

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Adventurous Tales

Stories of the Sea and the City

By Victor-Émile Michelet

A selection, translated with an introduction by Liz Medendorp

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my advisor, Professor William Paulson, without whose insight and guidance its full realization would not have been possible.

I also dedicate this work to my husband, Anthony, whose love, support, and encouragement have been invaluable throughout the entire time that I have had the privilege to know him.

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The Impossibility of Translation

Translation is hard. Impossible, really. The barrier between languages, even very closely related ones, is often insurmountable. Not because near equivalences don't exist, but because, no matter how close you come, you can never perfectly render the tone, the undertones, or the style of a literary work in any language other than the original. You can never bring a new audience to fully understand with the same ease or sense of closeness to the text as the original readers could. You can never perfectly recreate the experience of reading the work in the original language, and yet this is, while perhaps an oversimplification, at the core, the task of the translator.

Translators, however, far from succumbing to this cynicism (at least most of the time) are profound idealists. One must be blind to the overwhelming difficulties of the road ahead if one hopes to ever take a single step. Rather than wallow in their inevitable failure, translators must delude themselves into firmly believing that the project is entirely achievable, that success is possible, despite the fact that such perfect success is, in reality, unattainable. Translators are idealists and perfectionists in a world of impossibility and imperfection—they are simply setting themselves up for failure, but they do not allow themselves to acknowledge this fact. If they did, a crushing pessimism would cripple any effort at translation before it began.

It is necessary for the translator to fully invest themselves in the original in order to overcome and ignore the impossibility of translation. They must have an immense love for the original text, or for the cultural context of the original, or for the poetry of the original, or they must simply have a great love for *something* in the original that they wish to express or relay to others. This essential desire to share is foundational to translation. Without it, the translator would not find it worthy of their time and energy to continually fall short of the perfection they

so long for. Without this sense of devotion to something within the original, what was so great about it in the first place could never be conveyed in the new version.

I, myself, am a perfectionist setting myself up for failure. For some reason, I can't help but continue to put myself through the torture of translation. I've always longed to facilitate effective communication and mutual understanding amongst peoples, and I see myself as able to do that, to some extent, through the translation of texts in order to allow them to be shared and enjoyed collectively. This potential for shared experiences, while it can never be fully or perfectly actualized, offers hope in the pursuit of peaceable and amicable international relations. This ideal in its perfect form is most certainly unattainable, but value is found in the attempt to reach it. It is the difficulty of the task that attracts me to translation, for anything worth doing takes effort, and through that effort the ideal can at least end up not so far away as it once was. Great strides can be made when the bar is set high, especially when it is set so high that the ultimate goal is in fact impossible. It would be horrible to be condemned to a life filled only with easily-accomplished tasks—no advancement would ever be realized in the world and the thrill of success, of overcoming a seemingly impossible obstacle, would die away. Challenge gives humankind both purpose and a gateway to growth.

The “task of the translator” is an impossible one—there is no question about it—but it is this impossibility that marks the worthiest of endeavors. It is in man's nature to strive for the impossible—and once he reaches it, he aims for the next impossibility. In José Ortega y Gasset's essay, “The Misery and Splendor of Translation,” he explains man's primal need to strive for the impossible, to meet with challenge, to push himself:

Man's existence has a sporting character, with pleasure residing in the effort itself, and not in the results. World history compels us to recognize Man's continuous, inexhaustible capacity to invent unrealizable projects. In the effort to realize them, he achieves many things... This wedding of reality with the demon of what is impossible

supplies the universe with the only growth it is capable of. For that reason, it is very important to emphasize that everything—that is, everything worthwhile, everything truly human—is difficult, very difficult; so much so, that it is impossible. (José Ortega y Gasset 99)

Humankind needs the thrill of the chase—and even if he does not succeed in catching the elusive creature that he had set as his target, he still manages to catch something in the effort. This is how growth occurs. In the pursuit of that which is *truly* impossible, that which is *seemingly* impossible is achieved. While a perfect translation, wholly reflecting all the nuances, connotations, structures, styles, tones, and feelings of a text, cannot exist, the effort is still worthwhile and produces imperfect yet meaningful and valuable translations.

Who is Victor-Émile Michelet?

A now-forgotten figurehead of literary thought in the early 1900s, Michelet was greatly respected by his peers. Primarily recognized for his contributions as a poet, Michelet also composed theatrical works and prose pieces with a similar poetic quality. His theories and style were influenced by the experiences of his youth with the development of the symbolist movement in Paris as well as his adherence to the Martinist sect of Christianity. Throughout his eclecticism in subject matter and genre, a persistent theme of interiority and inward examination of the human psyche, grounded in both his literary and philosophical views, is a thread that runs throughout his oeuvre. While sometimes criticized for his departure from the standard poetic form, Michelet consistently applied, at times indirectly, his principles of esotericism to his literary approach.

Despite his apparent notoriety in his day, few have written about Victor-Émile Michelet. The primary source available on this forgotten *littérateur* is a 1954 doctoral thesis by Richard E. Knowles entitled “Victor-Émile Michelet, poète ésotérique.” From this work, we learn that

Michelet, somewhat unfairly overshadowed by his historian namesake, was well-known and respected in his day, despite some criticism of his abstruse stylistic approach. While born Nantes in 1861, one could say that he found his true home in Paris where he lived from the age of 21 to his death in 1938. Originally a student of law, he soon abandoned his studies for the intellectual discussions of the great cafés during the development of the symbolist movement. During these younger years, he ran in the same circles as such illustrious writers as Victor Hugo and Sully-Prudhomme, as well as important figures in symbolism such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, and Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (Cuvelier-Roy 12), who undoubtedly had an impact on his work and thought. His first publication appeared in 1890 and he quickly became an imposing figure in literary circles. He was president of the *Société des poètes français* (1910), president of the *Société Baudelaire* (1921), member of the council of la *Maison de la Poésie* (1931), and president of the bar of *l'Académie des poètes* (1932) (Cuvelier-Roy 20). These experiences coalesced to solidify his notoriety and influence among his contemporaries as well as to define his literary approach.

While a prolific and versatile writer, having produced works in many genres and having addressed a wide variety of subject matters, Michelet's stylistic approach is firmly grounded in his poetic background. Even in his prose, a penchant for the lyrical prevails, not necessarily self-evident in the subject matter, but evoked by an abstruse stylistic approach to sentence organization and rhythm. One predominant characteristic of Michelet's style is his frequent use of hiatuses—tangential breaks in sentences that sometimes cause the reader to lose sight of where the sentence began before it has yet been brought to completion. He also often constructs his sentences out of numerous discrete clauses, ordering them in a seemingly illogical flow of ideas, creating a division of phrases that, it can be argued, resemble that of a poem. This renders

his works somewhat inaccessible, often forcing the reader to re-read his lengthy sentences several times in order to grasp their meanings. In this way, Michelet's manner of writing forces the reader to reconsider each phrase, prompting further contemplation of the deeper meanings and connotations hidden within them. This intentional stimulation of pause and reflection is likely linked to Michelet's background in symbolism and Martinism.

The symbolist principle that art should represent absolute truths, but that these truths can only be described indirectly through symbolic representation, has clearly been adopted by Michelet and applied to both the content and style of his writing. His stories often include moral commentary, whether explicitly stated or not. For example, in "The Bad Brother," the vice of selfish greed, while never overtly addressed, is strongly condemned. Here, a captain of a fishing ship chooses to pursue his catch in order to make a better profit rather than retrieve the body of a dead man, a casualty of the recent storm, still floating miserably in the waves. He later learns that the body was that of his own brother. He is rejected by the townsfolk as a heartless beast who does not even deserve to pay his respects to his deceased sibling. In the end, he is wretched and alone, and it is implied that he takes his own life at sea, joining the brother he betrayed. This is a prime example of Michelet's proclivity for fable-like stories, using them as symbols for the absolute moral truths that he preaches without ever explicitly identifying them as such. His style also reflects this method of circumlocution through the twists and turns of his clausal scrambles of sentences as previously described. It is clear that Michelet's youthful interactions with the burgeoning symbolist movement had a profound effect on his writing, both of which grew concurrently and conjointly throughout the years that followed.

Michelet's adherence to Martinist principles is also revealed in his writing, attesting to his great dedication to and belief in them. Martinism preaches that Christ enables certain

individuals to attain an idealized state that brings them to a higher level of aptitude and intellect. Members of this cult believe that they are among those who possess these exceptional abilities that are only accessible to their narrow circle of enlightened people. This conviction is at the core of the esoteric views and practices of Michelet and other members of the Martinist cult. Applying this principle to the domain of artistic production, Martinist ideals would maintain that only a special few—very educated, talented, and therefore enlightened individuals—can produce beautiful and worthy works. Michelet’s membership in, and later leadership of the Martinist cult played a large role in both his philosophical and literary theories. Having acted as grand master of the Traditional Martinist Order from 1931 up until his death in 1938, it is clear that Michelet very firmly believed in the precepts of this branch of esoteric Christianity and therefore it is not surprising to find that he applied its principles to aspects of both his life and his work. His conviction informs the abstruse and obfuscated techniques in his writing, showing that ideas of esotericism were prominent not only his ideology, but his life and work as well.

The Martinist branch of esoteric Christianity also puts a strong emphasis on meditation and self-reflection, revealing another very important aspect of Michelet’s approach. The concept of introspection pervades Michelet’s thought and prose, both through the analysis of the inner psychology of human beings and through the expression of the power of the individual. He even explicitly states that

...that which is precious in the study of our dreams is not to find in them the figure of the emotions that we reserve for the future. It’s better to, through them, penetrate into the interior drama of our conscience. It’s better to know ourselves... Our own revelation of ourselves! (Michelet 1922)

This focus on the importance of the inner self played a huge role in Michelet’s life, philosophy, and writings, and appears in some form in nearly all of his *Contes aventureux*. In them, he examines the human psyche, along with all of its irrationalities, sufferings, and complexities. In

“The Tuft of Honeysuckle,” for example, the inner psyche of the character of Adrienne Déranne, while never explicitly given a voice, is revealed with all of its complexity, irrationality and conflicting emotions. She stays in constant mourning due to a tragedy experienced in her past, despite the fame and fortune of her present. She has succeeded in regaining her first love—the piano—as her profession and passion, but nonetheless clings to a persistent grief that overshadows the happiness that is within her grasp. Her conflicted inner self goes through several stages throughout the story, and she seems to never find a state of contentment: a familiar plight very common to humankind. Throughout the *Contes*, Michelet manages to address many different aspects of the complex and illogical inner human psyche, including discontent, jealousy, memory, and others, all presented in the form of short stories. Through the close examination of human interactions and reactions in what I would deem to be fables, Michelet makes poignant observations about the human condition and then proceeds to extrapolate moral messages from those observations. This rather sanctimonious injection of a moralizing quality into his writings exemplifies Michelet’s proclivity for esotericism and his devotion to its precepts.

Throughout this entire collection of adventurous tales, a strong esoteric trend is evident, a direct product of Michelet’s backgrounds in symbolism and Martinism. This aspect of Michelet’s approach figures in his writing both in terms of syntactic organization—as seen through his use of abstruse and complex sentence order—and in terms of content—as exemplified by his obfuscated symbolism, his exploration of interiority, and by his sententious yet not expressly stated moral judgments: hence his moniker as a “*poète ésotérique*.”

Issues of Translation

Published in 1900 in the midst of the “Belle Époque” of France, Victor-Émile Michelet’s collection of *Contes aventureux* is a paragon of his literary approach, and as such its characteristic elements present an exciting yet often times problematic opportunity for translation. Not only is it decidedly difficult to get to know the “mind” of this author due to the limited availability of information regarding him, but his particular literary methodology inherently forces the translator to address discordant trends within the text. Primarily, it is the stylistic obscurity of his esotericism, the tonal range of his eclecticism, and the specificity of his terminological context that render this quintessentially characteristic text of Michelet exceptionally complicated in terms of the ever-enduring question of the balance between fidelity and accessibility in translation.

Before approaching this project, I felt that it was necessary to set up for myself some sort of a framework or methodology. There is a wealth of information regarding translation theory, yet rarely can any account of a practical, straightforward approach be found. This rather frustrating realization is, of course, a result of the fact that the act of translation is fluid, involving many complex and contradictory factors. The reality of this inconsistency means that it is impossible to formulate any kind of hard and fast rule that can be effectively applied to all situations. I felt, however, that there had to be some core principles of translation that might offer insight into an overarching approach that could at the very least be used as a base from which I could work.

One succinct and practical method of translation that I found very useful when formulating my approach is presented by Quintilian in his *Institutio oratoria*. He explains how a student of grammar should approach the translation of Aesop’s fables. I was encouraged to

take note of the proposed method because of the similarities between the texts involved, seeing as I would characterize Michelet's *Contes* as fables that also have a very strong poetic style.

Quintillian describes his suggested approach as follows:

...they should begin by analysing each verse, then give its meaning in [a] different language, and finally proceed to a freer paraphrase in which they will be permitted now to abridge and now to embellish the original, so far as this may be done without losing the poet's meaning. (Copeland 23)

I based my approach to the translation of Michelet's tales on these basic guidelines. I started by examining each phrase and translating word for word, making the meaning my primary concern, and I therefore often retained multiple possible translations for individual words. I rarely even took the liberty of rearranging word order in this first rudimentary draft unless it was necessary for the understanding of the text. I then re-read my "literal" translation many times, transforming it through each reading into a more loose translation. I took each bout of revisions as an opportunity to focus on a different aspect of the text, and thereby, through numerous and varied revisionary readings, conformed it to the constraints of the target language. After verifying any potential semantic errors with an extremely well-versed and learned authority on these matters with whom I had the privilege of working, I turned to my English-speaking peers for a final reading in the hope that a fresh set of eyes might eradicate any lingering issues of comprehension or flow. While this method produced many awkward and extremely rough first drafts, it allowed meaning to be the primary focus, with stylistic and syntactic aspects only secondary in importance.

In my first round of revisions I focused on conforming the text to English syntax, not only simply in terms of grammatical rules, but also in terms of common use. Through the elimination of awkward moments that may give pause to a native English speaker, I attempted to bring a sense of flow to the text. I then repeated the process but shifted my focus from syntax to

style, which presented the much more problematic question of whether to attempt to retain Michelet's style or to use one more familiar to the intended audience. There is no clear answer to this question, especially because of the many different aspects involved in it, including Michelet's poetic syntactic choices, fluctuations in level and tone of the language, and use of culturally-specific terminology.

Yet in my attempt to form a coherent response to these issues of style in my translation, I maintained my original emphasis on meaning rather than sacrificing comprehension to the unique and predominantly inaccessible style of this "*poète ésotérique*." Throughout my work on this collection of short stories, I have encountered the complexities, the difficulties, and the joys of translation. I have over and over again been confronted with the issue of accessibility for the audience versus fidelity to the original, and I have also learned through this experience that both are essential to a successful translation.

Issues of syntax

Michelet's poetic style is highlighted in his prose by his tendency toward an inverted ordering of the numerous clauses in his sentences as well as by his propensity for appositives. His sentence structure in particular offers great difficulty in comprehension. Nearly every one of his sentences is long-winded, filled with commas, and the clauses are ordered in such a way that the meaning can be obscured. This sort of complex sentence structure is not completely uncommon in the French literature of Michelet's day, though he seems to have extended it much farther than was the norm. And while this stylistic approach was sometimes employed by English authors of his time, such as Henry James, and is still used by some modern authors, such as David Foster Wallace, it is awkward and even potentially incomprehensible to the average

reader today. Similarly, Michelet's frequent use of appositives, particularly presented in the form of adjectives functionally acting as adverbs, is very awkward in modern English. I do not consider my readers to be incapable of understanding appositives, but retaining them can cause a pause, an interruption in the flow of the text. These issues of syntax presented me with the difficult decision between accessibility and fidelity. Should I scrupulously maintain a dedication to the style of Michelet's stories, despite the fact that it may render my translation difficult or even downright unpleasant to read? Or should I sacrifice the intricacies of Michelet's writing technique in order to allow my readers to understand and appreciate the content of the stories themselves?

Given that I found many of the characteristic aspects of Michelet's style to be awkward in English, inhibiting both the ready comprehension of and the flow of the text, I found myself leaning towards accessibility in this aspect of my translation. While Michelet's clausal-driven sentence construction as well as his frequent use of appositives evoke an exceptionally poetic impression, the resulting translation sounds unnatural to the modern English ear. Although I think it would be an interesting and worthwhile endeavor, as all acts of translation are, to attempt an English rendering of this text with a focus on retention of Michelet's style, I found myself over and over opting for meaning over style. In hindsight, I recognize that this is likely a result of the fact that this text had never been translated before and as such is unknown by the English-speaking world, making me overly conscious of an attempt to effectively transmit the events of stories themselves. Through my wish to share Michelet's tales with a new audience, I was desirous of making my translation as accessible as possible. In addition, this sacrifice of syntactic style can at least partially be compensated for by the content of these stories, which, I believe, is fully capable of revealing the predominant aspects of Michelet's stylistic focus. I

therefore opted for meaning over style in my translation, relying on the content of the stories to reflect the underlying stylistic trends.

After all, without an effective transmission of the meaning of a text, is not the purpose of translation defeated before it is even given a chance? One translates in order to introduce the literature of one culture to an audience of another who would otherwise never have the opportunity to experience it. It is absolutely essential, therefore, that the reader is at least given the opportunity to comprehend the text, but Michelet's obscure style often inhibits them from doing so. While a translation should certainly make all efforts to remain faithful to the original in terms of content and, to whatever extent possible, style, the structure itself of the piece must be accessible to the reader in order for it to be readily understood. Through my attempts to translate Michelet's complex and abstruse writing style, I have come to the conclusion that the meaning of the text is of primary importance. Even though his style is so unique and specific, I find that it often inhibits understanding, especially in translation.

Issues of tone

When translating any text, especially one that carries both temporal and cultural disparities from the target language, many issues arise concerning the level and tone of the language. I first encountered struggles with this aspect of Michelet's style when considering the fact that this collection is comprised of fable-like tales, which, to me, indicates that the language should be engaging and dramatic, as well as accessible to all audiences, yet it often seems to be the opposite. Complicating the issue still further is Michelet's wide variety of subject matter and setting. He himself fluctuates between tones depending on the content of the individual stories. He uses more concrete language when describing the events of common people such as

fishermen, villagers, and lonely widows, yet elevates his tone, using metaphors and flowery description, when investigating the exotic, the philosophical, and the mythological. Michelet's wide range of tone is an important aspect of this collection, showing both the diversity of his compositional ability and the wide range of his interests, and I therefore determined that it should figure prominently in my translation. The intricacy of Michelet's work, being both concrete and intellectual, based in both realism and idealism, necessitates a great deal of consideration on the part of the translator in attempts to render the tone and represents one of the greatest issues I was forced to address in this translation.

Michelet's eclecticism is therefore rather problematic in terms of consistency of tone throughout his collection of tales. While all of the stories are related by some sort of connection to the sea or to the city, an already broad theme, many different types of stylistic settings are represented. They vary from lofty poetic musings in "Interlude—On the Beach" to representations of common people in desperate situations like in "The End of Pierre Elleck" to quasi-mythological fables like "Exiled from Heaven." This wide range of settings and styles causes the translator to deal with the issue of tonal style in a very different way. Although Michelet has a very distinct style overall—poetic, symbolic, esoteric—his eclecticism complicates and diversifies the tone throughout this collection. While his characteristic approach is still prominent in some of the tales, it is subdued for others, figuring in the content rather than in the compositional style itself. As a result, each individual story must be considered on its own, within its own context, in order to accurately render the tone in translation.

The feel of the beach interlude, for example, is far more romantic and dreamy than, say, the story of a poor old woman who has to bury her late partner unaided, simply because of her status as an outcast. These two stories represent the farthest extremes of Michelet's tonal

spectrum among my translations from this collection, and each necessitates a vastly different tonal approach. In the following excerpt from the Beach Interlude, for example, I strove to reflect the loftiness of the musings in Michelet's text, tinged with mythological and poetic undertones.

In enchanted palaces, in marvelous gardens, in legendary Edens you walked, my arm clasped about your waist; and while the light of the stars that had been gathered for your hair was shimmering around your brow, and murmuring musical caresses were rising, I spoke words of ecstasy to you from bended knee, I gave you kisses that revealed worlds.
(36)

This passage offers a good example of both the idealistic side of Michelet's writing as well as an instance where I took some liberties in my translation for the sake of tone. In particular, the original text simply states "*à genoux*"—literally "on knees" or "kneeling"—yet I chose to use the phrase "from bended knee" in order to retain the dreamy and grandiloquent tone of the interlude. While "*à genoux*" is entirely appropriate to the context of the story in French, a literal rendering of the expression into English would disturb the feel and flow of the text, causing a discordant diversion from the overall tone. In this case, therefore, my desire to remain faithful to the tone of Michelet's work led me to opt for a paraphrase rather than a more literal translation.

On the other end of the spectrum, "The End of Pierre Elleck" tells the heart wrenching story of a recently widowed woman whose drive to give her husband a proper burial, despite opposition on all sides, leads her to do so with only the rather rudimentary means available to her. In the following passage, she uses a dilapidated old wheelbarrow to transport her makeshift coffin, occupied by her deceased companion.

The woman had to hold back the speed of the wheelbarrow; all the same, at each lurch, the coffin would leap and fall with a deaf sound onto the old wood of the vehicle; the wheel creaked at each revolution; and, a few steps away, the hound was howling. From time to time, farm dogs would respond with barks. (34)

Any use of flowery or grandiose language would be completely inappropriate within the context of this tale, especially because of the absence of it in the original. This excerpt offers an example of Michelet's wide variance in tone particularly because it stands out in stark contrast to his usual poetic approach. He uses very straightforward and concrete language, avoiding metaphors, mythological references or philosophical postulations, and simply describes the rawness of the events of the story in a direct and frank manner. I felt no need to paraphrase while translating this section because Michelet's already-concrete language allowed for easy replication into a comparable tone in English. In this case, Michelet's esotericism does not reveal itself in his manner of writing itself, but rather in the content via his social and moral commentary. By removing his elaborate and abstruse style from this tale, he allows the content to become the focus, highlighting the merit of determination and initiative on the part of the widow in this story.

Michelet's use of a wide variety of contexts in his stories, both in terms of subject matter and setting, creates a wide variety in tone as well. For the translator, this means that a careful examination of the tone of each individual story is necessary. In response to these fluctuations, a decision must often be made for the sake of tone between freer interpretation and more direct translation, yet both are equally legitimate and the appropriate choice depends entirely on the specific situation and context of the phrase concerned. Throughout the entire tonal spectrum that Michelet expertly utilizes in this collection, he still always manages to retain undercurrents of his esotericism, whether it is seen through the tone or in the content of the stories themselves.

Issues of vocabulary

Since one of Michelet's unifying themes in this collection is the sea, through translation another issue arises—that of terminology. A preponderance of nautical terms is present throughout nearly all of the tales, bringing to the forefront the problem of the translation of technical vocabulary. The temporal and linguistic displacement of this text is thus further complicated by the underlying naval culture of north-eastern France, specifically Brittany. Although a comparable lexicon was also used concurrently in English-speaking seafaring communities, and therefore approximate equivalents likely exist, the temporal and cultural differences from the target language forces one to ask if these equivalents, when available, should even be used in translation. Not only would nautical terminology be unfamiliar to most modern readers, living during a time when sailing is no longer a common practice, but it also creates a concrete difficulty for the translator, for whom information regarding this vocabulary is not readily available. Because of this lack of resources on nautical terminology that had been in use at the end of the nineteenth century, I often found myself forced to resort to extrapolation and assumptions regarding the exact meaning of terms in the text, making paraphrase almost unavoidable.

Even when I was able to find near-exact equivalents to the French seafaring vocabulary, I was still torn as to whether I should actually use them in my translation. This is tied in once again to the issue of accessibility versus fidelity: Should the translation retain comparable technical jargon in order to remain faithful to the original, or should concessions be made for the sake of the reader, for whom recognition and comprehension of such terms would be unlikely? For example, in the story of Captain Lemeur, Michelet uses the verb “*godiller*” whose nearest equivalent is “to skull.” This term, while approximately semantically accurate, would doubtfully

be understood, not only because of the audience's likely unfamiliarity with nautical terminology, but also because the word "skull" has a very different meaning and connotation in English, evoking dark and morbid imagery. For this reason, I chose to paraphrase, deducing the general notion of the word through contextual research. I ultimately selected "coasting" over "skulling" to avoid such complications of understanding and connotation (13). I took liberties with this and other similarly sticky terminological situations throughout my translation of this collection for the sake of accessibility to the text for my intended audience.

An interesting lexical complication also arises when translating between languages that are closely related such as French and English. Among romance languages there is often a temptation to resort to cognates, and this is not always a bad choice. The cognate can in fact sometimes be the most "exact" way to translate a word, at least in terms of its basic semantic qualities, yet this is certainly not always the case. Indeed, often times romance cognates can have entirely different tonal significance, connotations, and sometimes even meaning. I ran into this issue many times throughout the translation of this work and was repeatedly tempted to use cognates, yet it often got me into trouble. I found that the allure of cognates could ultimately alter the tone of the piece drastically.

For example, in "The End of Pierre Elleck," the building of a bridge is described as an "*événement considérable*" that attracts many workers. This phrase, translated using romance cognates, could be rendered as a "considerable event". This phrase is far too heavy and extravagant for this story that describes the death of a common criminal, despite its approximate semantic accuracy. It elevates the tone and therefore causes a rift in the English translation that is not present in the French. A much more common expression is needed in order to adhere to the tone of the piece, which is why I opted for the phrase "a big event" (32). Another example of

this danger of cognates in terms of tone is seen in “The Bad Brother” when an elderly fisherman retrieves the body of a dead man from the sea. In the French, Michelet uses the term “*cadavre*” in reference to the dead man, and I had originally rendered this word as “cadaver” in English. However, one of my English-speaking peer reviewers pointed out that this term carries many medical connotations that would be inappropriate for the situation, and at her suggestion I changed it to “body” (18). I encountered an abundance of such cases whilst translating Michelet’s stories, showing that cognates present a constant struggle for translators of related languages. While the arguably “exact” semantics of these moments could potentially be obscured by my changes, the underlying messages and tones are retained. By simply lowering the level of the word “considerable” to “big,” and by eliminating any misleading connotations through the change from “cadaver” to “body,” I was able to avoid potential rifts in the tones of these stories.

Romance cognates, while appealing, inevitably thrust the text into a different linguistic system, so “exact” translations are not even really possible because of inherent differences in tone and undertone. When translating between romance languages, it is important to not be seduced by cognates, commonly referred to as “*faux amis*”—false friends. While they may offer some insight on a purely semantic level, it is impossible to separate words from their cultural context which infuses them with shades of meaning, tone, and connotations that must be considered in translation.

Appropriate word choice is the key to a successful translation, which is perhaps what makes it so hard to achieve. Although there is often a desire to find the most “exact” equivalent of a word, exactness is impossible due to the intrinsic connection between a language and its context. Nautical terminology is firmly rooted in seafaring culture, unfamiliar to the vast

majority of readers today, and therefore even comparable English terms are unsuitable for an accessible translation. Romance cognates offer false hope for such “exactness” in translation because words inherently carry shades of meaning and cultural connotations that cannot be ignored. Although I feel that retention of meaning is of the utmost importance in translation, I have been forced to acknowledge that semantically perfect renderings are impossible. Compromises must be made in order to effectively transmit the meaning of a text without drastically altering its tone or connotations, showing more than ever that translation is not an exact science.

No Hard and Fast Rule

Throughout my experience with Michelet’s tales, I have learned a great deal about the art of translation, but, more than anything, it has forced me to recognize the essentially fluid and subjective nature of the task. The only rule in translation is that there are no rules. Every situation is different, and therefore every decision must take into account the specific difficulties and contexts of each issue. In my experience, the essential dichotomy of accessibility versus fidelity pervades, as I am sure it does in all translation endeavors, yet, especially because of what I have learned throughout this process, I cannot imagine that any translation could be either wholly accessible or wholly faithful. Rather, it is the decisions about the interplay between the two for each specific literary work that reveal the character of the translator and produce the most successful translations.

Through translating Michelet, I gradually formulated a couple of pseudo-rules for myself in regards to this particular text. I determined that the content must remain faithful to the original, the style must be both faithful and accessible, and the structure must be wholly

accessible to the audience. This means that, stemming from my original approach of a gradual progression from literality to paraphrase, my primary focus is a truthful transmission of the meaning of the text, of the plot and of the purpose. This area therefore required the strictest adherence to concepts of fidelity. My secondary concern was the style of the text, which involves the complex issues of tone and vocabulary. These aspects require the maintenance of the delicate balance between accessibility and fidelity through conscious decision-making wholly dependent on the context of each individual situation. And thirdly, I made the decision to allow Michelet's unique syntactic structure fall to the background, a sacrifice made in favor of the aforementioned semantic and stylistic foci that I deemed greater in importance.

These "rules," as I have called them, are really just mere guidelines for this particular text that I have only developed through active engagement with it. Michelet's specific writing style is pervaded by poetry, symbolism, and esotericism, apparent in both his syntactic approach and in the content of his work. Despite his eclectic tastes in subject matter, his personal literary and philosophical perspectives are evident through, at times, his compositional style, and at others, his moralizing commentary. Through learning the particularities of my project as a whole, including both Michelet's characteristic literary approach and the specific issues of translation it presents, I progressed from my original rudimentary methodology into a much more complex and nuanced approach in the hopes of doing justice to this work to the best of my ability.

This close interaction with Michelet's collection of adventurous tales has led me to develop various theories on the art of translation as a whole regarding issues of syntax, tone, and vocabulary, but above all I have learned that these theories are not set in stone. If anything, they are simple observations on translation in this particular situation and in relation to this particular

text. While I am sure that they will positively inform my future endeavors in translation, I recognize that they will most likely evolve over time and through new projects.

The task of the translator is an impossibility that nevertheless remains a worthwhile endeavor. Throughout the actual act of translating, impossibility rears its ugly head at every turn, forcing the translator to make difficult decisions and compromises between accessibility and fidelity. Each decision is contingent upon the context of the work as a whole as well as the context of the individual situations within the text. For this reason, while it is useful for a translator to lay out guidelines when approaching a specific work, these are not hard and fast rules, but rather fluid notions that are altered and refined by interaction with the text and through the actual act of translation. The realization of the impossibility of translation can be very daunting and the translator unfortunately does not have the luxury or comfort of any set of rules to follow. This plight can be overwhelming and intimidating, but at the same time liberating. The flexibility of translation, while problematic and frustrating, allows for beautiful and enlightening texts to reach new audiences, promoting the sharing of stories and the interaction of peoples and cultures which, to me, is the worthiest of tasks.

Adventurous Tales

Stories of the Sea and the City

by Victor-Émile Michelet

A selection, translated by Liz Medendorp

The Betrothed of the Dead

To N. Quellien

All Hallows' Eve in Brittany is populated with heavy and mysterious rustlings. At the summoning of the living, the deceased answer with their invisible presence. This intuitive Celtic race considers death to be an ordinary modification of eternal life. Each village lives with its dead grouped around the church, in the cemetery that forms a part of the public square. They are not dead, they have merely departed. Sometimes they return. On All Hallows' Eve they surround those who love them.

But those who died at sea are not permitted to return to their native land. The sailor, the *denavor*, belongs to the sea in death as in life. A fateful force enchants their spirits and attaches them to the whirling waters. The ghost of a shipwrecked sailor has never been seen on land.

On the night that is consecrated to them by the devotion of the living, the deceased of the sea draw near to the coast, souls chained to the streams upon which they roam, anxiously gazing at the lamplight that marks the roofs where their loved ones dwell. And that night, the living go out onto the water to greet their dead of the sea. For on the coast there are very few families that do not mourn for victims of the deep.

I remember a gray All Saints' Day that I spent in a little port on the Bay of Douarnenez.

Returning from Vespers, my hostess Catherine and her niece Anne-Louise, taking off their large black shawls, entered the kitchen to make "the crêpes of the dead."

"Tonight we are going to sea in Lomic's boat to pray for our sunken loved ones and to offer them some crêpes and cider. Do you want to come with us? Maybe you had parents who perished at sea?"

“They rarely haunt my memory, for I did not know them. But I will go with you, Anne-Louise.”

I looked at the silhouette of the young girl basking in the glow produced by the gorse branches in the vast fireplace. Anne-Louise looked so lovely in the firelight. The clear, joyful face was a window into her pretty little soul and called for befriending.

More than one boy had dreamt of her honest and cheerful violet eyes.

“Anne-Louise,” I said, pointing to her hand, “who then gave you this ring with three ermine-spots?”

Anne-Louise’s cheeks blushed in the great fire. They became even redder when she nervously answered:

“It was Vincent, the dark-haired young fisherman who catches sardines with Lomic.”

According to local custom, when a young girl accepts a ring from a young man, she allows him to seek her hand in marriage. The day that she changes her mind, she returns the ring.

“Do you think you will keep this ring forever, Anne-Louise?”

“Ah! I had promised myself I would never marry a sailor. Marry a man of the sea; marry misery. But what can you do? You can’t go against fate.”

“Anne-Louise,” I said, smiling, “Keep a keen eye out tonight: Vincent will join us in the boat of his patron. You know that the dead are jealous, and they condemn any girl to whom words of love are spoken on their night to come join them within a year. Take care to keep yourself far from Vincent tonight.”

“Ah!” interjected the grave voice of her aunt Catherine, “I don’t want you to leave my side tonight, Anne-Louise.”

Around eight o'clock, the *Sainte-Marguerite*, Lomic's little boat, was waiting for us at the quay of Tréboul. There were twenty one of us in the row boat: the families of the crew. The elderly had come and the women were all wrapped in long black mantles, the hood of mourning that covered their flirtatious regional hairpieces. On the quay of Douarnenez, crafts were casting off around us, then in front. The thick air of the autumn night muffled the sound of the steerage and the creaking of the pulleys. Beyond the port, boats glided in the starless night, making their way, like us, towards the opening of the bay. And, by means of their pale navigation lights that danced upon the lapping water, we perceived their closeness to the oppressed spirits that were filling their craft.

We had passed Tristan Island. The *Sainte-Marguerite* was being faintly spun by a weak breeze from behind, soft "like cotton," said Lomic. People exchanged few words in low voices. A funerary flag fluttered from the mast's sail, a great rag of a black shawl prevailing over the shadowed brown veils. The numerous beacons speckling this terrible coast like stars—the flames of the Chèvre, of the Island of Sein, of the Ar Men of the Raz—were the only thing lighting our evening, which seemed to belong to the Ghost Ship glimpsed by so many long-haul sailors.

Anne-Louise was seated in the back next to her aunt. I could distinguish her silhouette from the others because of the youthful grace of her waistline that the heavy black mantle could not conceal. I looked about for Vincent: he was a handsome fellow of twenty years, an outgoing man from Cornouaille.

He had seated himself on the planking, facing Anne-Louise.

We were approaching the outlet of the bay. It was the preferred haunting grounds of the lost shipwrecked souls on their annual visit to the coast.

“Did you lose your parents to the sea?” Lomic asked me, revealing to me for the first time a solemnity on his pointed old ape face.

“They rarely haunt my memory, for I did not know them.”

“Then, do you want to take the helm while we say the prayers? You know the bay: stay away from the coast.”

Around us murmurs of chanting were coming from those directions that were marked by weak points of light, little lanterns moored on the tips of masts apparent through the darkness. Everyone in the *Sainte-Marguerite* was on their knees, whereas Lomic was standing against the great mast and reciting Latin prayers with a quivering voice.

In front of me Anne-Louise was kneeling, leaning with her arms on the bench and murmuring liturgical words at her aunt's side. In the darkness, the group in the front no longer appeared to be anything but a blur, their movements so rare, their outlines so blurred, that, under the influence of this night of reminiscence, I wondered if these beings were among the living as I, or if I was driving shadows, like the Homeric ferryman. And, as if led by a mysterious call, I let the boat drift imperceptibly towards the south in the direction of that sinister bay of the Dead from which rumbling was heard; for the sea, calm in appearance, was hiding a strong and insidious current, as if the troubled manes or the disturbed forces were mysteriously stirring in the depths.

Now the men were making libations to the manes. They were passing the bottle of brandy and the glass. And without entirely emptying the glass in their customary coarseness,

they sprinkled the rest overboard as an offering to those who, during their harsh life here below, had loved this elixir, inevitable bringer of forgetting...

“I don’t see the lights anymore!”

A bank of mist had covered them and was bringing towards us the soft breeze that little by little had turned down. It was time to come about, for soon we would be enveloped in the treacherous fog, and we were not far from the terrible Raz. The crewmen returned to the struggle. I thought I felt the spell of a black dream break around us.

The fog overtook us. The breeze had died down even more. The men were pulling on the heavy oars. We had to get back home before midnight; for, after that hour, the dead ask to be given the entire possession of this night.

From behind, now, I could no longer see the foresail. Anne-Louise had not left her place; and Vincent had seated himself close to her, expecting to take a swim.

We were unable to see anything, but we could hear all about us the rhythmic sound of rowing and the high voices of women who, to prevent a collision, were singing melancholy folk songs. The women on the *Sainte-Marguerite* were chanting the *Libera* with their rather distorted voices.

We came alongside the quay around one o’clock in the morning. It was one hour too late according to the silent elders, troubled by their ancient beliefs.

The countryside was hidden in fog. Returning home, I teased the young girl a little:

“Anne-Louise, you are a foolish little girl: while you were sitting side by side, Vincent spoke to you about love tonight.”

“Bah!” replied the child, becoming cheerful again, “didn’t you tell me very wise men once said that love and death are brothers?”

The next summer, I passed by the little port of the Douarnenez Bay. I entered the home of old Catherine. She was in black, as is typical for women of the coast, who are accustomed to mourning.

“Anne-Louise?” I asked.

“Ah! My poor sir,” sobbed the sad old woman, “In March, in crossing from Tréboul to Douarnenez, her dinghy capsized. She drowned.”

Poor Anne-Louise! Poor blonde bird! Ah! Why did I tell her that love and death were brothers?

Captain Lemeur

To François Coppée

During those days, a violent storm passed over the coast of the Atlantic and through the English Channel. Over the course of three days, fishing sailboats, coasters and long-haul vessels that had been surprised offshore danced a terrible dance in the roaring waves. And thus it was that Captain Lemeur had his sixth shipwreck.

Captain Lemeur reached his seventy-seventh year on the feast day of Saint Michael—that is, at the end of September. Why is he called captain? No one knew; he had never been in command of even the smallest coastal ship. What is certain is that the yellowed leather of his face had been tanned by the sprays of all latitudes. Several years ago he retired to his small hometown, a little fishing port in the north of Brittany. With his only daughter married to a customs officer and living three leagues away, he lives, old and alone, in a run-down shack that, standing in one of the horns of the port, towers over the marine horizon.

When he is not on the open sea, the old man only has to go around his hut to see it. He pays closer attention to what happens there than would the keeper of a signal tower. In these days of lazing about, which are very rare indeed, he exercises his critical faculties. Not a rowboat, not a trade brig passes in view without the captain grumbling about some maneuver. But most of the time he goes off in his dinghy on the pretext of fishing, but actually goes for the pleasure of drifting, of being tossed about on a few planks between the sky and the water.

The friends of his age—Captain Guivaréh, former coastal sailor, and Lefrançois, retired customs lieutenant—think of him with a certain tender commiseration. The young, who are disrespectful, call him “old crackpot” and the notary declares “what a character.”

He's a short skinny fellow. His trade, along with the habit of hauling in ropes, has bent his back and his long arms hang endlessly, sending two massive sinewy gorilla hands towards the ground. Even with such arms, the old man has the nimble gestures of a squirrel. On land, he walks heavily; he makes slow movements, his joints rusted. You have to see him in his dinghy, maneuvering with the agility of a cabin boy. On land, seagulls are awkward. On his tiny head you see three things: two young and sparkling little black eyes and a long yellow tooth that sticks up towards his eyes like the tusk of a wild boar.

Captain Lemeur needs to replace his dinghy from time to time, resting at the bottom of the water. So he buys an old rotten boat that no one wants anymore for next to nothing. For years he has been seen with boats like this; no one understands what secret strength maintains these decaying beams. The little urchins of the town, who would willingly go to open sea on a plank, don't dare to cast off in the dinghy of father Lemeur to go for a ride.

The old Breton has shipwrecked five times already. He always came through, whereas his mates went down. And yet, at the bottom of his heart, the sea dog worries. His seventy-seventh year is going to strike, and he understands that *the sea does not want him*. Fate has fixed it: Captain Lemeur will die like a landlubber, in his shack, on his bed. He will not be taken to fall into eternal sleep under the blue water, and he will not receive absolution from the hands of Saint Golcon who, on stormy days, goes down under the waves to hear, amidst the swaying of the gilded and pink algae, the confessions of the Bretons who pass away at sea.

The captain does not breathe a word to anyone of these ideas, of these regrets that torment him. One day, however, he nearly let escape his secret in front of the rector of the parish. His daughter and his son-in-law, worried they might see the old man throw caution to the wind and go off to sea in any weather all alone in his rotten dinghy, and having worn out their

eloquence in begging him to put an end to his maritime escapades, thought that the priest might plead with the obstinate old man better than they could.

The priest, nearly a contemporary of the captain, met his parishioner on the coast and walked with him. He spoke to him of the weather, of the waters, and then he tackled the question, imploring the sailor to lead a quieter life, to abandon the sea. He spoke for twenty minutes.

“At your age,” he concluded, “when one has worked as you have, when one has run as many risks as you, rest is needed.”

Old Lemeur, who had listened in silence with his nose pointed toward the ground, lifted his head and fixed his lively little eyes on his interlocutor.

“And you, Monsieur Rector, do you rest?”

Then, seeing the kindly priest taken aback, hit with this final blow, the captain, out of deference, spit his chewing tobacco from his mouth, scratched his cheek, and continued:

“Monsieur Rector, you are a priest: you have to die at the church; but me, I am a sailor: I have to die at sea.”

On the 19th of August, the sea was as smooth as the glass of a mirror. The soft breeze caressed it lovingly. Yet this pretty little breeze changed direction all day long with a flirtatious fickleness. Around seven o'clock at night, at high tide, the boats went fishing for mackerels. They left the port, as is the custom, stippling the surface, rosy under the setting sun, with little black spots that drew graceful dark scarabs in the distance with their wings outstretched.

Lemeur, who was strolling on the quay and looking at the flight of the boats, was accosted by his old friend Nédelec, who manned the lifeboat, and by the customs officer Le Behan, who was on duty.

“Well, well! Captain Lemeur,” asked the customs officer, “you’re not going fishing, then?”

“I will go tomorrow morning at five o’clock.”

“Hem!” Nédelic scoffed, “it could well be that it proves impossible to embark tomorrow. Did you see how the winds are changing?”

“My word, yes! I think the weather will change. But that won’t be enough to keep me from setting sail.”

Around eleven o’clock at night, a terrible gust of wind came from the north-west. It was the prelude to the tempest. Awakened by the howling of the storm, the village women threw their shawls upon their shoulders and ran all disheveled up onto the quay, having, in their fear, forgotten the custom of decency of putting up their hair which was so deeply embedded in the women of Brittany. But these women, without futile cries, silent and resigned, addressed a personal call to the good lady Saint Anne, who returns sailors in peril to their mothers, wives, and daughters.

And the wait lasted four hours. What was happening then, out there, in this black abyss where the water and wind seethed? At half past three, a first boat came into view. Who were they, these here who had been saved? They called out the name of the boat: the *Saint-Joseph*. When they had landed, they provided information: the others would come; they were following them. After having sailed far and wide for four hours in a raging sea, they had been able to escape the waves, the reefs, the currents.

One by one the boats landed, sails soaked, boats damaged, men exhausted. This time, by luck unhoped-for, there would not be a tragedy. Only two boats were missing. But they had been seen: they had not been able to return, not having anyone on board but two men and a cabin boy. They had let themselves be carried to a neighboring port that was more accessible and seemed to be out of danger.

This was perhaps the only coastal port where all went so well, for during the week that followed, the news of accidents did not cease to pour in.

In his shack, Captain Lemeur had been awakened by the howling of the storm. But he had seen many others like it. He did not worry himself over so little.

At five o'clock, the customs officer Le Bihan who was coming off duty spied him heading towards his dinghy.

“You aren't setting sail in this weather, are you Captain?”

“But yes, my word yes, old chap. Who would stop me?”

The people who were there begged him to stay on land. The old Breton wouldn't hear any of it. He had decided the day before that he would leave; why would he stay? Would he be afraid of the wind and the sea? Many other storms had blown over his body!

He cast off in his rotten dinghy, coasted for a while, cutting the great curling swells, then hoisted his sail and his jib. And the miserable boat went off to the open sea, running windward, for he had wind behind him—and what a wind! At the end of a half hour he had crossed the pass and was heading somehow or another towards the high seas. There, the difficulties intensified. Alone, the old man was accustomed to navigating without help, without even a rascally cabin boy. He had to take to the reefs and he had to be watchful of the helm. The big crashing waves were too strong as they passed over the boat without filling it. Soaked and dripping despite his

slicker and his rain hat, the old man struggled in the tempest with the agility of a young man. The ropes were as rotten as the boat. Under the strain of the wind stretching the sail, the halyard broke and the sail tumbled down into the dinghy. It was impossible to make a knot. Lemeur brought his jib and made up his mind to turn about and to return to the port by coasting. He had only made a few strokes when the oar, terribly shaken by the swells, broke apart. The sea was pouring into the miserable and forsaken boat.

This time Lemeur understood that he would sink. He worked out that the boat could still float for a few minutes. Calmly, he loosened the mast. He made a sort of triangle out of it and the two heavy oars, solidly lashed with ropes, in which the three sides were extended. He put two sides of the triangle in his underarms; then he waited.

A few seconds after finishing this maneuver, the dinghy sunk straight down. Lemeur stayed at the surface, gripping the two oars of his makeshift raft between his arms. The swells juggled with this bit of wreckage, rolling it from the peak of a chasm, and then launching it onto the white foam of a crest, beating the rugged face of the sailor to the point of drawing blood.

However, on land, the customs officer had hailed an idle cabin boy:

“Hey, little one, go tell Nédelec that he’s going to have to find that old fool Lemeur.”

Nédelec had forewarned the owner of the lifeboat, which was all ready and awaiting the call.

When the lifeboat had taken the old shipwrecked man on board, exhausted, paralyzed, ready to sink, Nédelic asked, tongue in cheek:

“Ah, well, old man, are you going to go back to sea with your boat?”

Captain Lemeur sat up straight:

“Of course! It will return to shore and I will set sail in it again.”

But, since the sixth shipwreck, Captain Lemeur is more unsociable and more taciturn than ever: he senses that he is condemned to die in his bed. He will never receive the absolution from the hands of Saint Golcon, who, on stormy days, comes down under the waters to hear, amidst the swaying of the gilded and pink algae, the confessions of the Bretons who pass away at sea. *The sea does not want him.*

The Bad Brother

To Jean Dotent

At twilight, the storm suddenly lifted. It had been one of those unexpected summer storms that comes and grips the coast just long enough to wreak havoc, and dies down as quickly as it was born.

The sardine-fishing boats returned in the daytime to the port of the Breton island, alarmed and drenched up to the tips of their red sails. They were arriving in masses, like flocks of weary gulls, for many boats belonging to neighboring ports had been able to take refuge on the island. All of the boats from the island had returned, except one: the *Marie-Josèphe*. The rumor was already spreading that she had met with tragedy and that her six men and cabin boy would never return... From the dock, their wives and mothers were still watching the horizon.

Loïc, a captain, reported that he had seen them. Loïc is not just anybody. The young people respectfully say of him that “he is a man who speaks well and who knows the sea.” As a testament to these two qualities, Saint Louis, his patron saint, had given Loïc the gift of a beautiful blonde beard, of which he was very proud.

“Loïc,” I said to him, “don’t dash everyone’s hopes. Perhaps the *Marie-Josèphe* could have run up somewhere on the ‘mainland’.”

“I don’t think so: the wind’s heading was only towards the Island. Unfortunately, it is only too true that the *Marie-Josèphe* is lost. We saw her sinking ten miles from here. The crew was going down before our eyes. But what could we have done? They were upwind of us. Try to go to them? We would have surely lost our lives without saving theirs. Oh! It was dreadful to see! The *Marie-Josèphe* took on water and sank slowly. So, with the oars, the masts, all the

timbers that they could get their hands on, the men constructed a makeshift raft as quickly as they could and drifted away on top of it.

“They could have held on until the storm broke, then the waves would have taken them somewhere on the coast, or a ship could have picked them up.”

“Alas! They could not have held on. A stormy sea like this one would soon break their raft apart. The most horrible thing was that they all knew how to swim. It’s better not to know: you sink, and that’s it. But when you know how to swim, it’s a long death. You drink with each wave and end up sinking when you’re full to bursting. Like that big fellow, Julien, who was on the *Marie-Josèphe*, you knew him: a lad of eighteen years, who stood strong as an oak; he was the best swimmer around and had the strength of two men. Ah! That one would fight before passing away, and he suffered too. Go on! Do you see his mother who waits for him at the end of the dock? It’s certain that the poor old woman will never see him again. He was the only child that she had left. Her daughter, who was a servant in the city, got sick and died three months ago. The other woman, the tall one who is crying farther to the right, that’s the wife of Marcelin, the captain of the *Marie-Josèphe*; she could already be called a widow. She has eight children and her eldest, at twelve years old, was his father’s cabin boy. Both of them lost!”

And Loïc, after a silence, stroked his blonde beard and added:

“Today it’s their turn; tomorrow it will be mine.”

That night the *Marie-Josèphe* was found beached on the sand. Filled up, she had passed through two waters, carried by the current. But there was no news of her crew. The craft that went in search of them had returned without having seen anything and the telegraph was silent. Loïc, alas! had been right. The six men and the cabin boy had been lost. It had not been possible

to “rescue them alive.” All that could be done was to wait the nine fateful days to “rescue them drowned.”

“Rescuing” a man “drowned” is not only assuring his body the rest of Christian earth; it is not only acquiring the proof that he had not given in, to the eternal damnation of his soul, to the delicious and treacherous seductions of the Siren, of the blonde Marie-Morgane whose golden hair strokes silver-plated fish tails. How many young sailors have let themselves be charmed by the song of this Siren of the waters who, described long ago by Homer, still lives, thanks to her dangerous ubiquity, in all of the caves of the coast of Brittany! “Rescuing” a man “drowned” is moreover to be able to confirm his death to the bureaucrats, without which verification his widow would not be a widow in the eyes of the law and would not have the right to the meager pension that the state owes her. Remember that bureaucracy oppresses the Frenchmen of the sea more still those of the land.

However, twelve days passed without any news of the shipwrecked men.

That day the sun rose joyously over the clear and smooth sea. His boat anchored offshore since night, Pierrick, the brother of the captain of the *Marie-Josèphe*, was tossing his long brown nets overboard and pulling them in, all glimmering with silvery sparkles: sardines, little fish with feeble brains, coming foolishly to entangle their fine gills in the mesh. Attracted by the odor of the fish-egg bait, schools of these little creatures were rushing up around the boat and thousands of them were leaping about in the air in quick tremors of silver on the blue sheet; and, from all points on the horizon, white gulls were flying in straight as arrows, pricking the water with their beaks and thus causing the metallic reflections of the prey to appear.

“Pierrick,” suddenly cried Jean-Marie, one of the crewmen, “look to aft port! What’s floating there, it’s the body of a man! It must be one from the *Marie-Josèphe*. Quick! Let’s go get him!”

Pierrick thought for a moment while the others were already preparing the lifeboat.

“If we go,” he said, “we’ll lose our catch. If we stay, we’ll soon have our ten thousand sardines and we’ll get back to the factory before the others. We don’t have a moment to spare. Last week, we earned in all two francs for each man. Today, if we delay, we’ll arrive at the port when the factory has already hoisted the flag announcing that it isn’t taking any more sardines, and we’ll have to throw the fish overboard. As for the poor deceased, he is subject to God’s will. There is a little boat over there that will fish him out.”

“Pierrick,” replied Jean-Marie, “that man there could be Marcelin, your brother.”

The men grew pale underneath their tanned skins. Pierrick was pale too. He said gruffly:

“I am master of this ship.”

The men looked at each other. One of them, a tall boy, still beardless, said:

“Pierrick, what you are doing isn’t human. If one of us had a crumb of bread, all the others would share it—it’s always been that way with us. When our contract is up, we won’t sail with you any longer. You would bring us bad luck.”

And each one returned to his work.

However, in the distance, the little boat had noticed the horrible floating thing and headed for it. The man who brought it up was an elderly fellow accompanied by a cabin boy. He took the body and returned to the port. In the little craft, the child was crying and wailing, terrified by this pestilential horror that had once been a man.

The islanders had been notified and arrived in the afternoon. They recognized the dead man by the particularities of his dress. It was Marcelin, the captain of the *Marie-Josèphe*. They wrapped him up in an old tarpaulin and loaded him up to be returned to the island.

The entire population of the island was waiting on the dock: fishermen in red raincoats, almost all young and with somber attitudes, slender island women whose low-cut collars left the fine napes of their necks bare and whose gracious gestures revealed the elegance of their society. Then, in one massive group, there were the girls of the “mainland:” peasant girls who had become workers in the sardine factories. The others didn’t speak to them, for they were different in race, in values, and in costume. Their heavy limbs, their flat noses on their thick faces, their bright and savage clothes—everything about them attested to the memory of their ancestors, Attila’s Huns, who had roamed for centuries on the peninsula of Penmarch. Scattered everywhere, scolded by the old women, curious children—the cabin boys of tomorrow—squeezed between the legs of people in the crowd to reach the edge of the quay.

On a step of the docking ladder on the surface of the sea, there was a lit lantern, a modest candle sheltered from the wind, and a dish of holy water with a branch of rosemary dipped in it, consecrated on the spring day of Palm Sunday.

Marcelin had been placed in a coffin in the boat. A lifeboat pulled away to get him as soon as the high silhouette of the rector could be seen behind the cross that was carried by the altar boy.

The sad widow of Marcelin let out a moan like a wounded animal. Her head emerged from her black hood, exquisite with the noble beauty of suffering that had stricken her twice in the death of her spouse and of her eldest son. And around her, shoulders drooping under their long black cloaks, other widows and mothers were crying, suffering because of the recent storm.

When the rector had welcomed with a prayer the dismal load that had been carried by the little boat, when the assistants had marched before the casket, Pierrick, whom no one had noticed, poked his head out from between his shoulders. He took the rosemary branch from the dish in order to draw the sign of the cross on his brother with the holy water. The men cast evil looks at him. One of them grabbed the holy branch from his hands and pushed him back. Voices murmured:

“He doesn’t deserve to go near.”

And when all the others had entered the church, he fearfully slipped into a shadowy corner. A trembling emotion penetrated into his black soul, as it did into the soul of the crowd. That poor little island church, very poor to be sure, held on to that emotion forever in the sides of its heavy roman archways. A church like this has a certain majesty from having received sorrows and confidences and keeping them secret by virtue of God.

At nightfall, Pierrick was mending a net on the shore. A tall young woman came to him. It was Anne-Marie, a truly delicious creature. Her short green shawl revealed a charming neck and, under her subtle lace cap with short wings, blonde curls were swaying joyfully, contrasting with the solemnity of her beautiful profile.

“Pierrick,” she said, “I was your fiancée. What you did isn’t human. I will not be the wife of a man without a heart. Adieu, Pierrick!”

Her words rose clear and lilting with the monotonous chanting accent of the people of her country. She left slowly and sadly. Pierrick was silently watching this pretty dark silhouette slip away in the powerful light of dusk; for the dying day becomes strong like the last pangs of a dying love...

And from that day on, Pierrick no longer spoke to anyone.

“Hey! Gildas,” I cried that morning to the customs officer who strolled on the dock.

“Who is the thieving rascal who took my boat?”

“Monsieur, it must be Pierrick. He left in it heading towards the mainland. Take our clipper there, it’s all ready. You can catch the wind and retake your boat.”

And, a few hundred yards away, I indeed found the little boat, adrift and abandoned.

What had become of Pierrick? No one ever knew.

The Unforgettable Gaze

A rather strange character was speaking. We had listened to his discourse on the power of the gaze, on this mysterious force that flows from the eyes of man or that shoots from the serpent's pupils, bewitching his prey. He continued with authority:

“I tell you that, through his gaze, man influences the destiny of his fellow man. People, instinctive guardians watching over the treasure of the most profound knowledge, express their troubles under the guise of hateful gazes. Haven't you heard it said: “If looks could kill, I'd be dead!” The gaze of certain lucid spell casters could even cause death with their evil eye, like those of the basilisk and the gorgon.

To be sure, throughout my life, many gazes have crossed with mine. Of them all, I again see several whose energy in that moment ensnared me in their net for all time. Sometimes, on the path where I make the pilgrimage to the cemetery, it so happens that I feel around me the presence of one of these enduring gazes from the past.

It seems that the beings that poured out a breath of their soul onto me with their eyes only brushed my life in chance encounters. No contact, no word ties them to my memory. Women whose kiss I do not know, men whose hands I have not shaken, whose swords I have not crossed, children whose preordained foreheads I have not caressed—they appeared suddenly at the corner of my path and disappeared. I will surely never meet them again.

And yet at certain times of pensive lucidity, their memory rises in my mind like a morning fog in the prairie. Glances of passers-by, you have the sorrowful allure of unfulfilled destinies...

Among them all, one gaze that I have seen pursues me still—yes, seen, but where exactly? Here is all that I remember:

The schooner was sailing along in the set of the soft breeze that so gently lifted its canvas, fully unfurled, so that the hull cut through the short waves in the night almost without pitching. For several hours we had been hugging the coast to admire, under the moon, its languid grace. I was leaning over the edge and taking in this Mediterranean panorama. The staggered terrain, clearly mapped by the starlight, rose slowly towards the distant horizon, covered here and there with large layers of darkened foliage. Then, at distant intervals, rushing towards the shore, there were fishing villages—cottages whose vibrant Italian colors faintly blossomed in the silvery light. Beautiful peaceful countryside, silent and safe!

“Oh!” a woman’s voice uttered on the bridge, “oh! Captain! Land there!”

This pretty whim of a passenger seduced by the beauty of the hour would quickly be satisfied.

A skiff docked us in a narrow cove, lined with chalky cliffs glittering under the pale lucidity of the air. We were intending to reach the top of the hills, which were cut into an amphitheater that had charmed us while shipboard.

The intoxicating odor of the Italian coast mixed with the orange tree, with myrtle, with resin and with salt, deliciously entered our lungs. Our little caravan of individuals, who had all been born in various climates, had abandoned all burdens of thoughts of ourselves. We did not think of losing ourselves in the illusion of this luminary march, which carried us towards the extreme limits of the domain of the senses, on the edge of the world where human feeling receives the kiss of the soul of the earth.

We traversed a thick forest of pines where the breeze was singing, and I remember that, in the enduring silence, a sailor's voice exclaimed:

“Ah! Where are we, then?”

Then, a few steps farther, another sailor, deep and young, said in Italian:

“Joy is dead!”

The trembling in this speech broke the harmony that had been tying me to my companions; and, under the weight of confused impressions, I slackened my pace so that a half hour later I found myself alone in a clearing. I stretched myself out on the ground. The night was lamenting the lost suns in the branches. Was I sleeping or was I still awake? I do not know anymore. My body remained underneath the pines; but I—I went elsewhere, to what point of space, to what age of time?

A few times since this night of dreams, it has imposed itself upon my memory, this indelible vision of my mind's eye, stronger and more sensitive than that of my flesh! In a pathetic hut, a carcass of wood dressed in rags, nestled a sort of Moorish leper wrapped in blue cloth. Before him, on a shelf of planks, a metal dish had spread out upon it several coins obtained at the pity of passers-by.

Was this a man, this shapeless monster, this hideous work of a wild demiurge? In the holes of his rags emerged sooty bulges that had recently been flesh. The glistening stumps, swollen into claws of crabs, formerly hands, were folded around a rosary. Human hands—sublime instrument of all work, of creation and of caresses, blossom of gesture, heroic palms of the strong, pale fingers of lovers, so dear to the kiss—how could they have once resembled these things? And there was a face, this chaos of bony caverns and swarthy bulges, this mask of dust framed with rags! Yes, for even from this horror a beauty was radiating.

“Ave Maria!” proclaimed the hard voice of the leper, “Ave Maria!”

And his eyes were gazing at me, beautiful like light. The spirits of the sun were so present in the coal that a power of glory was revealing itself through these great black eyes, uncontaminated and fiery, strong with a strange youthfulness.

I was immersed in this gaze like in an abyss of anguish and its intoxication won me over again. It carried me to the mystery of human suffering, to the world of tears and despair, to the heart of Hades. It taught me the mystery of the height of emotion.

After seeing this gaze, I knew secrets of hell, and I cannot forget them. Yes, the serenity of my thoughts remains wounded. Like a bullet that stays in generous flesh, this gaze of the devilish leper is lodged in my soul—in my soul yet washed with doubt and so proud of its rebirth into the certitude of life...

Will other eyes gaze at me someday, eyes divinely pure?

The Tuft of Honeysuckle

To Gaston Dubreuilh

When the great pianist Adrienne Déranne appears in a concert, when she advances toward the piano, waving to the audience with the utmost dignity as they cheer for her, a nearly imperceptible murmur of amazement always mingles with the bursts of applause.

Adrienne does not wear the white silk dress—nor the pink, nor the blue—whose folds glisten under the lights of the chandelier. Nor does she wear the low-cut bodice with a garland of roses or white lilacs snaking about, revealing her arms and her bosom. On her wrist, on her neck, in her gorgeous ash-blond hair, no sparkle of gold, no glint of diamonds can be seen. She is always clothed in a black dress of dull fabric that flows stiffly along her hips. Her slender and petite feminine waist is molded in a black riding dress that rises to her chin. Did the pianist adopt this majestically simple attire through an elegant refinement, or did she take a vow to forever carry some unknown mourning? She knows that this strict uniform admirably suits her somewhat wearied appearance and sets a superb backdrop for the invincibly sad and languid expression of her face.

If she does not want to adorn herself with a single ring, why does she not select a handful of rare flowers from the splendid bouquets lavished upon her by her admirers to put in her hair? Why does she always wear a tuft of honeysuckle in her ash-blond hair, under her left ear, with soft shades that barely show? And why, on her bosom covered with black fabric, do the spindly and curved petals of another bouquet of honeysuckle always appear, seeming to be cut from pale gold?

Twelve years ago, Adrienne was neither the austere artist nor the woman so pitifully sad who is known today. She was blossoming in the joy of her eighteen years. If her large and solemn black eyes betrayed the joyful lines of her somewhat thin, but boldly colored lips, it was only slightly.

Then she was married. As a young, middle-class woman with aspirations for aristocracy and art, she was condemned to live with a man who could not understand her disposition. This was the never-ending story, the never-ending suffering of those sacrificed for family interests.

Adrienne had hoped for only one thing: to be able to love the man to whom she was given with all of her heart. She closed up her heart that had been ready to open and vowed to seal its gate and door forevermore.

As a young girl, she passionately worshipped music: as a woman, it was from her piano that she drew the artistic joys that soothe any pain.

And so perhaps this was how she so completely assimilated the soul of Chopin, whose somber beauties she now reveals to us with an intensity that gives chills.

For she had this gift—so rare that only three or four artists in a generation are marked by it—this gift that allows one to transmit the magnetic power of a spirit through the sound of an instrument of wood and iron.

Four years after they were married, Adrienne and her husband were spending the summer in a little seaport on the coast of Brittany.

Among the strangers, with whom they had made those superficial acquaintances that blossom so easily and die just the same in seaside resorts, was a young man named Maxime Ortal.

At the seaside, you live in the open air; you see one another all the time. Adrienne would question Maxime; and he, with his youthful enthusiasm, would recount his struggles, his hopes, his dreams.

She would listen to him, not saying anything, but silently contemplating her broken life, the suffering and the daily vexations that she had endured for four years and that she continued to endure. And it was a sensation of calmness and rest to hear the voice of Maxime pouring out these words that charm and exalt, and to feel the penetrating eyes of the young man.

One day it was raining very heavily. If rain is sad everywhere, by the sea it is the saddest: The gray sky passes on its morose shades to the Ocean and the gusts swirl the rain like a thick veil on the horizon.

Maxime had taken refuge in Adrienne's parlor.

They were alone.

"Do you want to play something for me?" asked the young man.

Adrienne sat down at the piano and began the marvelously expressive phrase of Mozart's Don Giovanni; "*Batti, batti, o bel Masetto!*..."

She put all her soul into it. Maxime listened to her, his eyes fixed upon her, admiring her, and taken with an emotion that he was beginning to understand for the first time.

When she had finished, he suddenly and feverishly embraced her, burying his lips in the young woman's hair.

Adrienne did not cry out: she silently threw her arms around Maxime's neck.

They separated abruptly and anxiously: a slight cough had just made itself heard in the corridor adjacent to the parlor and the husband entered, seeming rather indifferent.

He couldn't have seen anything. Eight days passed by and he had not hinted at it once; he had not shown any change in his attitude towards his wife.

One night, around seven o'clock, Adrienne and her husband were strolling on the coast. They ran into Maxime who joined them.

The day had been unbearably hot; now, the ocean breeze was filling the air with freshness, enveloping everyone with languid drafts of air. On the sheer cliffs, the walkers were hearing the ringing sound of the tide that was crashing up against the foot of the rocks; and, at times, when a strong wave crashed, they could see streams of white froth that appeared for a second only to fall farther into the sea.

The panorama was splendid: the sun was setting on the horizon—a plump sphere of dazzling red with a band of black across it. Under it a swarm of white clouds, which were flitting about, borrowed pink and gold shades from the weakened rays. It seemed that the orb was sinking slowly into the ocean amidst fluttering sparks. Beneath it, the sea unrolled—a crimson plain where the crests of the waves bumped into shimmerings of gold and flame from all sides.

“Oh, how beautiful!” said Adrienne, looking for Maxime's eyes that answered her: “Oh, how beautiful, and how beautiful are you!”

The three strollers continued their walk chatting.

“Say,” the husband said suddenly, “what a lovely honeysuckle!”

In fact, along the length of the cliff, a honeysuckle was climbing that had grown there by chance in the hole of a rock. It extended one flower, freshly bloomed; but, to reach this flower, one had to descend onto a stone platform by hanging from the crags in the rock, and the descent was not without danger.

“The beautiful honeysuckle,” repeated the husband. “But what the devil is it doing there? It would be better on your bodice, Adrienne; I will get it for you.”

And he advanced onto the edge of the cliff. But Maxime was ahead of him.

The young man would pick the flower. His foot was resting on a projection from the rock: one false step and he would be thrown into the void.

It was over in a second: the husband cast a quick look around him: No one! Using his cane as a lever, he dislodged Maxime’s foot from the rock: he disappeared.

A terrible cry shattered the air. The husband turned with terror and saw Adrienne, marching on him, her eyes wide, her features contorted.

Pale, crazed, he recoiled before this vengeful vision; he went on recoiling, turning his back to the sea. His foot met the void: the assassin joined the victim.

Adrienne fell unconscious...

At the base of the cliff, wisps of froth from the waves could have been seen hitting the foot of the rocks. For several minutes, the froth was red.

And that is why the great pianist, Adrienne Déranne, who stays so miserably sad in the midst of applause, always wears a tuft of honeysuckle in her ash-blonde hair, seeming to encircle her forehead with a halo of mourning. And that is why, on her bosom, covered with black fabric, the spindly and curved petals of a bouquet of honeysuckle always appear, seeming to be cut from pale gold.

The End of Pierre Elleck

To Eugène Carrière

On the edge of the road rushing towards the prairies, a field had been broken apart in order to mine stone. It was morning. Two quarrymen were starting the day.

In the country, quarriers and excavators are nomads, in the manner of vagabonds and bohemians. These two weren't any different from the usual type: Their wild beards and the old cone hats that sagged over their eyes were made for terrifying the country folk after dusk had fallen.

On the road, a countrywoman in her fifties was shuffling up the hill. She was a sturdy woman, and well-built, even though her appearance was weary and her face ravaged. Her coarse wool skirt, all patched, was hitting her bare calves; a shabby white and yellow checkered handkerchief covered her shoulders and her canvas headscarf had been faded by the rains.

“Well! *La Quéraude*, so he isn't coming to work today, your fellow? He isn't any better?” asked one of the quarrymen.

“No,” the woman answered dryly.

She took up a sledgehammer, knelt before a pile of large stones, and started breaking them apart.

The woman stayed there, cleaving the stones beneath the August sun, until nightfall, letting out with each blow an imperceptible moan, tearing her lungs—a little release for her body that ends in crushing her back.

“Hey, grandma! We're going! Say hello to your man!” cried the quarrymen when the day was over.

La Quéraude got up and left. She was walking faster now than she had in the morning.

She entered a sort of hut that served as her home.

“Hey! Well, Pierre, are you doing any better?”

No response. In a corner, on a shabby straw mattress, an old man was lying stiffly with his long white hair pinned against a purplish face. The woman shook him, felt him. He was dead.

Near him a bowlegged basset hound awakened and howled. “D...darn you, Rapiou! Scram!” cried *La Quéraude*.

And she gave the dog a kick that made him shut up.

Then she crouched down close to the body, held the head in her hands, and sobbed.

When he was alive, Pierre Elleck was a short old man in his sixties, stocky and robust with a strong jaw and long white hair—a specimen of the race of Vannes. His face had been furrowed all over with deep wrinkles but stayed pink like that of a child.

He had been seen for the first time in that region when a bridge was being constructed over the river, a big event that had attracted a hundred workers. Run aground there after a tormented life, an endless tour of France, he had finally ended his Wandering-Jew’s walk in a shack that he built himself—something like a pig pen.

The country folk hated him: He was a stranger, and the Mayor himself said that he had gone to prison.

In the distant time of his youth, caught in the act of poaching, he had shot buckshot at an officer in a forest in Finistère.

One day he had picked up this tall, strapping woman, half dead from hunger, who was called *La Quéraude* and who had fallen into destitution after having been a servant at all of the

farms in the area. The former vagabond, weary of his bitter solitude, had kept the middle-aged woman with him, and the peasants crossed themselves whenever they passed by the cabin where these elderly cohabitants took shelter.

Pierre Elleck had died from smallpox. The next day, *La Quéraude* went into town. The priest refused to bury in holy ground this miscreant who was marked by the finger of God. The peasants fled from her in terror. Rejected at every turn, she returned that night to her cabin where Rapiou, the yellow basset hound, kept watch over his late master. A sickly odor filled the miserable dwelling.

All along the road, *La Quéraude* had solemnly reflected in a concentrated fury. This poor man had to be buried! Since no one wanted to help her, she would act on her own.

And yet he could not be thrown into a hole like a dog! And in her heart, hardened by a difficult life of suffering, the yeast of her beliefs of yesteryear was starting to ferment. Well! We'll see if he won't have his place in holy ground, her Pierre!

She took a few old planks left in a corner of her shack: she sawed them and nailed them together. The hammer blows made the whole hovel shake and the dog answered with irritated howls.

At the end of an hour, a type of long and narrow crate that resembled a coffin was finished. *La Quéraude* took the body into her arms and laid it in the coffin. She wanted to immediately nail together a plank in the manner of a lid: but her strength failed her, and she stopped to cry.

When she set herself back to her work, she was one plank short: she removed one of the beams from the door and nailed it onto the coffin.

To get to the town where the cemetery was, it was nearly a four-mile trip. *La Quéraude* found an old half-broken wheelbarrow, loaded the coffin into it, and threw in a shovel and a pickaxe; then, grabbing the handles, she set out on the road, followed by the basset hound.

The moon that softly caressed the countryside was casting a fantastic shadow before the group. The prudent country woman slipped along with her load under the trees that bordered the paths. At one point, the stony path sloped steeply down towards the river. The woman had to hold back the speed of the wheelbarrow; even still, at each lurch, the coffin would leap and fall with a deaf sound onto the old wood of the vehicle; the wheel creaked at each revolution; and, a few steps away, the hound was howling. From time to time, farm dogs would respond with barks.

The river could not be crossed except by boat. Luckily, the ferryman's vessel was there. *La Quéraude* put her load onto it, untied the craft, and set it off coasting as softly as possible. Reaching the other shore, she started again on her road.

At a bend in the road, the white trunk of a birch appeared to her like a ghost; frightened, she broke into a run, chasing in front of her the wheelbarrow where the coffin was gloomily dancing, ready to fall at each back-kick.

Finally the cemetery appeared where short, plump cypress trees towered over the little wooden crosses, abandoning themselves with a funerary pleasure to the soft embraces of the moonlight. *La Quéraude* shook the gate; it was closed. So the countrywoman, leaving her wheelbarrow there, went off to prowl around the neighboring houses.

A few minutes later she returned with a ladder.

The walls of the enclosure were rather low; but the coffin was heavy. As robust as the woman was, she still had to regain her bearings three times. With the coffin balanced on the

wall, she held it to her right while she mounted the rungs of the ladder. Astride the wall, whose stones scraped her thighs, she succeeded in sliding her load onto the ground inside the enclosure and she caught up with it in one jump. Rapiau, the yellow hound, had squeezed his way through the bars of the gate.

She glanced about her; her shovel and her pickax were still sitting outside in the wheelbarrow. She returned to get them and then started digging a hole in the bramble-covered ground along the wall. The pickax whirled above her head, carried by two arms that the shadows, lengthened by the moon, now setting and reddened, thrashed about like the wings of a windmill. After fierce work, the grave was dug. The countrywoman was covered in sweat; she was panting, suffocated and breathless from the effort and from the heavy August night air.

The countryside slept in a languid silence. The dog had fallen asleep by the coffin, hiding his silent snout between his paws. Only a tawny owl was hooting in a cypress tree.

La Quéraude lifted the coffin and softly placed it in the grave that she then proceeded to fill with earth and conceal under the brambles.

“Come on, Rapiau, let’s go!” She said to the dog, who sadly sniffed the makeshift tomb.

INTERLUDE

On the Beach

You did not know, Jane, that for one hour you were an adored princess, a worshipped empress, a venerated fairy—that you passed through all the magnificent transformations, through all the glorious metempsychoses. What’s more, you were, for a minute, the Guardian Angel, the Muse and the Madonna, as Baudelaire said, the guide who shows, with a solemn smile on her lips, the gates of Heaven.

You were sitting on the beach—you, with a delicate grace, facing the sea, the savage expanse; and I, behind you. A group of jealous worldly women and young men filled with crude desires flocked about you—you who stand out victorious, with but a mediocre triumph. But I must do you this justice: that you barely gave a single scornful ear to the idiotic utterances that dishonored the great melancholy of the ocean. As often as you dared, young blonde, you would look away to scrutinize my unknown eyes with your dark ones, and in them you saw the infinity of a dream. Something like a vague anxiety stirred in you, and so you gazed at length like a bewitched antelope, which made you all the prettier. And it is with this insight, experienced by women at certain moments, that you sensed that, for you, the hour was grave. You were right, for hear me:

In enchanted palaces, in marvelous gardens, in legendary Edens you walked, my arm clasped about your waist; and while the light of the stars that had been gathered for your hair was shimmering around your brow, and murmuring musical caresses were rising, I spoke words of ecstasy to you from bended knee, I gave you kisses that revealed worlds. And the incense of my adoring thoughts flew up to you, a goddess.

Now, the fleeting dream that was your glory is scattered—like all dreams, alas! and like all glories. Now you remain simply the pretty blonde with dark eyes that you had been.

You can go on into the life that is offered to you; you can, young girl, accept a husband who will grumble to you about his finances and choose a lover who will explain to you in detail the secrets of his stable. Just as a princess, in smelling it for a second, leaves a little of her aromatic breath upon the mimosa branch that she has plucked at random on the walk and later casts aside for the passer-by who will pick it up, I took what I wanted from you, and I leave you the memory of my evocative power that glorified you. Go now.

Adieu, Jane!

Exiled from Heaven

(A Christmas tale)

To Alexandre Tansserat

There was much snow before the gates of heaven that night, for it was Christmas—that time of the year when the Angels are molting—and the white feathers of their wings made a heavenly snow that was strewn over the serene dwellings in the square.

And yet, that same day, Saint Colombe—whom Our Lord God the Son cherished above all others due to her beautiful pale blond hair, almost white, as if a reflection of the immaculate sincerity of her soul—Saint Colombe had left Heaven to go visit one of the souls under her protection in Purgatory. The Saint, very kind and very compassionate, had wanted to stay to console this poor soul who was languishing in Purgatory. So much so that she lingered, and when she started back on the road to Heaven it was night, a night most certainly clearer than our poor middays on our miserable earth; a star—still a pale, dim lamp compared to the beautiful heavenly light, but capable nonetheless of blinding weak human eyes—guided Saint Colombe through the snow-covered paths. While she was walking—so lightly that she barely brushed the surface of the soft whiteness with her rosy toe—she heard a weak wailing not far off.

Looking about her, she soon caught sight of a small rosy thing that was letting out a cry. Completely bare, its vulnerable skin bundled in the cold of the snow, a child, a little girl, was forsaken there, with a few frizzy wisps of blond hair already on her brow.

“Poor child!” murmured the Saint, touched by what she saw.

She took the little being in her arms, wrapped her in a section of her robe and took her.

In two seconds, she was at heaven’s gate.

“Knock knock!”

Saint Pierre¹ came and opened it.

“Why!” he exclaimed, “What have you brought us, there, Saint Colombe?”

The saint unveiled her pretty cargo.

“Ah my!” resumed Saint Pierre, “Today is a day of discoveries!”

And he pointed to a babbling newborn in the corner, this one a boy.

“How adorable, the little angels!” said Sainte Colombe while the good Saint Pierre smiled with his old wrinkle-rimmed mouth and tickled the chin of the tiny baby he had found.

Numb to the bone, the babies shivered in the snow, which huddled around their little limbs in fluffy clumps.

“Quick, let’s clothe them!” she said.

She gently took between her shapely fingers a bit of this snow which, in the blink of an eye, was transformed into a gauzy white fabric, light as a cloud and yet warm like a maternal breast. With a thread of the Virgin, captured in flight, she made a pink belt and used it to fasten the radiant white dress, so delicately woven, to the waist of the little girl.

Saint Pierre made by the same process a flowing smock ideally white for his protégé.

“But,” ventured the celestial doorman, “what shall we do with these whippersnappers?”

“Why, raise them, watch them grow, unaware of any human world, without thought of any animal domain, but in the eternal bliss of a divine homeland.”

“That would be nice; but, my poor dear friend, you know full well that we are prohibited from keeping them here.”

¹ Saint Pierre is the French name for Saint Peter, while “la sainte Colombe,” literally “the holy dove,” is a name for the Holy Spirit.

“That’s true,” said the saint, sadly shaking her head. “Oh!” she cried a minute later, “I have an idea.”

And, clapping her hands, she let out a small cry of joy, more soft and more affectionate than a melody of Cimarosa.

“Let’s hear this idea.”

“We cannot keep them here. Well! We will keep them with us anyway. In Heaven? Impossible! Yes; but next to it? Who would forbid that? Come and bring them.”

They went out and stopped close to the pearly gates of the divine dwelling. The saint made a sign and suddenly a diamond pavilion rose up, set with gold.

Translucent, the inside of this miniature palace could be seen, and standing out against a curtain made from the pink of the dawn were two amethyst cradles draped with angel’s sashes. A door connected it to the palace of Saint Pierre.

On the pediment, Saint Colombe hung two stars.

She delicately placed the children in the cradles while they made their first attempts at smiles amidst the whiteness of their young robes.

“But,” said Saint Pierre, “we must baptize them. What should we name them?”

Saint Colombe leaned over the cradles. Stroking the forehead of the little girl, the aromatic breath of the blessed saint suddenly made very fine blonde hairs grow there and curl.

“You,” she said, “you will be called Colombina.”

Then, grazing with her lips the cheek of the boy:

“And you, you will be Pierrot!”

And in this palace the children grew side by side under the loving embraces of Saint Pierre and Saint Colombe. And it was quite often, wasn't it, oh pale saint, virgin and martyr, that you, not having known motherhood on earth, deserted the unutterable bliss reserved for you in Paradise for the joy of kissing young foreheads where minds were awakening!

Since the fragrant breath of the saint frequently lifted it softly, little Colombina's blonde hair curled delightfully. And, having in this blessed time that vivacious *je ne sais quoi*, her blue eyes sparkled as if each look was a flash. Her rosy mouth, revealing the shine of her pointed little teeth, sometimes formed a smile made the saint, the poor thing, fear that she saw there a sweet mischievousness.

Pierrot, growing up, became slender and frail like an aspen tree, and, like such trees, whose leaves curl up when there is a gust of wind, revealing their pale backs and dressing them in white, he was white from head to toe. Through admiration of the white saint whom he loved with his muddy eyes, he kept a perpetual whiteness on his face. He loved her, this divine godmother, with a divine affection; for, raised in an everlasting homeland, he gained there something everlasting: Love. He had an admiration of her that was filled with ecstasy; and, when she would leave, it was his companion Colombina that he saw with loving eyes.

Close to heaven's gate, a stairway with luminous steps descended all the way down to earth. The two children often came to play on the landing, for they had been forbidden to venture a single step down the stairs themselves. And Pierrot, listening to Colombina's laugh, would often fix his eyes on the dazzling stars nearby.

“Little one,” Saint Pierre said to him one day, surprising him in the middle of his contemplations, “don’t look at the stars so much: one day, you will find that they are too far away!”

Colombina inspected the first steps of the stairway with curiosity, wondering where they led. It was with great regret that she respected the order to not go down them.

And yet, one day, since she was no longer a little girl, but soon to be a young woman, she tapped on Pierrot’s shoulder while he was lost in contemplation of those dear stars.

“Are you coming?” she said.

“Where?”

“Let’s go down the stairs.”

“Oh! No, it’s forbidden!”

“Too bad! If you aren’t coming, I’ll go alone.”

He begged her not to, crying. She replied to all his pleas by shaking her mischievous head:

“I’m going.”

“Well then,” he finally replied, “let’s go!”

And, with Colombina leading him by the hand towards the mysterious staircase, he took one last look towards the palace that he was leaving, the homeland where he had been loved.

Down they climbed for a long, long time. The banister of the staircase had been formed with great lilies that pressed up against one another. At intervals, stems appeared, from here, a vast dark corner, from there, the faint light of a star.

Colombina collected some lilies and gave them to Pierrot. Finally they arrived at the bottom of the staircase. They were on Earth.

“Earth!” said Colombina, jumping for joy, “why, it’s a lovely place, Earth! Oh, we are going to have so much fun!”

They found themselves in the middle of a forest. Rays of sunlight slipping between the leaves lit the underbrush with a cheerful light and the two children marveled at this new world. At each discovery, there were little cries of delight. Colombina was radiant.

But when the night came, she was cold, she was hungry, and she dropped from exhaustion.

Pierrot spied a cave where he quickly made a bed out of moss.

“Come on!” he said to his companion.

He wrapped her in pieces of his smock and covered her with his arms.

“Are you still cold?” he asked.

“No.”

The voice of the young man began to tremble, and it was barely a whisper when he spoke into the ear of his friend:

“Do you love me, Colombina?”

“Yes.”

“Will you always love me?”

“Oh! Yes, forever!

So he pressed his lips to the half-closed eyes of the young girl and the two fell asleep together, side by side with the great celestial lilies that did not frighten away the sincerity of that nuptial night.

The next morning, after having wandered for a long time, they came to an immense town where gray houses huddled together under a sad sky like muddy, frightened sheep. The two young people were clasped in each other's arms, taken by a vague apprehension.

On the drab walls, squares of bright colors, multicolored fliers, gleamed here and there. And Pierrot read somewhere: "*Paris.*"

"Paris," said Colombina, "so this is the place they speak so poorly of up there! But it's very pretty, Paris!"

They reached a great avenue, very long and very wide, where swarms of carriages milled about. Pierrot once again read a plaque: "*Champs-Élysées.*" In the shiny silver-lined black coaches gentlemen sat, dressed all in black. They were ugly; but—oh! How pretty!—from their mouths, where they would sometimes put little brown cylinders, light spirals of blue smoke resembling the ceiling of heaven would escape.

"It's their souls flying away!" said Pierrot.

Also stretched out in the carriages were pretty young women covered with silk and velvet, magnificently dressed, like fallen angels.

Colombina, in seeing them, had a look of sadness for the gauzy white dress encircled with a pink ribbon that Saint Colombe had woven.

At that moment, in front of her, an old man dressed all in black descended from a coach: Duke Géronte². He tipped his hat.

"Do you want to be like these women," he said to the young girl, "covered with silk and velvet, adorned with gold and diamonds, to which the sunset and stars pale in comparison?"

"Yes."

² Géronte is a classic character in French theater, most commonly used to represent one who is fooled or deceived.

She left the arm of her friend Pierrot and stepped over the footstool. To assist her, Duke Géronte clasped her waist. And, on the gauzy white dress encircled with a pink ribbon that Saint Colombe had woven with a bit of celestial snow, the dirty black mark of a fat hand appeared.

“Oh!” sobbed Pierrot, paler than ever.

And he fell like a brick, unconscious.

From then on he roamed the nights, ever thin and pale, his eyes ever fixed on the stars, and looking with an involuntary perseverance for the mysterious staircase by which he had descended from the divine homeland. Through his wanderings, eternally weary in the mud of the streets, his white smock was soiled and faded.

One night he encountered Colombina, but she was no longer white and blonde and rosy. Buried in an outfit of earthly luxury, she was beautiful among women, but ugly among angels. She came to him:

“Do you want to kiss me, Pierrot?”

But he ran off in a frenzied flight. This was no longer the friend that he had loved for her soft resemblance to the white saint who would kiss his forehead. Oh! No, nothing remained any longer in her of what he had loved. And he resumed his eternal march in the vain search of the celestial stairway until one night, one Christmas night, very weary, he fell on the stones on the road. He looked up at the stars one final time and closed his eyes, waiting...

And the snow covered him once again with a soft shroud, as white as his heavenly smock had been in his infancy, and perhaps that night his soul climbed the longed-for staircase, off to regain the maternal kiss of Saint Colombe.

But are you the only one on earth, oh Pierrot, my friend, who walks the length of a human life with the infinite regret of a divine homeland left forevermore, with the hopeless love of a vision from long ago, lost forever, with your eyes forever sadly fixed on the stars?

Three Kisses

To Henry Beauclair

Bonjour.

“Until tomorrow, my dear beloved!”

And the sound of a kiss, making its way through the rumbling of cars, hit the ears of the poet Pierre Reyal, who turned suddenly.

Two lovers had been parting ways at the corner of Rohan and Rivoli around midnight.

Pierre resumed his walk, daydreaming, bumping into two passers-by, nearly getting crushed by a cab despite the energetic exclamations of the driver, and finally reached Carrousel Square.

The electric light, projecting its pale brightness across a rather thick fog, fell upon the summits of the square, playing among the leaves and casting the shadows of the trees on the path. At the far end, towards the Louvre, the distant and sparse candelabras scattered the darkness of a few luminous points half-veiled by the mist. This little corner of Paris was a mythic countryside.

Pierre believed he was in Girodet’s painting: *le Sommeil d’Endymion*. He was there, in the square, hidden away in the mountains, the handsome shepherd of Carie; and this softened, pale light kissed the disquieted shrubs in order to look at him, to make him drunk of a fleeting caress.

Pierre had just seen the kiss of reality; now he saw the kiss of legend.

He walked towards the shadows, going around the square, and sat on one of the benches in the corner formed by the two wings of the Louvre, surrounded by small columns.



Le Sommeil d'Endymion, Girodet-Trioson, 1791

He was alone, his ears still ringing with the sound of the kiss that he had heard, his eyes filled with the fantasy kiss that he had imagined. He crossed his arms, hoping that maybe one of the stars hidden by the fog would descend towards him from on high, like the moon towards Endymion, and that it would come in the form of a woman in a white dress with flowing hair, her lips lightly touching the forehead of the dreamer.

He lifted his eyelids, then lowered them, and his head fell on his left shoulder.

He was there, far away in the countryside. Pierre was 14 years old; she was 12: Céline. She was tall, with a childish slenderness, but her flat virgin chest already had some of the suppleness of a woman. She was so alluring, this little blonde, with her cheeks so fresh, and a few unruly hairs occasionally flying away, a few threads of gold escaping the braids! They were mischievous, these hairs, just as much as the laughing child was: wild rings fluttering around her forehead, caressing her ears and her neck—a neck so pale, so delicate! And the two long braids,

unable to remain wound on her neck, always fell, unfurling, twisting on her arched back, like two golden serpents. She had a little laugh that opened the door to paradise, a clear and soft laugh that revealed her little teeth: and when you closed your eyes and heard it echoing, you would have believed that these pretty white teeth were tumbling into a crystal glass like pearls falling from the string of a necklace.

Pierre had heard it often, this laugh, when he had frolicked with Céline in the barnyard after the turkeys that clucked furiously and fanned out their tail feathers in their flight with comical expressions of rage. He had heard it again when, in the meadows where they played hide and seek, the delicate head of the sweet girl would suddenly appear, hanging from the trunk of a poplar; then as she would run away, frightened as he pursued her, and he would always catch her in the end, both of them gasping for breath.

With her crimson lips she would laugh at everything she saw, at everything she loved; for in her laugh she put her precious heart of a little girl. And yet one day the laughter became serious: It was one of those summer mornings that fill your soul with their perfumes, in the hour at which the last coolness of dawn points mysteriously to the future enthusiasm of the day. Weary of running, they had come together to rest, shading themselves from the newborn sun in the angle formed by two living hedges; and they were sitting there on the thick grass among the mint leaves and the wild thyme that perfumed this retreat. Lifting her head, Céline had caught sight of a wild rose in the hedge; she wanted to pick it, and the thorny branch whipped her face, scattering ruby droplets on her cheek. When she sat down, Pierre took her two delicate little hands (oh! so delicate!) in his, fixing his troubled eyes on the blue ones of the little girl:

“You’re bleeding,” he said with a trembling voice.

“Heal me!” she responded with a smile, extending her cheek in a graceful yet mischievous gesture.

At length, one by one, Pierre sucked between his lips the bloody droplets off of the smooth skin. And when he had finished he saw that Céline was completely red, lowering her golden eyelashes, taken with an unexplainable emotion, while he wondered if it was because of the light wound of his friend that his vision burred and that his heart was beating so fast...

Sitting on the bench, the poet’s head straightened up then fell on his right shoulder.

Did she have a name, this thick and brutish girl on whom so many passers-by had placed their kisses? Each one who bought her for a few hours bought at the same time the right to address her as he pleased. Was she a woman? No, a thing; albeit a rather pretty thing.

Red-headed, with very white skin speckled here and there with a few tawny spots, she had a cavalier way of shuffling along the pavement that gave her the air of a dethroned queen. Wasn’t she one, in fact? Was not this desired woman, with her demeaned appearance, at her core actually made to exercise power over others?

One night—a June night when chests burned with the heavy air—seeing her walking in front of him, in watching this powerful allure, these wide hips, these robust limbs that seemed built for wild embraces, Pierre felt a flood of blood rushing to his brain. He doubled his pace and arrived at the side of the strolling woman who slowly turned her lazy head towards him.

There was a flash of lightning: Pierre’s eyes met those of the redhead who immediately looked away. That was enough: Pierre was in a frenzy.

He fastened himself to the steps of the walking beauty, brushing his shoulders, fixing his dilated eyes on her. He followed her as if an invisible chain tied him to her. Behind her, he mounted a stairway, not realizing that he did so, not understanding a thing, except that she was in front of him. Even if she had climbed fifty stories, even if she had gone down to the center of the earth, he would have passively followed her.

Was it luxurious or drab, the room into which they entered? Was it a boudoir filled with fresh satins shivering under the light; was it a vulgarly furnished room where three wilted chairs dawdled sadly against the dirty walls? Pierre didn't notice any of it; he only saw one thing: the creature that was in front of him.

She nonchalantly placed the brass candlestick on the table with a short candle burning. Pierre looked at it. His mouth was dry, his collar choked him, he felt like he was breathing fire. Suddenly, he embraced the redhead and, seizing the top of her bodice under her chin with his full hand, he tore the fabric and sharply planted his dry, burning lips on her skin.

The man who was sitting on the bench of the Louvre shuddered; his head rocked from side to side, then fell again upon his chest...

It was very cold that night; but, whether by whim or to throw off all suspicion, Madeleine had wanted Pierre to wait for her in the street. An aristocrat, used to living in overheated apartments, to not going out in the winter except in her automobile, warmly wrapped up in furs with her little feet on a hot-water bottle, she came to the rendezvous shivering, hiding her hands in her muff, sinking her neck down between her shoulders. Her pretty profile could hardly be seen under the dark veil where droplets of dew appeared at the height of her mouth.

She took Pierre's arm and the two walked with a rapid pace towards the nest where their love would take shelter. They were on the Concorde Bridge. The passers-by ran about them with their noses in their collars. Madeleine, seized by the cold, hung on the arm of her poet, squeezing herself against his body. Then, since the wind stung her eyes despite her veil, she closed them and, leaning her little head on Pierre's shoulder, said:

"I'll walk as if I'm blind, steer me and tell me when I must step up or down."

And he steered her as if she were blind, watching over her, describing to her the little zigzags so as not to alarm the passers-by.

"Faster, faster," she cried, her eyes always shut, "oh! It's so fun! It seems like I'm walking towards an abyss, like I'm going to fall off a cliff! Let's run!"

They arrived at the Quai d'Orsay; they followed the sidewalk, which was entirely deserted and very poorly lit.

"I'm cold," she said.

Pierre opened his coat and wrapped it around her waist while she cuddled up against him, murmuring:

"Yes, like that! I'm not as cold now."

As he lifted her veil with his finger, bending down to give her a kiss, she rejected it, throwing her head back and laughing, then she nimbly lowered her gaze.

When she saw Pierre's head distancing itself from hers, she suddenly lifted her veil again just up to the middle of her nose.

She was so pretty, with her lips that opened in a provocative smile, with her rosy cheeks and her little nose reddened by the cold, while her dark eyes sparkled in her gaze.

Pierre leaned down again, approaching her lips; but the veil fell again over a burst of laughter; then it rose once again. The game restarted two more times until Pierre, seizing the perfect moment, finally managed to press his mouth against that of his beloved.

This time, a smile passed over the face of the poet who was still sitting on his bench. He looked at everything around him, got up, and slowly went on his way, his heart full of memories.

The Lover's Sentence

To Mario Fenouil

The ancient Hindu village dozed on the shore of the Ganges, softly illuminated by the last lights of the day.

Between the tall palm trees and the towering banana trees, deserted temples and palaces overhung large staircases, bordering the water of the famous river that flows so majestically.

Soon the night would swoop down upon the country—the abrupt Indian night that suddenly follows the day without the transition of dusk.

On the shore, a crowd of young girls were gathered between the stones and ruins. Most of them had travelled from great distances to perform the ritual that would foretell the fate of their love. They had all plunged joyfully into the sacred waters, their tanned young breasts in the open air with only a strip of white cloth about their sides. They were coming up out of the water, all chattering like a flock of birds perched in the trees, very proud of having dipped their bodies in the great Ganges—the river that washes away all stains and prepares its bathers for prophetic revelations.

Halida, one of the prettiest bathers, emerged from the water. Without drying herself, she put on her white linen dress and sat down. Halida was an alluring young girl. Her sixteen years were mature and her body had blossomed into womanhood. In her country, girls are ripe and nubile when girls of the same age in the West are still playing with dolls. Such a delicious creature—whoever holds her heart is surely blessed. Her mouth was a flower created for kissing and a powerful magnetism emanated from her large charcoal eyes beneath her determined brow.

Halida, like many other young girls, had come that day to the ancient city that bathes in the Ganges to consult her fate, to know the destiny of her love. Would her lover be faithful?

She had to have fallen in love with a European—one of those men who comes from very far away, from an unknown and mysterious country spread out under the sleeping sun, who spends a few months in India and returns to his homeland, leaving behind a weeping woman.

Halida, along with the other young girls, prepared the objects that would reveal her destiny. All the others had come up out of the water and were lying down on the shore. They had small baskets containing eggs and stumps of candles. Halida took an egg, poured the whites on a stone, and pronounced an incantation. She then planted a candle stump in the eggshell.

The night fell suddenly on the river and on the earth and on the high palaces and the temples in ruins, like a stone crushing its heavy shadow. The landscape swiftly crossed over from day into night.

So Halida went down to the edge of the water and, very gently, with meticulous care, entrusted the egg shell to the current, planted with a lit candle. The little light flickered, regained its balance, and flowed along with the river.

Similar lights embarked all along the riverbank—candles launched by the other young women who were gathered there. They were watching the shimmering points in the dark water. Each young girl's eyes were anxiously following her candle.

Those who would see theirs for a long time would be glad. Their love would be happy. The owners of the candles that immediately tumbled over and blew out would suffer greatly from their love.

Young Halida's heart was beating very fast as she accompanied with her eyes and with her hopes the candle that was floating with the will of the current.

Young girls were weeping all around her. They had seen the destruction of the vessels that carried their hopes.

Halida's candle was floating slowly. It had already travelled about ten meters. The young girl followed it along the shore, her naked little feet in the stones and thorns. Suddenly, the light went out. The candle had sunk.

It was a bad omen. Her love had been condemned. The pale European that she had had the foolishness to love would leave, abandoning her for the kisses of another woman.

Stewart was a young English officer of twenty-five in service in the Indies. He had a rosy, doll-like face with a strong jaw that reflected the conquering English race. His clear, pale eyes, however, seemed to softly caress all those who met his possessive gaze, like a man petting a hound.

Stewart had found Halida alluring. He had picked this pretty Hindu flower.

They had spent three months of enchantment together.

But man grows tired of everything, even the love of such a charming girl; and Stewart was thinking about his upcoming return to England.

"Will you stay for a while still?" Halida asked him when she had returned from the test of the light on the river.

"Yes," answered Stewart, "I will stay a long time, to stay close to you."

But Halida knew that this man was lying, as all men lie. She knew that soon she would be left alone, scorned by those of her caste because she had given herself to a European, to one of the damned of the West.

Her plan was made. The pretty Hindu saw the simplicity of life and death. If the man who you had loved died, no other woman would possess his kiss. You cannot be jealous when death is your rival.

Halida gathered some banana tree leaves, leaves sharp like blades. She cut them with meticulous care into fragments no larger than grains of rice.

And every day, in the plate of rice that she prepared for her beloved, she would put one pinch of the fragments of banana tree leaves, sharp like blades.

“Halida,” Stewart said one night, “I don’t feel well. The climate of your country is making me sick. I will spend two or three months in my homeland and then I will return to your kisses. If I were to stay I am sure that I would die from it, as so many others have died.”

Halida wept bitterly at the idea of this separation. But every day she would put one new pinch of banana leaf fragments in his plate of rice.

Her tenderness increased before the departure. And the night when her beloved left, she cried all of the tears in her body. What cruel destiny separates those who love each other?

The young officer set sail. In the bottom of his heart, he regretted leaving the delicious Halida. Would he ever again find a lover so captivating?

Nevertheless, he felt dull pains in his gut. On board, the pain became intolerable. Eight days after his departure, the steamer that was carrying him had to toss overboard the young blonde man who was taken by a sickness that the doctor could not recognize, stitched up in his shroud and left for the sharks.

The fragments of the banana tree leaves, sharp like blades, had perforated his intestines on all sides. The young man had died in atrocious suffering.

Halida remained without any news of her beloved, but she knew full well that the work of the banana leaves had been inevitable and sure.

Thus had fate decided. You cannot be jealous when death is your only rival.

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