile little by little took on another shape. I moved my fingers on to the nape of his neck and his lips wavered imperceptibly. One might have said that a child was emerging from inside his face and approaching me with less and less fear.

But that day, Top preferred to remain in the middle of the lava floor and play his instrument. He made the volcano resound like the immense throat of a tenor: sometimes to call, sometimes to answer. I made the water whirl, he made the stone vibrate. He was a musician to the end of his fingernails. And me, I was becoming a ballerina.

I was like a bride whose train was so heavy that she couldn't get to the wedding. In my memory, my daughter was only an image among images. My train interfered with the function of time: to open hope.

However, when you stop resenting the facts, you become as peaceful as a river. The bride's veil softens and comes to life.

The man approaches her to find her glory and sings:

*Come with me from Lebanon, my bride,
Come with me from Lebanon!
Look from the summit of Amana,*

*From the summit of Senir and Hermon,
From the dens of lions,
From the mountains of leopards.
You ravish my heart, my sister, my bride,
You ravish my heart with one of your glances...
(Song of Songs 4:8,9)*

The hardnesses of memory dissolved. The stone became flesh, the flesh became water and the water became life. Nothing, then, is more beautiful than this life.

That day, time lost its nails and I yielded my body to it. I no longer had the desire to remain a stranger to the water. The skin of the outer water came to touch the skin of the inner water then and they recognized each other.

I understood that I had never been touched before, that I had never known the power and fertility of touching.

I was truly naked! As naked as time. So naked that I heard my body pray.

A little fish glides between the waves, a wisp of smoke whirls between two puffs of wind, a seagull weaves its way between two currents, they no longer fear the world's immensity. They are part of the party.

When the immensity of the universe touches the immensity of the soul, fear stops and memory catches fire.

"In spite of the immensity of everything," Tob said, "perhaps because of it, nothing can be distant, nothing can be somewhere else. The soul and the universe speak as equal to equal, as immensity to immensity. They echo each other and give each other life."

I was naked and I wanted to participate. It is this, I believe, that opened up in me this great emotion called desire, from the Latin *desiderare* which means to seek a remedy.

I wanted to celebrate like the trees, like the mountains, like the birds, like the stars celebrate: with great shouts, with great laughs. There is a festival of disproportion in immensity and a celebration of unity in the orifice of the world. A woman's womb is made for infinity.

I had finally understood that there is only one sacrament and it is love's. It is a mass that forgives the past, that confirms the present, that anoints the dead, that baptizes all, that makes of the smallest atom the priest and cantor of all the universe.

I was in the middle of this mass and Bie approached.

All my senses met in the bottom of my womb. I saw, touched, felt, tasted by this mouth of the womb become jubilation.

Tob struck his instrument and the mountain's resonance made all my body quiver.

I felt the need to be touched by something intensely palpable, tangible, compact.

One might have said that the mountain wanted to explode. It wasn't big enough to contain all three of us: Tob who was singing, Bie who was swimming around me and I who was letting myself be enveloped. The gyre of the galaxies, the swelling of the pulsars, the mystery of the quasars would have been needed. All, absolutely all would have been needed. Not all that is, no! it's far too small, all that can happen, all that can occur, all that can suddenly appear would have been needed.

Bie was whirling in the water. He got out of the water and took me away. The force of his steps made the stone resound.

Tob and Bie were so handsome, their serenity was not a slick joy, devoid of suffering, blissfully happy. No, it was a joy made of all the sufferings in the world. The joy of a mass, of a shift of states in the heart of suffering.

There were in the souls of Tob and Bie weaknesses and gaps that had become fullnesses of strength, a pain that had become a surplus of hope, a silence that had become a formidable music of celebration.

I wanted to participate, to belong to that music, to that strength. I wanted to surrender to it unreservedly, with no holding back, as one surrenders to death, as one surrenders to life.

I could no longer endure Bie being out of me. This strange pain was so unbearable and so pleasant, it opened everything and everything became life.

I didn't know that love was the unique substance of life. I began to feel the imperative need to make Tob and Bie men by opening to them the space of a creation. I wanted also to become a woman in the sacred act of an eternal touch.

Bie danced around me and as he wasn't hindered by any reason, he began to laugh like a child. The joy of Tob echoed very strongly in his music, he participated unreservedly like the soul participates in the body.

Bie was so joyful, so powerfully joyful, he was turning around me in the celebration of the world. He was the body of Tob's music. He was the mountain's resonance and in him all the walls came to crumble.

He had found the orifice of fertility in which the inner and the outer touch unhindered, transfer their substances, exchange their liquids, yield their essence. He entered with such force and such gentleness that he froze time. Time no longer slipped along like a river, it had stopped short in a strange verticality. The past no longer went into the distance, the future no longer arrived from down there; both of them suddenly appeared from the same undefinable second of life.

Life was set ablaze. I participated fully in its creation. I became totally woman: creative ebullition.

The celebration had taken on tremendous proportions. Tob's music shook all the mountain's innards. A phenomenon of resonance suddenly happened. The ground began to tremble, the walls staggered, the mountain was going to collapse.

Bie barely had time to get me up and grab Tob by the arm. Laughing, we ran on the stone, which was breaking up. We threw ourselves into the entrance cave. The volcano's walls were collapsing but we were protected.

The immense flagstone of dried lava oozed a burning water. The pressure was enormous. The little lake began to boil, to explode in a powerful geyser which was already rising very high in the sky. Great pieces of rock were torn out and flew away like butterflies. The jet of water reached titanic proportions. It seemed to touch the clouds, in fact it did form clouds.

A fine rain covered Miserere. A warm and gentle rain. The children began to skip, the mothers, to stand up straight, the men, to get up and look at the sky. Nobody understood what was happening. The rain didn't stop falling. The geyser climbed very high and did not diminish in intensity, on the contrary it increased in volume and in energy.

I saw a man who was looking at the sky. He began to smile and to weep. It was then that I understood. Just as in a desert, the planet's water had taken refuge deep in the subsoil, and today, thanks to a geological phenomenon taking place, it shot up to the skies and fell gently back on the surface of Miserere. It would no doubt fall for a very long time, perhaps for years.

The elders remembered that in former times their planet had been very fertile, there had been immense lakes and deep forests. As in all deserts, the soil was covered with seeds of every kind. Life was going to begin again.

The man began to shout for joy. He would die, no doubt, but his children, the children of his children, would know a world green and rich with life. A wave of hope passed through the planet.

Tob and Bie laughed, we could no longer contain our feeling. The children would walk, would walk ever further into the bowels of the unknown and always, there would be moments of hope.

*And he took a shoot from the country, and placed it in a fertile soil;
he put it by an abundant water,
and he planted it like a willow. (Ez. 17:5)*

*He said to me: "This water will flow toward the eastern region,
will descend into the plain, and will enter in the sea;
when it flows into the sea,
the waters of the sea will become wholesome.
All living beings who move
will live wherever the torrent will flow,
and there will be a great quantity of fishes;
for wherever that water will come, the waters will become wholesome,
and everything will live wherever the torrent goes."
(Ez. 47:8,9)*

The return

After my depression, when I clearly perceived Job's face and heard his voice distinctly again, I felt pregnant with joy. A dazzling sun entered through the windows. Everything had quieted down.

Job and his companion Silence had accompanied me all during these three terrible days. They had never left me alone or upset. They had confidence in me.

You never return the same from a journey like that. Everything is different. Concrete had lost its importance. The buildings, the walls, the cars were almost invisible. The streets, the sidewalks, the alleys, the roads were more noticeable. But what filled my eyes with tears were the men and women, the children, the trees and the birds.

I am not talking about cages, everyone has his or her own cage. But in each cage, there is a small child who is grabbing hold of the bars with both hands. He looks around him with curious and sparkling eyes. They are such beautiful children and what happiness it is to see them play, talk with each other, join hands across the bars.

There are, in all the universe, only naked children who are standing on the edge of a cage, always ready to catch an ant, a tree leaf, the finger of another child. From time to time, taking advantage of a temporary separation of the bars, they go out straddling a dream and return with livelier eyes and greater desires.

They are beautiful, these little children, but sad also at times. Often, when I walk in the streets, I see them trying to catch hold of someone's hand. But the hands are too busy, they go away and the children grow sad.

They are naked and so fragile, these children, so tender and so pure, that if you have not passed through fear and doubt, you cannot stand the sight of them. And this is why the machines of the world have become so complicated.

Fortunately, nothing has changed since the first day: always there are children who marvel, seek out and touch each other. The sun walks on big legs, it goes I don't know where! But between its knees swarm the drinkers of light.

I returned to my work. I teach French to the little ones, I teach them the verbs and forget sometimes the names of things. I draw wings and install them firmly on their backs. After awhile, they fly off far from their cages and return loaded with flowers.

It is a lovely profession, teaching language and poetry: the art of stepping away from the collective madness, of entering the creative madness, and returning rich in hope. Every day the children in my class change the world a little bit.

There was now a man in my life. He is a child, but he is a man too. When we make love, it is as if memory were crouching like a feline and leaping very high outside itself. It is a very lovely game and very pure, accessible only to naked children. It is the opposite of two cages squeaking in a desperate coitus.

A little boy was born of our love. He smiles as if all the future were there, just for him. It is a gift and a surplus of happiness.

This is how the children go, opening a million futures at once to be certain that nothing is closed either by an exaggeration of doubt or by an exaggeration of certainty.

Job comes to the house often. The sufferings of his youth and his perpetual destitution have aged him prematurely. More and more the child can be seen emerging through his skin. I had never seen so much trust in a single spot.

We go to the park, Job, my companion and our little boy. We swing with the other children. We discover the laugh that makes the world when it pops out of its Source.

That day, Job could no longer get up off his bench. His breathing was only a wheezing. Even so, I heard his final song:

*I will pour on you a pure water
and you will be purified.
I will give you a new heart,
I will put in you a breath, a new spirit:
I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone
and I will give you a heart of flesh.
I will put my breath, my spirit in you
and I will make you walk... (Ez. 36:25-27)*

*On the dry bones, nerves
are grafted
and flesh will grow with skin
over it,
but there was no spirit in them.
So He says to me: "Prophecy, son of man,
say to the Spirit: come from the four winds, Spirit!
breathe on these dead that they may live!"
Then prophesied and the Spirit entered in them,
they came to life and stood up on their*

feet... (Ez. 37:8-10)

Job had taught me that life finds being an easy game because it is truly sublime and that, when death yields its fruit, life explodes.