

# Stories Imagined and Real



## Conversation in the Metro

This is one of Colette's many writings about the performing arts. For several years she made her living as a mime and actor. An amusing part of this "conversation" is that the listener only hears one side of the dialogue. The Oberkampf metro station is located on the Right Bank of Paris in the 11th Arrondissement, and was then in a district populated by workers and artisans. This story was first published in the newspaper *Le Matin* on April 30, 1914.

They've just run into one another on a train. They are both young, made-up, poor, pretty, all skin and bones. They have the self-assurance that comes less from innate impudence than from the habit of living in public since they were born: first in the streets, then on stage in variety shows. One speaks very loudly, too loudly. I can hardly hear the responses of the other, whose voice is hoarse and weak.

"Me? In the new show, I'm playing a chauffeur, a misuse of taxpayers' funds, and an iris. What about you?"

"—"

"Oh, I see. Something like a gas lamp in the distance. Practically nothing, in other words. What really bugs me is the hairstyles for the extras these past few years. They say it's because of those Russian ballets."

"—"

"I mean that before, for the extras, it was usually wigs, or shepherdess hats, or a fall of hair; but now, it's these monuments they stick on our heads, or these things with spangles and fake jewels, or imitation fur hats, and helmets worse than firemen wear. The migraines they give me! And I'm not the only one. Not to mention the heat. . . ."

"—?"

"Yeah, they're cooking us with all that heat where I am, and the concierge, who sells drinks, she doesn't let a thing get past her that you don't buy from her. Not everybody is a star who can treat themselves to water with mint syrup at four sous a glass. We all wanted to buy stuff from outside, but the old bitch said she'd stop any 'disguised packages' from getting through, that's what she called them. Me, I drink when I get home to my estate, y'know?"

"—?"

"Yeah, we worked it out so it's cheaper. Hundred forty francs a year, for a room with a toilet and sink, that's not bad, though

you would think at that price it wouldn't rain in your room. So the guy who wrote the Christmas show, who came by once, you know, like a tourist, he says, 'You live in a historic home, my children, a relic of the old Montmartre, a true wonder!' A wonder like that, he wouldn't pay three francs to put in his play. Long story short, I'm all alone in the wonder. Alice—she's in the hospital."

"—?"

"Luckily, no, it's not contagious. That's funny, you know! She was six months pregnant, but she kept working. You remember, she was playing a naked woman in the orgy? When she started to show a little, she figured they would *show* her politely to the door, which is only fair, but it turned out the director had a heart and he kept her in the show. He changed her role in the orgy, they moved her farther back and put her in a big red veil from the waist down, and since she's got a nice bust, she could've continued like that till her delivery, if she hadn't fallen, and fallen bad, on our stairs, see. She's in the hospital. Doesn't look good."

"—?"

"Oh, yeah, you should go, that would be really nice of you. If you'd seen her, the poor kid, when they took her away . . . and the dog, that she'd found a month before, who didn't know a soul but her, he clamped so tight to her when they carried her downstairs—the thing was crying like a human being. I never saw him again, that dog. You getting off at the next one?"

"—?"

"No, I'm going as far as Oberkampf. Yeah, sure, drop by sometime. And about the kid, if you want to see her again, don't wait too long."

## Divine

This short story was first published in a book where twenty-six authors each wrote a story about a character whose name started with one letter of the alphabet, from A to Z. A different artist illustrated each one of the texts. The book is entitled *D'Ariane à Zoé, Alphabet gallant et sentimental agrémenté de vers, de proses et de lithographies par 26 écrivains et autant d'artistes*, published by Librairie de France in 1930. The Venus of Cyrene is a classic sculpture not found until 1912 in Libya, a Roman copy of a Hellenistic statue thought to be by Praxiteles. It depicts Venus rising from the sea.

"Stop, already!" yells Divine, without opening the door. "You trying to break my doorbell? Who's ringing, anyway?"

A voice that seems to pierce through miles of fog, a voice husky with the dawn, sweet and male like those pastoral voices in the meadows that wake the sleepy cows, pearly with dew, that voice answers: "It's the milk."

"Of course it's the milk! Just leave it at the corner of the doorway. I'll get it in a second!"

She adjusts, before opening the door, the belt of her pajamas, and wiggles her feet into her slippers. Then she changes her mind and walks into the kitchen to turn down the burners with their flames of blue sepals just touching the bottom of a small copper laundry pot full of water; she opens a transom that lets in the musty air of a courtyard, its odor of sprouted potatoes, coffee, and a cellar without wine; she takes in from the windowsill a stick of butter hardened by the cold.

When she comes back to open the door a crack, "The Milk" is still there. He has beautiful, curly blond hair, cut in a crest in the Parisian style; bright eyes; and purplish hands.

"Good morning, Mademoiselle Divine."

"Never in hurry, huh? What are you waiting for, standing here on my doormat?"

"A ticket to the Sunday matinee."

"Again?"

The eyes of "The Milk" wander over Divine, searching downwards for a flash of leg, higher up for a rising orb.

"Beat it! We'll see about that. C'mon, beat it! And your customers, you don't care a lick whether they get any breakfast?"

"I've got one of the two new trucks," answers "The Milk." "That way, I make good time. I'm bringing you six eggs laid just today, to thank you for the ticket from the other Sunday. You can gulp them right down."

"Now that's a rare treat," says Divine without irony.

"The Milk," showing off, shrugs his shoulders: "Hey, what is that to us? Seven hundred white chickens, without a mark on them! If my parents listened to me, we'd double the number. So, Mademoiselle Divine, the Sunday matinee?"

"We'll see. Get going, now, the water for my coffee is boiling over!"

When the door closes, Divine listens to the steps of "The Milk" on the stairs, and the bottles clanking like cowbells. As if reassured, she takes off her pajamas and for five minutes she "runs through her exercise drills," following the peremptory advice of her friends.

At the Casino de Paris, Divine practices the profession of being a naked woman. The beauty of her body so strictly adheres to the norms of antiquity that it seems at first glance ordinary. As for her head, it resembles a brown-haired boy's, with a graceful and empty youth about it, and as for the rest, it's like the Venus of Cyrene. That is to say that on an ample chest, her two conical breasts tremble neither when Divine laughs nor when she runs, and that from the nape of her neck to the small of her back the concave and living imprint of a peaceful snake nonchalantly undulates. Her long thighs, her knees with their oval caps, rest on a solid ankle, not very high, that has for its base a wide foot with toes that unfold gracefully. Under the skin of her calf—downy, rough, and cold like peaches grown in the wind—a powerful muscle, discreet, vaguely traces the shape of a heart.

Village blood nourishes Divine's depilated flesh. A uniform amber tone covers her, a bit greenish under the stage lights. When her cousin Betty, a performer with the Folies Bergère, came to see her in her village in a five-horsepower car and they bathed together in the stream, these two young women did not waste time in idle conversation.

"What are you going to do, Ludivine?"

"Next month I'm starting at the factory of United Jams."

"You start earning right off the bat?"

"Yeah. Fifteen francs to start out."

“What if I could find you something in Paris where you’d earn forty francs right off the bat?”

“Then I’d go to Paris.”

“Your mother wouldn’t say anything against it?”

“Not if it were written in a contract.”

On the stage of the Casino, every evening at nine-thirty, a giant clam made out of painted cardboard yawns and reveals Divine, naked, a pearl lying among pearls. She stands up, opens her arms, and slowly inhales. Lipstick that is almost black thickens the arc of her motionless mouth and her eyes receive without blinking, wide open like the eyes of a blind man, a terrible punishment of light.

Later she reappears, naked, carried on the ravishing arms of a naked man. We see her again upside down with the violet coloring of a bottle of wine turned upside down, in the throes of The Orgy.

Walking from the stage to the dressing room that she shares with Sylvana the blond and Maryse the mulatto, Divine receives homages. In three months, she has achieved a small portion of fame. Along the way she never opens her crepon kimono even a bit, and she only extends one finger to her admirers.

“I don’t like those guys with the warm hands,” she confides to Sylvana.

Proud and secretive, Divine says no more. And all that she locks in her heart—rural wisdom, the poetry of the exile, respect for the fruits of the earth—it all turns toward the young man from the pastures with the icy hands, joyful as dawn, patient, sweet, scented like a blond heifer—toward “The Milk.”

## The Woman Who Sings

This is a rare short story where Colette takes on the persona of a male narrator. Or does she? Colette mentions in passing the devastating fire in the crowded charity bazaar on the rue Jean-Goujon that took place on May 4, 1897. There was a famous scramble where everyone tried to rush out to avoid succumbing to the fire. One hundred and seventeen died, many of them from the Paris elite. This story originally appeared in Colette's book *Les Vrilles de la vigne* in a later edition that she published in 1934.

The woman who was about to sing headed for the piano, and right away I turned ferocious, feeling the concentrated and motionless revolt of a prisoner. While she cleaved her way through a sea of skirts belonging to seated women, her dress stuck to her knees like muddy ripples, and I wished that she would faint, die, or even simultaneously rip her four garters. She still had several meters to cross: thirty seconds, room enough for a cataclysm. But she strode serenely over a few feet in patent leather, frayed the lace of a flounce, muttered "Excuse me," greeted us, and smiled, her hand already on the dark Brazilian rosewood of the Pleyel with its reflections like the Seine at night. I began to feel pain.

I noticed, across the dancing fog that forms a halo around the chandeliers when the evening dims, the curved back of my heavy-set friend Maugis, his bent arm defending his full glass against stray elbows. I realized I hated him for having managed to get to the buffet table, while I wasted away, trapped, seated sideways on the gilded caning of a fragile chair.

With insolent coldness, I stared fixedly at the lady who was about to sing, and I held in a sneer of diabolical joy, finding her even uglier than I had hoped.

Caparisoned in metallic white satin, she held her head high, topped with a helmet of unnatural, violently blond hair. All the arrogance of women who are too short blazed in her hard eyes, where there was much blue and not enough black. Her protruding cheekbones, her nose restless and open, her chin solid and ready to squeal, all that created the impression of a pug-nosed snout. Before she could say a word I wanted to call out to that face, "Here, sooeey!"

And her mouth! Her mouth! With disdain I focused my glance on her uneven lips, carved by an errant penknife. I calculated the vast opening they would soon unveil, the quality of the

sounds that cavern would moo. What a trapdoor she had! My ears burned in anticipation, and I clamped my jaws shut.

The woman who was about to sing planted herself immodestly, directly facing the audience, straightened her posture in her stiff corset, making the apples of her bust jut out. She breathed deeply, coughed, and cleared her throat in the disgusting manner of great performers.

In the anxious silence where the perfumed armatures of fans creaked like minuscule punkas, the piano began its prelude. And suddenly a sharp note, a vibrant cry pierced right to my brain, bristled the skin of my spine: the woman was singing. After this first cry, which sprang from the very depths of her chest, came the languor of a phrase, nuanced by the most velvet of mezzos, the fullest, the most tangible I'd ever heard. Transfixed, I lifted my glance toward the woman who was singing. She had definitely grown taller than a mere instant ago. With her wide eyes open and blind, she was contemplating something invisible that her entire body was hurtling toward, out of her armor of white satin. The blue of her eyes had darkened and her hair, dyed or not, adorned her with a firm flame, rising straight up. Her large and generous mouth opened and I saw burning notes fly from it, some like golden bubbles, others like pure round roses. Trills shone like a rustling stream, like a lithe snake; slow vocalizations caressed me, a cool hand lingering. Unforgettable voice! Fascinated, I began to contemplate that large mouth, its lips painted and rolling over wide teeth, that golden door of sound, jewel case of a thousand gems. Pink blood colored her Kalmuk cheekbones, her shoulders filled with a quick breath, her throat thrust forward in a gesture of offering. At the foot of that bust held in passionate immobility, two expressive hands twisted their naked fingers. Only her eyes, almost black, soared over us, blind and serene.

"Love!" sang the voice. And I saw that mouth, misshapen, moist, and crimson, close on the word while sketching the image of a kiss. A desire so sudden and insane grabbed me that my eyelids moistened with nervous tears. The marvelous voice trembled, as if choked by a tide of blood, and the thick lashes of the woman who was singing fluttered, just once. I wanted to drink that voice from its source, to feel it spring from the polished stones of her teeth, to dam its flow just for one minute with my own lips, to hear it, see it leap, a free torrent, and bloom into a long harmonious sheet that I would crack with a caress. To be the lover of that

woman transfigured by her voice—and of that voice! Sequestered for me—only for me!—that voice more moving than the most secret caress, and that woman’s second face, her maddening and demure mask of a nymph drunk on dreams!

Just when I was succumbing to these delights, the woman who was singing fell silent. My cry—like that of a man falling—was lost in a polite tumult of applause, in the “wows” that mean *bravo* in the language of salons. The woman who sang leaned forward to thank them, unfurling a smile between her and us, a flutter of her eyelids that separated her from the world. She took the pianist’s arm and attempted to arrive at the doorway; her train of trampled, bruised satin hindered her steps. Gods! was I going to lose her? Already a corner of her white armor was all I could see. I threw myself forward savagely, with a devastating fury like certain “survivors” of the bazaar at the rue Jean-Goujon.

Finally, finally, I reached her, when she was next to the buffet table, fortunate isle, laden with fruits and flowers, scintillating with crystal and spangling wines.

She held out her hand, and my trembling hands rushed to offer her a full champagne flute. But she bluntly refused, reaching for a bottle of Bordeaux: “Thank you, monsieur, but champagne doesn’t agree with me, especially just after I sing. It goes right to my legs. Especially since these kind ladies and gentlemen insist on my singing *The Life and Love of a Woman*, can you imagine?” And her large mouth—an ogre’s cave where a magic bird nests—puckered against fine crystal which she could have smashed to pieces with a smile.

I didn’t feel even a drop of sadness, and no anger. All I remembered was: she was going to sing again. I waited, respectfully, for her to empty another glass of the Bordeaux, for her to wipe, with a gesture like scouring a pot, the wings of her nostrils, the deplorable corners of her lips, to air out her damp armpits, to flatten out her stomach with a sharp slap, and to steady on her forehead the false front of her peroxide hair.

I waited, resigned, battered, but full of hope, for the miracle of her voice to give her back to me.

## Jealousy

Colette published this exploration of jealousy around the time she separated from her lover Missy, the Marquise de Belbeuf (1862–1945). It was first printed on February 22, 1912, in *Le Matin*, a newspaper edited by her soon-to-be second husband, Henri de Jouvenel (1876–1935).

I'm chewing on a sprig of bitter herb that makes my saliva taste of boxwood and turpentine. The wind dries the water of the waves from my arms, from my cheek; and having twisted, all along the footpath, stems of broom that brushed my hands, my fingers remain acrid and green. I am carrying in me, on me, the aroma and the taste, the salt and bitterness of my jealousy.

I fled from you, along the path of gorse that cards my dress. I've reached a dry shelter that you don't know, a sonorous lookout of rock. A swirling wind inhabits it and seems always to be imprisoned here. Below me, amid long, tapering reefs, the sea, ashen and green like the gray leaves of olive trees, torments itself and fizzes with the violence of a dammed-up stream.

It's a beautiful spot for a refuge. In the distance I can see our house, clothed in dark and varnished ivy. You're back there. You read, your forehead between your two fists, like a schoolboy. Or maybe you're sleeping, because sleep surprises you capriciously in the middle of the day and throws you down, no matter where you are, for brief and deep rests.

I watch out for you carefully, from the heights of my jagged tower. If you open the door, the flash of the glass will warn me—but won't I first see your greyhound whirling on the grass, quick and white as a pigeon?

You won't come. I have time to calm myself. For a long time I chew the sprig of bitter herb that has exactly the corrosive and acrid taste of my pain—I'm jealous.

God keep me from looking for help from you! The reassuring word, the persuasive caress, and the promises. My poor lover, beyond reproach, you would lavish them on me in vain. You still believe, oh simple one, that fidelity begets trust. You don't know. You can't conceive of jealousy without hope—the hope of reconquering a belonging that is vied for or surreptitiously stolen from you. It is so innocent, your masculine jealousy, and so active! It expends its energy in the stern attentions of a wronged property

owner, so it almost takes on the austere pleasure of work. You imagine, you see obstinately behind me the shadow of a man—that's all. I envy you.

Alone, you stand alone before me, on the ravaged field of the sea. Alone, between me and the choppy waves, the color of absinthe. Your first love, and your earliest memory, the last face you kissed before mine, I forget them, I shove them aside carelessly, impatiently. Alone, it's alone that I contemplate you here, that I beg you here—and I curse you alone.

If you could understand . . . I'm jealous. It happened to me. I don't know when, I don't know how. I remember one day I came home—you were standing there behind me—and it was as if I'd discovered you, as I quivered with a strange fury that combined the astonishment of possessing you, the sudden foreknowledge that I'd lose you, and the humiliation of belonging to you. It seemed to me that, up till then, I had almost not noticed you.

At that moment, I saw you suddenly—you blocked out all of the window and the sea speckled with islands, I couldn't see anything but you—your shape, slightly inclined, of a man who is going to spring forward and run, your amorous way of inhaling a flower that has too strong an aroma. That's where I started to measure, with a very quiet muttering, the place you held in my life. That's where I wanted, for the first time, to turn you out . . . too late.

Too late! Your tyranny was already in full bloom, scandalously safe. Already you used me royally, sure of finding in me something inexhaustible. Already you were blooming in me like a beautiful province that nourishes all its fruits: I was, depending on the hour, depending on your whim, the mouth, silent and hot; or a fraternal arm; better—I was a friendly and wise voice and advisor. I was everything to you, without effort, without fault, and I didn't even suspect it.

It was that knowledge that made me miserly and jealous. Not that I would want to take back what I give: I couldn't. But I come here to protest and to lament, in the name of an imaginary equity: what I am to you, it is inevitable that you will be that for another. Does she exist? It hardly matters. But I foresee, I prepare, for another, a lover, a love, whose magnificence only I know—a love created in my own image.

I pine to think that one day, you, you whom I fulfill, you will become my equal, when I'm no longer close to you. You will

become my equal to dismay another woman with love, or rather to live by her side as I live here, proud, wasted, inexhaustible . . . I'm jealous. When I create you as you will be, you dazzle me. It's as if I took off, to better appraise them, the ornaments I'm wearing: when they shine on you I cry to see them so precious, but I no longer dare to extend my empty hands. May my jewels, dangling from you, at least protect you from my jealousy, which knows neither time nor space!

I distance myself, without the strength to do you harm. I come here, through a path of thorns, I climb as far as this dungeon of rocks where the wind and my worry struggle with a shackled wing between them. There is nothing more in me, below or above me, than the whipped sea, crumbling stone, breathless clouds. This storm of air and water, this jumble of reclining rocks, that is how my inner disorder has been distributed, to your glory—oh, you, who just appeared on the threshold of our house, so small in the distance, clear, tapered, minuscule, and terrifying.

## By the Bay of Somme

The Bay of Somme is located in the province of Picardy in Northern France, along the English Channel, with its dramatic tides. It's a popular location for bird-watching and fishing. Hourdel, Le Crotoy, and Saint-Valery are towns in this region. Crécy Forest is one of the largest woods in France. First published in *Les Vrilles de la vigne* in 1908.

This mild landscape, flat and blond—could it be less simple than I thought? There are odd customs here: they fish from vehicles, they hunt in boats. “Bye! The fishing boat’s about to go, I hope I’ll bring down a nice snipe to roast tonight.” Then the hunter leaves, packed into his yellow oilskin, his rifle slung over his shoulder. “Kids, come look! The carts are coming back! Their nets are hanging from the poles just bursting with sand dabs!” Strange, for those who don’t know that game ventures over the bay and crosses it, from Hourdel to Le Crotoy, from Le Crotoy to Saint-Valery; strange, for someone who hasn’t clambered into one of those carts with huge wheels that take the fishermen along twenty-five kilometers of beaches, to meet the sea.

Stunning weather. We left the children to bake together on the beach. Some roast on the dry sand, others simmer in the saucepans of warm pools. A young mother under a striped beach umbrella deliciously forgets her two kids. Her cheeks warm as she gets drunk on a mystery novel, clothed like her in unbleached holland.

“Mama! Mama, oh, mama!”

Her pudgy little boy, patient and stubborn, waits, shovel in hand, his cheeks dusted with sand like a cake.

“Mama, mama!”

Finally the eyes of the reader rise, sunstruck, and she lets out a weary little bark: “What?”

“Mama, Jeannine drowned.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Jeannine drowned,” repeats the well-behaved, pudgy little boy, stubbornly.

The book goes flying, the folding chair collapses.

“What are you saying, you little snip? Your sister drowned?”

“Uh huh. She was there just a minute ago, and now she’s not there anymore. So I think she drowned.”

The young mother whirls around like a seagull and is about to scream when she notices the “drowned girl” at the bottom of a huge bowl of sand, where she is digging like a fox-terrier.

“Jojo! Aren’t you ashamed to make up stories like that to keep me from reading? No cream puff for you at snack time!”

The well-behaved, pudgy boy opens wide his candid eyes.

“But I didn’t do it to bug you, Mama! Jeannine wasn’t there anymore, so I thought she’d drowned.”

“Lord! He believed it! And that’s your only reaction?”

Dismayed, her hands knitted together, she contemplates her pudgy little son from across the abyss that separates a civilized grown-up from a savage child.

My little bulldog has lost his mind. On the trail of sandpipers and ringed plover, he stops, then runs away like mad, loses his breath, dives into the rushes, gets stuck, swims, and then comes back empty-handed but delirious, shaking back and forth an imaginary fleece. And I understand that an obsession has grabbed hold of him and that he now actually believes he’s a cocker spaniel on a hunt.

The Nun and the Redfoot Knight gossip with the Harlequin. The Nun inclines her head, then runs, flirtatiously, wanting to be followed, making little cries. The Redfoot Knight, with boots of orange leather, whistles cynically, while the Harlequin, shifty and thin, spies on them.

O, depraved reader, who was hoping for a good old-fashioned, raunchy anecdote, undeceive yourself: I’m just recounting to you the revels of three lovely birds in the swamp.

They have charming names, these birds of the sea and wetlands. Names redolent of *commedia dell’arte*, even Roman heroics—like the sandpiper called the *Chevalier Combattant*, “The Fighting Knight,” this warrior of a bygone age, who sports a plastron and bristly ruff, with horns of feathers on his forehead. A vulnerable plastron, harmless horns, but the male of the species is true to his name, since the Fighting Knights kill each other under the peaceful eye of their females, an indifferent harem sitting on the sand, crouched in a ball.

In a little café by the port, fishermen wait for the tide to come in before leaving, the tide that’s already slyly tickling keels of the boats that are stuck in the sand at an angle, at the end of the quai. They’re the type of fisherman you see everywhere, with clothes

made of fabric like tarpaulins, blue knit sweaters, and pug-nosed clogs. The old ones have a closely trimmed beard and a short pipe. They're the current model, popularized by prints and snapshots.

They drink coffee with an easy laugh, and with their bright eyes devoid of thought, they charm us—the landlubbers. One of them is as striking as an actor, neither young nor old, with a woolly fleece of hair and beard, paler than his weather-beaten skin, and the yellowy eyes and pupils of a dreamy nanny goat that almost never blinks.

The tide has risen, the boats dance on the bay at the ends of their moorings, their bellies clink against one other. One by one the fishermen leave, shaking the paw of the handsome guy with the golden eyes: "See yah, Canada." In the end, Canada is left alone in the café, standing, his forehead pressed to the window, his glass of brandy in hand. What's he waiting for? I'm impatient and decide to speak to him:

"Are they going a long way out?"

With a slow gesture, his deep glance indicates the high seas: "Out there. Lots of shrimp right now. Good catch of sand dabs and mackerel and sole. A little of everything."

"So you're not going fishing today?"

The golden pupils turn toward me, slightly haughty:

"Heck, no, lady, I'm no fisherman. I'm here with a photographer who shoots postcards. I'm what they call 'the local color.'"

## II

SUNBATHING—"Poucette, you're gonna boil your blood! Come here this instant!" Thus apostrophized from the patio above it, the female bulldog lifts only her monstrous, bronze-colored, Japanese muzzle. Her mouth, split all the way to her nape, half opens in a little pant, short and sustained, a mouth blooming with a curled tongue, pink as a begonia. The rest of her body trails behind her, flattened like a dead frog. She hasn't moved an inch, she's not going to move, she's cooking.

A summer mist bathes the Bay of Somme, filled with a neap tide that barely palpitates, flat as a lake. Retreating behind this moist and blue fog, Saint-Quentin Point seems to flutter and float, diaphanous as a mirage. A beautiful day to live without thinking, wearing only a bathing costume!

My bare foot amorously teases the hot stone of the patio, and I'm entertained by Poucette's stubbornness. She continues her sun cure with a tortured smile. "C'mon, get yourself over here, you dirty mutt!" and I walk down the stairway whose bottom steps sink into the sand that covers them, sand more transient than the waves, this living sand that walks, undulates, forms hollows, flies, and creates on the beach, on a windy day, entire hills that it levels the very next day.

The beach dazzles me and reflects back in my face, under my straw cloche hat with the brim folded down to my shoulders, a rising heat, the sudden breath of an opened oven. Instinctively I screen my cheeks with my spread hands, my head turned aside as if in front of a fireplace burning too ardently. My big toes rummage through the sand to seek under these blond and burning ashes, the salty coolness, the moisture of the last tide.

The noon bell rings at Le Crotoy, and my short shadow gathers at my feet, wearing a mushroom in its hair.

The sweetness of feeling defenseless, and, under the weight of an implacably beautiful day, of hesitating, tottering for a minute, my calves alive with a thousand pins and needles, my back tingling under my blue sweater, and then to slide onto the sand, next to the dog wagging its tongue!

Lying on my stomach, a shroud of sand half covers me. If I budge, a fine stream of powder pours out of the hollow behind my knees, tickles the soles of my feet. With my chin resting on my crossed arms, the edge of my cloche hat made of rushes forms the border of what I can see, and at my leisure I can digress, making myself a dark soul in the shade of a straw hut. Under my nose three lazy sandhoppers jump up, with bodies of transparent gray agate. The heat, the heat . . . Distant buzz of the rising waves or is it the blood in my ears? Delicious and fleeting death, where my thoughts dilate, rise, tremble, and evaporate with the azure vapor that vibrates above the dunes.

AT LOW TIDE—Children and more children. Kids, brats, urchins, pipsqueaks, small fry . . . Slang isn't enough, they're too much! By accident, returning to my little villa, isolated and far away, I fall into that little frog pond, into that warm bowl that the sea fills and exits every day.

Red jerseys, blue jerseys, rolled-up pants, sandals—straw cloche hats, berets, and lace bonnets—buckets, pails, folding

chairs, cabins . . . All that, which should be charming, makes me melancholy. First of all, because they're too much! And because of one pretty little girl, round as an apple, chubby-cheeked and golden with sturdy legs, how many Parisian kids become the victims of a faith that's both maternal and routine: "The seaside is so good for the children!" There they are, half-naked, pitiful in their nervous skinniness, bulging knees, thighs like crickets, bellies protruding. Their delicate skin has darkened in one month to a cigar brown. That's it. That's enough. Their parents think they have robust complexions, but they're only dyed. They've kept the rings under their eyes, their hollow cheeks. The corrosive water skins their pitiful calves and riles their sleep every night with fever, and the slightest accident lets loose the laughter or easy tears of nerve-wracked children dipped in dishwater coffee.

Haphazardly they splash around, the boys and girls, they moisten the sand of a "fort," they channel the water of a salty puddle. Two little "lobsters" in red jerseys work side by side, brother and sister with the same burnt blond hair, maybe seven- or eight-year-old twins. Both of them, under a knit hat with a pompom, have the same blue eyes, the same cap of hair cut just above the eyebrows. But no eye would mistake one for the other, and even though they're the same, they don't resemble one another.

I couldn't tell you what makes the little girl a little girl. Her legs awkwardly and femininely a bit knock-kneed? Something, in those thighs just barely showing, flares more softly, and with an involuntary grace? No, it's definitely her gestures that give her away. A little naked arm, imperious, comments on and draws in the air all that she's saying. Her fist turns with a supple flick, a certain mobility in her fingers and shoulders, a flirtatious way of planting her fist at the notch of her future waistline.

For one moment she lets her pail and bucket fall to the ground, she arranges something or other on her head—her arms raised, her back bowed, and her nape inclined, she gracefully anticipates the moment when she'll knot, in that same standing and arched position, the net of her veil in front of the mirror in a bachelor flat.

CRECY FOREST—The first time I inhale this forest, my heart fills. A former self rises, it quivers with a sad cheerfulness, points my ears, with my nostrils wide open to drink in the scents.

The wind dies down under this tent of trees, where the air barely sways, heavy, musky. A soft wave of fragrance guides my

steps toward wild strawberries, round as pearls, which ripen here in secret, blacken, tremble, and fall, dissolve slowly in a sweet, raspberried decay whose aroma mingles with a greenish honeysuckle, sticky with honey, and with a round of white mushrooms. They were born this very night, and their heads lift the crackling carpet of leaves and twigs. They are the fragile and matt white of new gloves, pearly, moist as a lamb's nose: their fragrance evokes fresh truffles and tuberoses.

Under cover of this centenary cluster of trees, the somber green darkness knows nothing of sun and birds. The imperious shadows of the oaks and ash trees banish from the ground any trace of grass, flowers, moss, even insects. An echo follows us, unsettling, which mimics the rhythm of our footsteps. We miss ring doves, tit birds, the russet bounding of a squirrel, or the luminous little ass of a rabbit. Here the forest, humanity's enemy, flattens them all.

Right next to my cheek, glued to the trunk of the elm my back is propped against, a handsome and crepuscular butterfly is sleeping. I know its name: *lycaena*. Shut tight, its wings spread in a leaf shape, it's waiting for its moment. Tonight, when the sun sets, tomorrow, in the soaking dawn, it will open its heavy wings, mottled in buff, gray, and black. It will bloom like a pirouetting dancer, showing its two other, shorter wings, bursting with the red of ripe cherries, striated with black velvet—its garish undersides, petticoats worn for parties and the night, which a neuter cloak, during the day, conceals.