



Woman Under Skylight, Humid and Grey Aristi Trendel

Όλα τα λόγια που είχαν μοναδικό τους προορισμό εσένα ¹

Odysseas Elytis

1 January,

Today I have turned forty and it is a cloudy day. On the slim symmetries between the century that like a new born hailed time and me, the belated pilgrim of eternity, I try to keep my mind busy. I find it tremendously hard to keep my mind busy. Eternity is an idle, boundless vale and keeping time for a high mountain plain woman is an almost impossible task. Besides, I will never get accustomed to the time-lag. So I live outside what has been going on. Why I am an outsider, this is sheer destiny, I mean, our self is a sort of ineluctable destiny. My sense of fatality is probably part of my heritage. The man I loved pointed this out to me once. He told me, “you have a sense of doom”. He told me, “you have put me in front of all your philosophical problems”. His words always bore a classic grace. He stripped me gently of all my clothes and gave me my pilgrim’s dress. I sometimes wear mufti but this is only a disguise.

Today I have conceived the idea to write a novel bearing the mellifluous title *Nephele*. It will grow with the century. In my impregnated mind, it will grow like a poplar. My conceptions normally faint, never come round. I have completed four note-books of notes —none of them golden— that I have never

¹ Words not like the others but these too with a single goal: you.

shaped into any form. To this jungle of wild ideas, to this cemetery of unfulfilled schemes I never return. I am a born note-breeder, a compulsive note-keeper, a veteran in the task. Not that my conceptions are misconceptions, but memories are old, worn and fusty and I do not have the guts to stir them to life. And what life? And whose life?

My inaccessible beloved is not a memory. My pilgrim's progress brought me to her. It would be impossible to bury her in a musty note-book. It would be afflictive to adulterate her in a distorting novel. I will go through the affliction of fiction but I will save her too. In a diary I will keep her pure as she is. Her purity suspends time, suspends my breath. It is hard to figure out whether there has been anything that gave me that intimation of purity before. A baby's smile perhaps. Willy's smile in the incubator. He was infected by a vile virus at birth and his existence was suspended for a few days between life and death. From those days of uncertainty I have kept a memory of purity. It seems that they are back the days of uncertainty. My mind sways between life and death. This gentle swing makes me somewhat dizzy. I feel a tingle in my fingertips. It is the affliction of fiction, I say to myself, as a multitude of words stirs up in me and drives me to the fifth note-book, the blue and grey one. *Nephele* looms large in me still blurred. My novel blows life into all my impossible loves, heavy clouds full of restless wanderlust. This cloudland I have inhabited. To fog, mist and haze I have aspired. I am not the only one. This is reassuring. Others have done it before me. That crazy writer whose character wrote down in his diary that he would live for the emotions only. A ritual suicide sealed his life like a cloudburst. The Japanese soul is not that inscrutable for a European mind after all. I am not isolated. Cries and whispers and sobs and whimpers have been congenial to my ears like my beloved's song.

Today she is leaving. Maybe she's gone. I cannot keep in touch with her whereabouts. "Shall we accompany you to the station?" I said. She gave me her most formal smile and with a forbidding gesture, "No, thank you, everything's

arranged". She told me the date though.

"How strange!", I said, with my most formal smile and a burst of gloom within me, "with the advent of the new century", my mind pouncing on the reverse symmetries of the unfortunate event.

"It's smoothly ushered in", she said softening the formality in her voice.

"Have something to read on the train", I said, casually handing her *The Fountain Overflows*. "It's a very amusing story about violins".

"No, thank you", she said, "I don't really read literature".

"Not even Virginia Woolf?", I pleaded, suddenly hearing an inner voice crying out "To the Lighthouse, quick, to the Lighthouse".

She looked surprised as if I had revealed to her the depths of my soul.

"Well, music is my only mistress", she said at length and added almost shyly "I pore over La Fontaine at times".

She will not read my novel. Desolation hovers over my future manuscript, penetrates my blue and grey note-book. *Nephele* will never descend upon her mythic mind, will never touch upon her secret heart. She will never stray into the maze of my mind, she will never venture into my open heart or the body, the vicarious body of words, voluble, voluptuous, on high voltage. One more reason to write it: for all the pathos that surrounds its existence breathing cathartic life into it. Like Zeus I will assemble the clouds. Just like him I will create her in her own likeness. I can see her, Willy's bow in her ringed hands, and I have no doubt. She is the nebulous embodiment of all my impossible loves. It is her living body I want to hold here in these inceptive pages, frail, unfamiliar, endearing. I have kept notes, but I have never kept a diary before. This sudden desire for truth without disguise overwhelms me. I cannot bear to transform her beyond recognition; I cannot bear to refer to her as a verbal construct. My beloved exists; she belongs to a reality outside language. Between me and her I want direct means of transport.

Of course she will never read my diary. My humble abode she will never

deign to enter. To my homely chamber music she will never hark. My beloved, remarkably alert, is blind to my flesh, deaf to my voice. My voice, her voice, alien voices. She gave me her voice. Very recently. I was totally unprepared for the event as for her departure. I knew that she sang. Romain's colleague, who introduced her to him, told us so. Naturally I looked for her records and I found none. Naturally I did not dare ask her. But she came to me with her voice. Her valedictory gift to us. She is leaving today. She may be gone. With a cortège of nimbostratuses. I sit under the battered skylight, while in a languishing deluge my beloved bids farewell: *Oh Belinda, remember me but forget my fate.*

2 January,

Not a sole instant have I forgotten. Recollecting is my fate. She experienced it, at least vicariously, the long, unrelieved agony of the queen and sang it to me and I listened to it all night till it melted into my breath. If she knew the vibrating adventure of sound and soul, their soul kiss...She would not acknowledge it. Will it remain in my novel too, unacknowledged and unacknowledgeable? My characters have the substance of ghosts. Their lurid procession reminds me of the ghastly silhouettes in *The Seventh Seal* lining up for death. I cannot even join the queue. Ghosts do not die. They are eternal tenants in death's demesne. My characters are made of fog, mist and haze, take various forms and varied shapes while a head voice follows the cloud-drift. It becomes the voice of disarray and avowal. And this is love in my novel, the loud lament of disconsolate chimera. No need for quotation marks. We are all of the same stuff, geniuses and dwarfs. Our voices merge like the clouds. And I sit here, under the skylight in my beloved's armchair and watch their trip. It is a sort of bird-watching. Romain and Willy have gone out for a walk and the house is silent. I can only go out at night when there are no people around. I do not have much energy these days. I cannot lament under the skylight. I only wonder for the millionth time why we single out one frail being and invest it with the profundity of an emotion which

is not even ours. The mystics do not have to answer such a question. I think a lot about them because this is a mystic place. I became aware of it the very first moment I set foot in this forest and let myself answer the call of the wild. Romain tells me, "I fear one of these days we'll find you at a tree trunk, your head crushed against a stone". The violence in the picture startles me. Evil has no access here. Purity disarms it. This place has a soul. Others have felt it before me. This is reassuring. It has been a holy retreat. It has been invested with anchoritic afflatus. It is cited in a guide, *The Holy Places of the Region*. There are even modern pilgrims. They are less interesting. They come in groups. I run away from them like a doe. I talk to the does. "Stay", I call out to them. They flee my passage but not before flashing a gleaming glance at me. And for a second I am rewarded with their timorous beauty. Romain puts salt for them in the garden, and early in the morning they come and eat. But I have never seen one, although I have often waited for them in the silence of the morning. The only doe I have seen in the garden was a trapped one. In a fit of panic at the approach of a dog, she threw herself at the wire fence and flew through the hole back to the woods. I called her the lost Elvira, the wounded doe and vainly looked for her in the forest. I had never been attached to animals though. Never kept a pet.

I talk to the squirrels. They are skittish and cheeky and seem undisturbed by my presence. I have never touched their bushy tail. "Stay", I tell them. "Once I have met a bear and let him touch me. He was greedy for honey. It was very pleasant". "I'm a bear. I like touching", the man I once loved would tell me. He is a gilder.

I talk to the clouds. "My beloved", I whisper in my cloud-forest and think of the mystics and think of the pilgrims, who knelt in this place, and of our difference. They love the infinite. I love the finite. But that is what makes love divine, I say to the clouds. The faculty to love a frail, limited being, one who cannot love you.

At the beginning thoughts crossed and re-crossed my mind in a ceaseless

dialogue with a presence in my mind. They were the reflections of a solitary stroller, they were birds of passage. Now there is no need for words out there. Now there is only music. Others have felt it before me: the Buddhist monk in *Narcissus and Goldmund*. This is reassuring. Out there, there's a tremendous freedom from words, a mighty rest. Naturally in here, under the skylight battling and drumming, I still wrestle with words. I want to speak to her. As if words could reach her, as if they were the key to her secret heart. Strange how things deflate when they take the shape of words. How they become deficient, deflowered, their innocence of emotion lost. I have a river of words flowing in me, a meandering river. I do not know where I am getting them from. They shower down on me like the murkiest cloud. In *Nephele* clouds swell, hide the horizon. I have started the first chapter, "Stratus". With hardly any notes.

They are back. Doors slumming, feet thumping. Romain is going to open the door without knocking as usual, his face intruding, his Cyrano's nose protruding, his body hesitant at the sill,

"Are you still reading? Am I disturbing?"

"I'll be with you in a minute", I say, my mind trying to make connections between matrimony and privacy. But I cannot leave her wooden armchair. It feels like an ark in a deluge of desolation, a womb in a welter of *Weltschmerz*. Willy is calling me but the armrests hold me. I stay still for a minute, one more deep breath of her, then I plan my itinerary down the stairs, to the kitchen, first grill the fish, then peel carrots and potatoes, next defrost the black forest. "It's freezing outside", Romain says, "it may snow".

It is snowing. The skylight is sealed white. *Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht*. It is past midnight. Have fallen asleep in the middle of the third and the oboe wakes me up. It is the cry of a wise owl. Trees clad in white lace. White illumination in deep midnight. She has never seen this uncanny landscape at night. For fairies only and awoken pilgrims in deep midnight. She is neither a

fairy nor a pilgrim. I do not know what she is. She may be a hermit. She lives alone in a house, I will never see, by the lake. She lived alone in a house by the canal I entered once. She asked me to drive Willy there, because her car was in the garage. She was too conscientious to call off the lesson. She opened the drawing room door for me and said, "Please stay". How could I have stayed? My eagle's eyes surveying, spying her intimacy, pouncing with the talons of love. "Thank you", I said, "I think I'll do some shopping". Willy was admitted into her inner chambers. He was free from the shame of love. Yet the innocence of it has been with me all the time. I am convinced now. My love for her can only be white like a cirrus.

I want to tell her about the softness and whiteness of the snow, how similar to it her presence here has been to me, soft and white and lace-like and immune to impurities. About the long winter I'll travel without her in the dead of her likeness. If she knew about my weird winter in the dread of her likeness. She would turn aside and sing another version of farewell, "The Arab hostess's farewell" from the repertory she gave me. *Adieu, souviens-toi*. She sings but does not listen.

3 January,

I listened to it all night, her voice crooning, lulling me to sleep softly, waking me up when at its heights. Then Romain came into my room in the early hours of the morning and unplugged my stereo. It was not very loud but in the stillness of the place and of the night sharps acquire a particular vibrancy.

She no longer sings. She will never sing again. Her voice is a thing of the past. She will never come here again. Her presence here is a thing of the past. She cannot see me. She has never seen me. I have seen her and I can no longer avert my eyes from her. I look at her and I see myself. Not that we are alike. I do not know exactly what she is like. I do not know much about her, but I love what I know. Her ringed fingers, her wrinkled eyes, her violinist's gaze, her soprano's

voice and her ordinary voice. I love Vera Delaseine.

I went downtown today. I feel null and void in towns and cities. My steps took me to the canal. Her place gaunt and giddily empty. Mist clouded my eyes, a word came up in my mind. *Niflheim*. In this uncanny world she takes shape now and moves away from me. I do not quite understand this movement. Its geometry eludes me. My characters are my own flesh and blood, yet they live in another world, not an underworld, but an “overworld”. They are more pallid than Poe’s cadaverous figures, more insubstantial than Plato’s ideas. And yet they are solid with the patrimony of the past, they bow under their surplus of humanity. In my mind they are colours. Blue like eternity, white like purity, red like anguish and black like death. They come out on a palette of pastel, whitish, bluish, pinkish, greyish. This toning down takes place within the movement. Others have experienced it too. This is reassuring. I have loved some of them, as if they were my own kith and kin. And even more. Love sustained me for a long while. It had a spiritual quality, an unsuspected poetry. Love outside language is not a different matter. It is an unmanning matter. It is an avalanche, a landslide. It has become a sweet obsession to me but I have no wish to overcome it.

When Vera Delaseine rang the bell, I did not hear it, I was in the cellar. Willy ushered her in and took her to my study because his room was a real mess. Willy is brilliant but very disorderly and disorder is disturbing to me. Under the skylight she sat, in my wooden armchair. We did not shake hands, my beloved is not expansive (I have never touched her hand), and always talks turkey. Willy’s previous teacher was a tall, young woman, soft-looking and soft-spoken and Willy always spoke with seduced admiration about Annabel. I think she was German but I never had the chance to ask her, I always went shopping during the lessons. My beloved is elderly and frail (although this is only an appearance) and austere (deeply austere), so when I first saw her under the skylight, I did wonder how Willy would get on with her. Willy loves Madame Delaseine.

“I cannot play as well as before”, he tells me meaningfully.

“Of course you can”, I reassure him, “she wants you to. She’d be very disappointed if you didn’t”.

This morning he composed a song he sang and then played for me. Johnny Chagrin loses his mother, Freya, and sets off to find the meaning of life. And the note of Johnny’s tearless sorrow besets me with questions. A surrogate mother, I wonder, growing perplexed. Clouds travel steadily over the skylight. This overhead movement becomes the leitmotiv in *Nephele*. I do believe she would be disappointed. “He’s very talented”, she told me. For two scholar years, two hours a week, Vera Delaseine devoted herself to Willy. It was only after a few sessions that she started bringing her violin to play with him at the end of her lesson. I was loaded with shopping bags when I first heard her playing. It was Beethoven and I am always available for Beethoven. I went on tiptoe up the stairs and sat on the sofa, my eyes fixed on the closed door. I no longer left the sofa during her teaching sessions. My awareness of her presence in my study, behind the closed door, under the skylight, turned into an act of contemplation. Through the sound of her violin, Vera Delaseine manifested herself to me. Her being travelled like light and spoke to me like a heralding angel. Through the eye of the cyclone I saw her. It was a spectacular sight. After that my mind became a deep cave resonant with her own sound. Vera Delaseine has many facets. Her placid, unfeeling aloofness yields to a soft, receptive femininity during her music lessons. I could see her behind the closed door mistressfully wielding the bow, her fiddling fingers upon the strings, her face snugly on the chin-rest as if upon a loving shoulder. I cannot picture the men who loved Vera Delaseine, music buffs no doubt, but I can picture her sending them away like a siren to a death-in-life. As for the woman who has loved Vera Delaseine, dismissed too, her love uncared-for, but not uncharted. When I knocked on the door to attend her last lesson, Vera Delaseine was standing under the skylight with a rapt expression on her face. She was looking towards me without looking at me. I found her face beautiful. I found her bearing proud. Her raptness turned into rapture in me. It

occurred to me then that she knew. I had seen this expression before, her face falling into a raptness as if into a void. "I'm sorry", I mumbled and without any further explanation I closed the door. I could not stay with them, I could not stay before the closed door, in the house either. I was propelled into the garden, strode out to Willy's hut and back to the house and back to the hut, in strife, in the hold of desire. Elvira flashed in my mind, her brown body holing the fence, Elvira hurting herself. She left the house without offering me her hand, displaying a formal smile. The fence between us was intact. And she now sings my yearning. The eerie irony of it,

Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt, weiss, was ich leide.

Seh'ich an's Firmament nach jener Seite.

Der mich liebt und kennt, ist in der Weite.

I look up out of the skylight swooning in the sound of her voice.

4 January,

I had to pull myself together today and resume my introspective and retrospective life. In the morning the day looked like an endless ladder I had to climb up with my fear of heights and my short breath. Vera Delaseine is a mistress of emotions, I thought to myself and the thought pushed me upward. I temporarily left the first chapter to work on the last, "The Grey Uniformity of the Sky". My beloved is my focal point. She is certainly fathomless but she can fathom me. I know she lives in the universe of music, she can probably live nowhere else, and my own chaos could only be distasteful to her. Did she sense it? I do not know where I stand with her; right now three hundred and fifty kilometres away from her; such a grey distance between our beating hearts. My beating heart's craving to be loved. Its thirst and hunger harass me. When Vera Delaseine first called me by my first name —and that liberty was so unlike her, I

did not even know that she knew my first name. I felt like a sun inside a cloud. I have never ventured a public pronouncement of her first name. My beloved would have instantly perceived the shade of a tender tone. She would have seen the luminous cloud over my eyes. Did I want her to know? Between revealing and concealing I swayed. I want her to know. I want to tell her about my hourly contemplation of her presence, week after week, month after month, twanging the strings of my heart. Now that it is over I could tell her. For two years I have fought the temptation to write to her. Finally I can only write about her. In the war of pronouns I find myself defeated. I am a subdued I without the endearing you. In the labyrinth of the self I will roam without the leading thread, the second person singular, the mighty stimulus. You or she, it is just a matter of grammar, the inner voice whispers in me forgetting the colossal difference involved.

“How can you stay for hours shut up in this room?”, Romain asks me. How can I explain to him that I am not alone? “Who’s with you, then?”, he would ask me. The lady with the violin, the former soprano, the music teacher, Vera Delaseine. He would not be impressed. Better a woman than a man. He has always thought that I am an obscure eccentric, that my affections are a thing of the mind. Not only. But he does not know. Honey Bear knows. At least somebody knows. How could Romain see my body holding her voice like a hollow vessel, my body vibrating? “She lacks breath”, he tells me, listening to her absent-mindedly; he has got a sound judgement but I know, too, that he loves depreciating what I love. “You’re a misanthrope, darling”, he tells me, visibly annoyed. I have repeatedly declined to accompany him to dinners and outings. “I feel like a bachelor”, he complains. “Do make the most of it”, I keep urging him. “I’m a Catholic”, he reminds me but I forget. Right now I cannot see anyone. My beloved in me requires full attention. Vera Delaseine offering a half smile; Vera lavishing a full smile; going up and down the stairs in her queenly carriage. A captivating fox, a fiery lioness. She intimidated me. She knew all the

keys, all about me, I mean what I loved, and I am in the dark, she and music, a unique blend, very similar to the one that shapes *Nephele*, of love and meaning.

I refused to get another teacher here. Willy is going to the Conservatory. I dread the thought of driving him to the city. People do not seem real to me. I do not feel real among people either. I see my hands moving aimlessly. I hear the sound of my voice alien, false. My head turns, pivotless. My beloved made me solidly real, safely human. How can I explain to Romain that I do love people, not their loud, social part but their silent, secret, unreachable self that only the other can draw out, the other invested with imaginative intensity, with supreme simplicity. I love their ivory-towered I, their euphonic you, I and you, the sine qua non conjunction of love and meaning.

In my prison of the self she sings to me. Her stern voice totally transformed by La Périchole's slow waltz, *Je t'adore, brigand, Je ne puis pas vivre sans t'adorer*. The blend of love and irony.

5 January,

Undramatic irony. Harsh awareness of reality. Better shut it out and breathe in an imagined space. Vera Delaseine, my imagined space. I shrink from anything that could take me away from it. Willy plays as if she were around. "It's as if she was here", he tells me. I can hear the wind wallowing in the trees, I can see it wooing a glassy cloud. My days are minutely planned though. 7 a.m. Willy's alarm clock rings and he comes into my bed. 7.05 my alarm clock rings and he gets up and makes tea for me. 7.15 Breakfast. 7.50 I drive Willy to school. 8.10 I put the house in order. 9.10 Cooking. 10.10 Writing. 11.25 I pick up Willy from school. 12 Lunch. 12.45 I clean up the kitchen. 1.25 p.m. I drive Willy back to school. 1.40 Writing. 3.50 I pick up Willy from school. 4.10. Willy has a snack and I prepare dinner. 5.00 I drive Willy to the city for his music lesson. I stay in the car and read. 7.30 Dinner. 8.45 I check Willy's homework. 9.15 Willy goes to bed and I do some housekeeping. 10.00 I go out for a walk. 10.45 I go to bed. Reading

and writing. Freedom. Straight on till morn.

Last night I dreamt of her. I was so happy to see her. She entered a room with a staircase foreign to me and asked me what I wanted her to sing. "Villa Lobos", I said thoughtlessly, "aria number 5". "I don't know it", she said, rather embarrassed without looking at me. "Please, sing whatever you like, I like everything you sing", I said, very pained at missing her eyes. I went up the staircase to listen to her better. With a harrowing happiness in my heart. I woke up with a pit in my stomach. I was so happy to see her. I still find it easier to work on the last than on the first chapter. Maybe it is a matter of sky.

The neighbour asked me if I wanted a bird. It was already dark when he came into the garden from an opening in the hedge. "It's a very sad sight a bird in a cage", I said, "We could find it a mate. Mated in a cage is better than being a loner in the sky", he said. He is a cardiologist-cum-gardener. Hearts and plants have no secrets for him. "We never see you in the garden", he tells me. "I look after a different garden", I tell him but I am sure that he has not read *Les Fleurs du mal*. He still loses his faculties, when he speaks to me. He has had an eye on me for the past nine years but never made any advances. He may be a Catholic, too. My middle-aged self now gets mildly surprised. It is a curious thing to see him flushed and flustered. And Vera Delaseine, wouldn't she get surprised to see me up a staircase flushed and flustered waiting for her to sing? Sing, my beloved, sing. A *canzone napolitana*. So full of surprises my steady, my stolid, my predictable beloved is.

6 January,

Another dream: I came back from my walk and found Willy still awake. "There's a shadow in the garden", he said. I looked outside and thought that there was a black sheep. Willy opened the French window. "Watch out", I said, and in a twinkling of an eye I saw that it was a black horse, wild and furious. It ran and hit Willy on the face.

Many a time I felt that between me and her there is Willy, an unbroken link, a guarantee for the future. Would she have taken the same interest in him, had he been less gifted, I wonder. But would I have fallen in love with her, had there been no violin, had she not played with Willy Mozart's "Melancholy" to me, their modest audience. The day Vera Delaseine looked at me over her scores, under the skylight, her violinist's gaze possessed by Mozart's "Melancholy", I felt like Isolde under wounded Tristan's gaze, Isolde before the love potion. That is how Mozart and Wagner merged under the skylight. That is how I found myself on the crest of the wave. Vera Delaseine was no longer a stranger to me. She became most intimate to me. What happened to that gaze? *Mir erkoren, mir verloren*. The day Vera Delaseine gazed at me, I let fall all the trappings of individuality. I became a crested wave that reached up the cupolaed cloud.

The sky is clear blue today. A cold sun fathers the day. I am starting a prologue to *Nephele*.

7 January,

I walked with Willy to the riding-school in the morning and he fed the horses. As he stood nose to muzzle with a glistening, black horse, its forelock made me restless, its hindquarters frightened me, I suddenly felt as in my dream and cried, "Watch out, Willy". He looked at me surprised and I shivered. I keep shivering. I must have caught a cold. I have been rather imprudent today. It was very reckless of me to take off my clothes in the forest. A black, starry sky. Black and golden silence. His bear's voice bespeaking love. "Are you alone?" I was surprised to hear his voice bearing lusty tidings. He hardly ever calls. He never writes. In his bossy, busy life he sometimes thinks about me. I call. I write. I wait. For the promised parousia, for a river different from the one of Heraclitus. I receive no calls, but I have been carrying my phone with me all the time since I gave my personal number to my beloved. "And please, do call if you are in town. We'd be delighted to see you".

“What are you wearing?”, my invisible lover asks. His bearish voice is a bit huskier. I cannot give an accurate description. I look ridiculous in my three layers of wool, mohair, cashmere and lamb’s, and my huge, grey coat.

“An impressive mass of wool”, I say evasively, “but it’s soft and I’m naked underneath”. He knows that I never wear knickers and seldom a bra.

“Lie down”, he says in a tender commanding voice. He is a Westernised Easterner and I his Muslim wife. No need for ceremonies, for legal procedures, for public announcements. “Our Prophet”, he told me and I have found accommodation in the hospitality of the first person plural. I welcome all prophets. They have seen something I cannot see. Besides, he bears the Prophet’s name. I spread my coat over the frozen earth. I have easily acclimatised to this sylvan microclimate. A Japanese novel comes up in my mind, *The Lake*, but I cannot remember any lake in it. The only lake I can remember is my beloved’s. A phrase though from the novel flits through my head: “their lawn bed” and its atmosphere around my body-in-a-daze. His bear’s voice over my body.

“Take off your clothes”, he says and his voice becomes hoarser. I take off my boots, unzip my skirt, lower my tights.

“Take your nipples into your fingers”. His voice lifts my pullovers one after the other. I think about that Kurdish film maker, who directed his film from his prison cell. There was a mute woman in it. There was a paroxysmal intensity in it. I had cried for hours.

“I can see you, you know”. I have lost count of the years since I last saw him, but it feels as if it were yesterday. The pain, too, feels as if it were yesterday. I can see him, too. He has taken off his glasses and his generous, circumcised intimacy springs up like a snake. I brace for the fearful bite. It pokes its head into my breasts and slithers a meandering course down my belly.

“Open your legs”. The sky is incandescent gold. “Wider”, he wheezes. In my narrowing consciousness there is still the glow of a shaky thought, something about the mathematical relation between agony and pleasure. I could discuss it

with my beloved, by the lake, if the opportunity ever occurs. The sky descends lower. Dozens of falling stars cleave the darkness like fireworks. The spirit of the place occults its clasping arms, orchestrates the crescendo of our pristine voices under the thinnest of moons.

I come back guiltless but doleful. Willy is sound asleep, his arm a halo around his fair face. He looks so much like his father that I cannot believe that he is mine too. Romain is out. I take a hot bath. Over my head, within the space of a skylight, the shimmering firmament. The sky has been hoisted back to an inaccessible heaven. Steam spreads over the glass, blurs the celestial light. Vaporous emotions float in a Turkish bath-like massive mist. "Cumulonimbus", the chapter before last starts taking shape. Lightning and thunder are still to come. I cherish the thunder-cloud.

8 January,

Chilly, blue sky. I cannot help calling him.

"You surprised me yesterday".

"I am less predictable than you think".

Honey Bear is not expansive. He wears thick, horn-rimmed glasses and speaks Cornell-accented English. He has a wide forehead and thinning, greying hair. He is down-to-earth, matter-of-fact. There is a romantic nook in his mind where the nectar is. He has an acute memory for details and a sharp eye for invisible bonds he treasures in the nook. A half smile can send him. A half breast can shake him. Honey Bear loves femininity. He can expand then with a glass of red wine and a dish of octopus salad. He wants to know more about my beloved. I tell him about her fettered femininity, her controlled smile, her technical diction, her thin lips, her proud nose, even about the day I thought she was wearing perfume but my nose was blocked and I could not be sure. He listens thoughtfully and asks, "Is it physical?" I find the question typical of a man, especially a sober sensualist. "It's the power of her personality", I say and

continue with her teaching qualities, her mastery of the bow, her conversational voice that makes me see wheat fields in August, her artist's voice that ascends colourfully high in the range of joy and grief. I tell him about the scenes under the skylight, her neatness, her primness, her firmness, her raptness and my rapture. Her aloofness and my veneration, her immanence and my transcendence. "A woman of substance", I conclude, "as sturdy-minded as you". "What an interesting life you have there", he says, and I realise that I spoke as if I knew her intimately. "I'm a stranger to her", I say in a detached sufferer's tone, "and nothing can alter that. She deepens my sense of fatality. I've also put her in front of my philosophical problems". They have strangely come together, merged in my mind these two people of different gender and different vision. I have entered their chemistry and nothing can undo that.

9 January,

I have put her in front of my fictional problems, too. My desire to speak to her turns into a long, undelivered letter that has not found yet its way to paper. I mentally keep revising it, redistributing the commas, inserting some semicolons, aspiring to a tighter economy apt to make sense to her. Can it make sense to her the marvel of love, the windmill of memory? Both dead letters to her, unmusical dramas, silent sirens. Nevertheless, my letter flows undisturbed and lowers to seething depths and rises to freezing heights. *Nephele* is its double plus a locus of transformation. Honey Bear will read my novel. *She is dead, for my life! But Even so; My tale is told.* Or rather it is being told. Satisfactory pace, six pages a day. Love's labour is not lost.

10 January,

If I had her address I would send her a card. *Dearest Madame Delaseine*, no, not dearest, too expansive. *My dear Madame Delaseine*, the ambiguity of my, neutrally cordial or possessively affectionate. She would accept the cordiality. *Willy is*

doing fine. Your departure has had a creative effect on him. He is looking forward to showing you his work. It is cold and cloudy in this virginal valley, but evergreen, the evidential promise of nature. While at the same time my mind would compose a second message, its undelivered double. My beloved, There is a flower I like, a proud solitary flower, trillium erectum album. We will wait till April for nature to fulfil its promise.

“Please let your hair grow, mummy”, Willy tells me as he is looking at my old pictures. “I want you to look as before. You were very beautiful before”. How can I explain to Willy that even if I let my hair grow I would not be as before? And my beloved how was she before?

I climb three flights of clouds and wake up out of breath. My eiderdown is on the floor. I have perspired and I am cold. I lie waiting, waiting for what? No more music sessions under the skylight. My life is remembrance.

11 January,

Such a quaint feeling the other day talking to him about her, “the part of you I do not know”, he said. Fleshing her out in an insubstantial present, blowing light into it, the pale light I saw on her face, the piercing light of a sickly sun that made it through the clouds, the cold light of her eyes. That is why at times I thought she did not like me, that cold fire.

Honey Bear reminded me of the dormer (as if I needed a reminder) and that sent me meditating on the architecture of love. Dormers, skylights are different forms but they are both openings to the world. I could not live in a house without plenty of openings. That’s the only thing I asked from Romain when he decided to build his dream house. And that dormer in my mind where Honey Bear last possessed my body, that skylight right above my head, under which she would stand and play, are propulsive openings. Out of them I reach for the clouds.

In

bed (or standing in the dormer) Honey Bear is a predator. Is that because “it’s physical”? His question comes back to me now and makes me wonder whether I did not dismiss it prematurely. We apprehend the other through our senses. My beloved is inseparable from her form. I long for that form when anonymous passers-by bearing some vague resemblance to her bring it back to me. And I am like Honey Bear, I like to touch. Of course the tension was there before she rang the bell, but when she did ring it at 4 sharp and I suppressed, in a mixture of awe and relief, a heartfelt “I’m very happy to see you” and simply said “Good afternoon, Madame Delaseine”, under the spell of her gaze I could not sustain, her untouchable presence, disturbingly melodious, induced an erotic state of consciousness in me. And the day Vera Delaseine let her gaze linger on me throughout the piece they were playing—I am not very open to contemporary music and I shut the sound off—the state reached its highest pitch and I felt like Isolde after the potion. And I kept suppressing the heartfelt “I’m very happy to see you”, but I liberated my gaze and in the contact of our eyes I thought I saw a sign of recognition, an act of endearment, an interminable caress.

12 January,

I do not know exactly when I put on those love lenses for her. Before Mozart’s “Melancholy” I daresay, even before Beethoven’s unidentified piece. My lenses are invisible but I could no longer see without them. Thanks to them I looked above me towards the clouds, their languorous voyage in a mythic sky. I have always been fascinated by women. I found reddish-haired, sharp-profiled, husky-voiced Clavdia Chauchat most unforgettable. She was only a character in a book but overwhelmingly real in the recesses of my mind. In the pearly pantheon of *Nephele* Madame Delaseine becomes real, too. In *The Magic Mountain* Mann never unveiled Clavdia’s mystery, so how could I? My beloved’s veiled self is revealed in the magic of sound. She is stolid and sober, but her voice is

dramatic and colourful. Writing is the management of desire, of *οιστρος*, the Greek word sounds more telling to me. Vera Delaseine's composure showed me the way. There is no doubt, my beloved is a muse and a mystery, a milestone in my life and the keystone in *Nephele*. My previous note-taking was feverish but rambling. Now my thoughts have threaded their way through reality to fiction. They have become purposeful. Vera Delaseine is also *Nephele* in process. They are inseparable. They feed on each other. Naturally the hypertrophy of imagination entails an atrophy of reality. The balance of forces seems threatened but I don't care.

I have acquired a new habit. At 11.50 I walk to the mail-box. When it rains, I take the green umbrella, the one I accompanied Vera with, to her car once, under a torrential rain. I come back with Romain's mail, my thin sense of reality and Vera's thank you smile under the torrential rain. I rest for a couple of minutes in the armchair, under the skylight, conscious of two deep lines of disappointment at the corners of my mouth. I add a few lines to my mental letter: *My beloved, I could understand why you do not read novels. They are such poor substitutes for love and life. I found myself poring over La Fontaine last night trying to see what you read in him.* Dozens of plump, cherubic snow-white clouds turn the sky into a heaven of tenderness.

13 January,

Both acts have to do with hubris, the act of loving and the act of writing. So much force goes into them, that gives you an unruly freedom, that makes you impregnable. Nowhere is to be found this outrageous disdain of reality bred by a fatal image. I dreamt of Vera Delaseine last night. We were to take the same train. Our common destination had a heady wine effect on me. I looked outside the window and saw her on the platform, three minutes before departure as if she were coming for her lesson. She did not know that I was looking at her. A face among others. An image of fate. A lasting image.

I went cycling down the road with the lindens. A sweet summer waft stirred my memory as her face on the platform came back to me. She was going to embark. With me. My hands were frozen. The sky unnaturally low. A huge closed gate to heaven. *My beloved, Are you familiar with the fragrance of limes in early summer? Or is it only hearing that is developed in her?*

14 January,

They saw it on the Aegean, the ancient and modern Greeks, the laugh of the waves. I saw it on the sky, the same tearful laugh of the clouds and this evening I opened my arms for a such tearful cloud and curiously *it* consoled me. It was such a relief all that water upon my face. Days steeped in blue melancholy. Is it my period or a blue period? I crouch under the skylight sick with nostalgia and it rains here too. Parallel patches of Ionian green, of Aegean blue deepening. Weed-like, slippery sensation. A lover's appeal. *My beloved, Give me your rapt gaze again. Your cloudy gaze. Your laughing waves. I know you can stay still and listen absorbingly. Let me talk to you and I will sound like music, the wind in the willows, even in the reeds.* I can see Hans kissing Clavdia's brow. In *Nephele* it is a woman's kiss. Did Hans really leave his magic mountain? A blank. Curiously I can't remember. I will never leave this magic forest. Outside the window the winter's appeal. Hybrid nature. Sunny rain. Naked branches shining like arms. Crouching immobility in blue and green.

15 January,

Like a painter I have to draw her from memory. Then I witness an Ovidian transformation. Another picture coming into life. *My beloved, what is a memory? Is it a sensuous image that has not spent its capital of desire? "Desires", she said smiling, "one has at any age", at any respectable age. She only came here in her teaching capacity, never took off her social garment, never opened the inner door, but she said that she taught not only with what she knew but also with what she was. I*

was only a passive listener wishing to be taught by the Apollonian mistress, breeding vagrant emotions in a cloud of a sound that was to bring forth Pythonic rumbles waiting to be deciphered, to be turned into music. I suspect that for my beloved emotions should only be authorised within the space of art, they should be testimonies, but we are not here to bear witness and I did kneel where prayer has been valid. Have I embraced art because I lost my beloved, or have I found her to commit myself to art? My faculty of speech so considerably decreased in her presence, increased in her absence. And now in her definite absence, it reminds me of a cicada's song in torrid heat. *Nephele* is Vera's voice that speaks through me.

16 January,

The days feel longer, reluctant to go since I have started keeping a diary like the first days in a distant, foreign country where an exploratory sense of duty pushes you to new discoveries. This lengthening of time, this unexpected distension reveals the substance of the past. Unwritten days could only feel now like a frivolity, a sinful lightness of being and omissions become burdensome reminders of the wealth of life that goes unrecorded.

I meant it to be an inner record of my love within the confines of the self, widened by her imaginary presence, magnified, mystified, enriched by powerful illusions, ensnared by deceitful illuminations.

17 January,

I had an appointment with the dentist this afternoon. As I was combing my hair in front of the mirror, it occurred to me that it was going to be my first visit since last April, when I bumped into her at his surgery. I suddenly shrank from the appointment and my apprehension had a touch of a schoolgirl's misgivings before a date. I reached the place twenty minutes earlier, and just as I expected, Vera Delaseine stood in front of the door, in the quaint immateriality of memory,

looking towards me without looking at me, a hectic raptness over her face. A few dangling seconds, just what I needed to master the baffling beatings of my heart and speak to her but without a word Vera Delaseine decisively opened the door and disappeared into the next room. I was tempted to wait for her at the entrance hall but I reasoned with myself and entered the waiting room. We never mentioned to each other that silent meeting. I could not stay and wait for my appointment today. Vera's overpowering presence suspended my reason, but her paralysing absence made everything seem absurd. I drove outside the town, down the road with the poplars, into a part of the woods I did not know. I took a new path. Bluish dapples hung over my head. It occurred to me that I may not see Vera Delaseine again. Her wrinkled eyes and ringed hands, her frail figure and generous breasts. That my letter may come to a tearful full stop. That Vera Delaseine might become a memory. The woods were empty. Desolation spread over my mind like a mournful veil. *My beloved, What is a memory? Is it the besieging sense of void that accompanies a lingering image?*

18 January,

Slight slackening of pace. I dropped to five pages. Not that I think less about her, it is just this sickening, sinking feeling that obstructs me. A sky of lead. A life of lead. As my eyes become bleary, my winter's tale turns bleak. Yet various moods and measures dominate my words. I resolve to say more, all. Our truth lies in fiction (our freedom in diction, our drives in affliction). Not that it is unalterable there. But at least it *is*. At least some may know me. As a voice. Does Honey Bear know me? I hardly knew her. Her platinum mystery. *My beloved, Tell me, have you ever known anyone?* Our time has run out. "How time flies", she told Willy at the end of a lesson. She seemed genuinely astonished. The cliché took a witty overtone in her small mouth. Memories are the dregs of time. Drinking to the dregs. I keep forgetting that I am forty. Does the heart as a recorder of emotions have an age? Does it become blunt over the years? I do not mind aging now. It

brings me closer to her. It seems to me natural. Conscious of her age she was. Liked to joke about it. "She's coming next week, unless she has smallpox", Willy reported. I was not quick enough to get the joke. "Which is rather unlikely at my age", he added, successfully imitating her mocking tone in her nimble understatement. Her taste for understatement. With all those emotions at the tip of her fingers, along her vocal cords. At the tip of my pen. Down my throat. The distance she took. The technicality she put. The right chord.

21 January,

"Let's go to Montreux for the weekend", I suggested. Romain looked surprised at such an unexpected initiative. We went. Steadily cloudy skies. Dozens of blue and golden lakes in them. No spells of rain. Spellbound I walked.

"You could call your teacher", Romain said to Willy.

"We don't have Madame Delaseine's phone number", I said.

What was I there for? Music-bound I walked, her voice drifting in my beclouded brain.

*Ach, den Blick kannst du nicht sehen,
Der zu dir glühend eilt,
Und die Seufzer verwehen
In dem Raume, der uns teilt.*

Why did I go to Montreux? To diminish the distance? To court the law of probability? To woo coincidence?

*Will denn nichts mehr zu dir dringen,
Nichts der Liebe Bote sein?*

She was nowhere to be seen. But my sense of her imminent appearance made me forget the whole weekend that Vera Delaseine was a memory. Then back to the

hard reality of recollection. *My beloved, How do you handle memories? Do you wear gloves, do you use forceps?* It can only be done gently, in the nude. What is love but an emergency?

“I think that you need some help”, Romain told me tonight. It was my turn to be surprised. “You’re always elsewhere. Like a crank you live in a world of your own”. “I’m sometimes unhappy”, I said, “but unhappiness isn’t a mental disease”. He then said that I was a werewolf. A werewolf, a werewolf. The word echoed in my mind like a child’s song. Once again I had to consider the rift between us. I used to view it as a sad development but now I am accustomed to it.

22 January,

I need to talk today, I call Honey Bear. “I’m alone right now”, he says and sounds high-spirited, “but it has to be quick”. I am not truly prepared for it. Willy is in his room. “I’m not alone. It has to be silent”, I say and go down to the basement and into the gym room and lock the door. I can see him walking to his office door to lock it, just as he used to. I am trying to peer into his eyes behind his glasses. He is going to take them off and come to me naked. Their bareness is just another screen. It is quick but not exactly silent. I am rather slow to emerge. “Are you still there?”, he asks. “I’m feasting on your invisible, untouchable presence, my haptic lover”, I answer. He does not tell me as he used to, *Lay your sleeping head my love, Human on my faithless arm*. He loved this verse. He always mistook it for Frost, Auden I would correct him. I suddenly find it useless to talk. I go out in the garden. A plane is flying westward leaving the trail of a cloud behind.

23 January,

Strange, strange these people we love but cannot contact, cannot join, cannot touch without the cover of a myth.

24 January,

A sense of uselessness. Time does not fly. It does not even flow. I am stranded in the middle of nowhere. A womb-like cloud crowns the old oak. I make some tea, although it is not tea-time. It was tea-time. It is tea-time in the miracle play of memory. She knew the Bible well. That is what I discovered in that prolonged teaching session, when we had two aromatic cups of Lady Grey together. I do not know why she stayed. It must have been Willy's beseeching tone. The right chord. Talked about Callas's voice. Admired it, although she did not find it perfect.

"I thought you were a perfectionist", I said.

"It's always intriguing", she said smiling, "to be told how what you say strikes other people and what sort of sense it makes for them". I wish I had enlightened her on that matter.

She came up with a host of past voices I had never heard of, half or totally forgotten, citing names, giving explanations, making comments. She bent towards me, the cup of Lady Grey in her hand, to hear what Willy, who was sitting across the sofa, was saying. That was the closest she ever got to me. If I had turned my head, her face would have touched mine. Is it physical, Honey Bear? I sit here where she sat on the sofa, with an aromatic cup of Lady Grey in my hand, *my beloved*, I say, my head, a rainbow upon her shoulder, her ringed hands, rain fingers in mine, *my beloved*, I repeat, a faint phantasy.

25 January,

A white night in "Cirrus". Life turned into magic. A midwinter night's dream. I do not know what power was at work last night. The force of love and the force of fiction became totally indistinguishable at night. The magician's emotion. Carrying on the tip of the fingers the unbearable heaviness of being. Exhausted after the performance. *My beloved, Why don't you read novels? I am writing you one.*

I could read it to you when the trilliums are in bloom. At midday, in an open air café. Next to you I will no longer shrink from people.

“Nephele stood in the middle of the grey-draped room. There was nothing inviting in the cold immobility of her gaze but its fiery fixity. It fettered Helle to her. Like a full moon her face shimmered against the silvery curtains. Her lips were parted as if by a whisper. Imperceptibly she glided through the distance that separated them. Nephele did not step back, did not bend forward. Helle’s proximity blurred her vision. Bluish shadows licked Helle’s moony face. Nephele did not open her mouth, did not close her eyes, when the woman’s fervid lips brushed hers. They withdrew almost instantly but maintained their troubling proximity. Nephele’s tepid lips quivered.”

26 January,

I embraced the effigy of love and pressed her bare breasts upon my bereaved bosom and nestled in her naked neck. And when she drew me to the wooden armchair, I knelt at her feet and snuggled in her lap. *Nephele* gave me this happiness. It brought my beloved to me in the intimacy she denied. Completing the novel is the only task I can accomplish for her, although she does not need anything from me.

27 January,

Back to the canal. Back to the house. The garden door open. Did not dare enter. Walked all the way. Glaring headlights upon my lustreless brain. Came back very late. Went straight to the computer. Romain woke up.

“You lead a disorderly life.”

“I’d like to stay alone.”

“Why did you mask your document?”

“Have you been investigating?”

“You forgot to take out your floppy disk.”

"It's just a novel."

"A novel?" he said in disbelief, "it ended in the nineteenth century."

"Yes", I said, meaning nothing.

The text disappears. Out of the cauldron of creation thousands of colourful stars cave in.

28 January,

"We should go away for a couple of weeks next month. You look tired and Willy would like that." Romain says. 'Where?' I ask faintly sensing danger. "Senegal", he says, or "a place, any place, under a clear sky." I mean to sound composed. "I can't go, Romain," I say. "Why?" he asks irritably. "Madame Delaseine may try to contact us. She'd like to see Willy." "Did she fix a meeting?" "No", I say, "but I'm sure she will." "Well, it seems to me highly unlikely", he says thoughtfully. "Why?" I ask. "Tempus fugit", he explains. Apart from his church Latin, this is his favourite phrase. Still I linger on its syllabic symmetry, reluctant to move on.

29 January,

Nox jungit equos. Another favourite phrase. Clouds like the white wings of Cupido, trees like the black wings of Somnus. Forms are more poignant at night, under the shadowy weight of their mystery. Looking at the black and white tiles I wonder what death is like. The supreme measure. The thought gives a terrible turn to my imaginary intimacy with her. It makes death seem natural, simple, ineluctable, possible. Who was that falling woman through an assembly of cottony clouds? Her body lying unscathed. Dead...

10 February,

No more walking. I sleep instead. But cloudless nights wake me up. They are too long to slip by unnoticed.

21 February,

No reading these days. Words get in touch with my eyes but make no sense. I sit and wait, still, in wet afternoons, the patter of rain the only music in my ears lulling my melancholy. Her indifference hits me.

2 March,

No question of keeping up this diary. I fear the beetle-like image it sends back to me. I am no longer a traveller upon a sea of clouds. The novel, the diary, the barometer of each other.

7 March,

My beloved, I still have the amorous, daughterly tone when I speak to you, as if it did not sound tactless, irrelevant, irreverent.

15 March,

My beloved.

30 March,

Romain is at a business lunch. Willy is invited by a friend. I have just come back from the mail-box. No news, no words. A phrase here and there, between lunch and dinner, dusk and dawn. Words filled the void. What will happen now that they have thinned out? I still have it in me, the glimmer of love, the glitter of literature, but their liquid light no longer seems to be held in communicating vessels. I feel like a rain-dripping tree after the rain has stopped, the cloud has gone. Love is a cloud-bearing state, though. How can people live in dry countries, under cloudless skies?

There is a buried doe in the garden. Romain took care of it the other day.

“Haven’t you really seen the corpse? Just in the middle of the alley, next to the mahonias. Half-eaten or decomposed. The garden’s become a cemetery”. He

looked surprised. I have called her Pleida, the departed doe.

What will happen to her phantasmal shadow in me? Woman under skylight. In pearly, bluish shades. Bonnard held it all his long life, his nude in the bath, in mottled shades, immovable in the middle of his brow, a third eye, like Werther's. *Ich trete ans Fenster, meine beste! Und seh', und sehe noch durch die stürmenden, vorüberfliehenden Wolken einzelne Sterne des ewigen Himmels.* There may be stars tonight. Over Pleida's burial ground. *My beloved, You lent your voice to infamous passions. I wept for joy on your interpretation of Medea. Tell me, what happens to the soundless, the formless, the inarticulate?*

She sings. I look at my unfinished manuscript, my marred momentum and my thoughts sink in ominous clouds. She sings the wisdom of the three gypsies.

*Hielt der Zweite die Pfeif im Mund,
blickte nach seinem Rauche,
froh als ob er vom Erden rund,
nichts zum Glücke brauche!*

The ash tray is stained with buff butts. In my mouth the taste of bitter rust. She did not smoke. The taste of her mouth I did not know. The state of her mind either. Curiously withdrawn at times. The nebulous woman under my skylight.

What will happen to it now that there are no words to sound it out? It may drift skyward, may float like a cloud. I have lost her twice. The dimming vision of my three eyes. I peer at the narrowing passage life seems to be and I can see nothing. My impaired vision that has tumbled down the fated straits, into the fabled Hellespont, is raised up to the cloudy sky still seeking for the numinous Nephele of the seventh heaven.