

Noé

Deborah Marie Poe

*Je plongerai ma tête amoureuse d'ivresse
Dans ce noir océan où l'autre est enfermé;
Et mon esprit subtil que le roulis caresse
Saura vous retrouver, ô féconde paresse!
Infinis bercements du loisir embaumé*

*I will plunge my head, in love with intoxication,
into this black ocean where the other is enclosed;
and my refined spirit, caressed by the swell,
will surely find you once more, O fertile indolence!
Infinite rockings of perfumed leisure!*

Charles Baudelaire, from "La Chevelure"

In the afternoon we drink paroquets—Cassis with mint syrup—color like the bird. Parakeet. We put our heads on the pillow early, too early for our age, and Edwige's black hair is spread across the pillow. I can't sleep. It's difficult now. Difficult to negotiate without. At least there is Edwige, warm, near me. And our baby inside her.

We're trailing our cure.

Edwige's eyeliner is a Simone de Beauvoir slated coal, already scarred in *demi*-sleep, underneath her eyes. She forgot to wash her face before sleeping. Her eyes are fluttering, and I think she already dreams. She twitches like an addict before she slips, and she is beautiful.

By common law, we are married. I can touch her as I please. Sometimes I imagine someone else, and she knows this too. It is part of our love. Open. Or together floating. Her underwear is white, there is a butterfly on the front. I touch her. It is okay that she does not respond. For now it might be better.

I am an object out of place, even with Edwige. What I mean is that I am not rubbed of the same cloth. This sense of homelessness comes over me often, like a fogged-in lighthouse. The fogged-in sways of Brittany, my Bretagne. Somehow not mine.

I joked with Edwige yesterday. I told her she should write a poem where she expresses what I am trying to say. That is, writing about the things she feels, not what I feel. She asked me if I feel stupid, because I sound stupid. Don't you remember how I told you I loved you, Edwige. She turned to me, took the hair away from her eyes, and nodded. Then she tackled me.

Tonight I turn on my back, to read Baudelaire. I know swans don't really sing when they die. When Edwige sleeps, it's like she sings. Her breath is semi-full of smoke coming from her lungs—the alcohol faint, a sweet tempting for kissing her in—the smell of toothpaste. Half sighs tell me she already dreams, or something.

Our parents cannot penetrate. They are far away from this. Unaware of our mean-world secrets, because they hold their own. When Edwige confronted her father some years ago with the memory of his hand moving down where it shouldn't go, he wrote a letter from somewhere in the south. In the letter he apologized for her memory, because he had no recollection of his own. Edwige's mother, living in the states, was neurotic and could not be relied upon. Edwige left home when she was 17 and almost never spoke of them. We met on streets they never understood. It is unimportant how unaware of me they are. What is theirs is theirs, and that does not include me. What is ours is ours.

With my parents, I only wanted to work on my paintings. As if one can decide so early to embrace a career in science or business. I always found this ironic because my father—as an Irish art history professor in Brittany does neither. This is one of the problems with France in general. To choose. But my father pushed hard.

The radio is on softly, another minor revolution. In France it has been occurring since the eighteenth century. Tonight it has taken place near Bastille. It is nothing new. I don't need to listen to know this. I have been there, have seen it. I have seen it in fact 10 or more times. I am a white sign who doesn't get blamed by the majority. The police have taken me also, but not because I'm Arab or from the suburbs. Rather mostly based on the way I look. My metal and leather bracelets, my buzzed hair, my leather jacket. Skeleton tattoos and black, punk, balding boots. My pierced nose and general appearance don't sit well with the *jeune flic*, the young cops.

The riots, usually, look the same. Metal bicycle racks careen through shop windows, window after window from ceiling to ground—thousands of francs in merchandise all previously so elegantly displayed—are destroyed. Young men, my age, set telephone booths on fire, and small police cars stuff rascals in hatchbacks.

When we learned of our pregnancy, I was confused. Edwige had said something after the first month, but I hadn't taken it seriously. We thought we had been secure in our timing. Sometimes, certainly, we got carried away. Perhaps we forgot.

I am behind Edwige, and I turn from my book. I feel her belly. For the moment my hopes move beyond fucked up families. This might be the hope of first trimesters. We didn't drink much really tonight. And besides, we stopped other things. We made the decision together. And we decided that was final.

But I can touch her, and I do. From behind her, I touch her belly, my woman *brûlante et suant les poisons*—burning and oozing out poisons. I reach around her and remember leaning her back against the wall. The calendar, with a picture of Bretagne—still dated from a year ago but still accurate for the month—hangs on this wall.

There are times when I needle her, push her so far she becomes infuriated. She will not play the piano for me, she will not be coaxed, and so I take her against the wall and scream to her to play for me. Edwige will grab my jacket's collar and pull me against her, and she will force her mouth to mine, and she will scream of me to promise, to promise. And then everything is alright. Because we let each other be.

Tonight, the rise of her multiplies inside me, I touch her eyes lightly and the lashes flutter against my hand, then down and farther beneath the line of her only clothing, and I slip my hand in moistness like a warm heart of snow. She is awake, and the streetlights interrupt and stutter between the blinds' sides. Edwige. Noé, you make me. Make me the warm blue sky of the desert.

The exchanges on the streets ended a few weeks before. Jerome and I met about a month before. It is hard to extract yourself, and I was concerned for Jerome. I told Edwige that night it would be late or all night, but I promised her. Still Jerome and I did our dance. Jerome asked me to play questions when we sat in his living room, the table covered with leftovers—pizza boxes, leftover bottles of rum, ashtrays—weeks of gathering. I knew this game questions, it amused him. Like truth or truth, he loved the lack of dare. He asked me who I thought of besides Edwige. I told him it was him and laughed. I was slow and, that night, I went light on everything. Jerome though was on edge, I could feel it. I couldn't keep up with the void he needed to fill. I zoned out, fell



asleep on the sofa, listened to a jazz groove I didn't recognize but one that took me to my paragraphs—how I think when I'm doing the stuff.

When the light broke through the blinds, I heard a siren on the street, opened my eyes, and turned. On the couch nearby, leaned back against, Jerome's face was a pasty grey, echoing the sickness of the CD skipping. My stomach dove. Jerome and I had been friends for some years. I had revived him in the past too. I tried it then, but it was pointless. I laid my ear next to his face and listened. When I gave him mouth to mouth I heard a gurgling in his lungs. The stench was so strong, I thought I'd pass out. When SAMU, the 24-hour ambulance, came, they explained he had drowned from a spewed beer he couldn't handle—OD was the official cause of death. I walked the long way home, contaminated with dark thoughts. I bit the inside of my mouth that morning until I felt blood on the tongue.

I was afraid to return to Edwige. She didn't say a word about being gone all night, or the leftover look in my eye. But she bit her lip before delivering news of her own.

Noé, I'm pregnant, I'm pregnant, Noé. As she told me, she pounded my chest—my jacket softened her blows. I could almost taste metal as I swallowed. We have to quit, Edwige. Edwige, I pulled her into me, we have to quit.

When I told her of Jerome later, she took it as a bad omen, sobbing for some hours after. We decided together that morning that there would never be another time. Not again. We told our friends we had the flu, but they knew better. We called Lucian and asked that he lock us in the house. Some of our friends lived on the streets, but they no longer asked for a place to crash. Word moved through the streets. They passed us food through the windows daily and were good. They moved like animals through the night.

We suffered in relative silence. In the night, especially, during those weeks it was a mixture of dominance, distance, and desperation. At first she slept beside me in bed, and I struggled to fall asleep, her so violently kicking in the twilight of sleep. I was aching an ache that seeped from muscle into bone, and I craved something beyond her. She infuriated me, and I was cold. Restless, I had a constant erection. Between the seams, I touched my jeans imagining Edwige on one floor and me on another. One night, after screaming over Chinese takeout, Edwige began to shiver and goose bumps erupted across her arms. I wound my arms around her, took my scarf and wrapped it around her throat, asked if she still trusted me, and plunged myself in and out of her. I was surprised when she had an orgasm. I didn't, and rubbed myself compulsively, to bruising. We were without crutches, cold turkey, without pharmacological help. The bathroom next to the bedroom, our only bathroom, reeked, and for 7 days it was a fight to get there first. I knew the only thing she thought of was the heroin, and sometimes I hated her. Skin ruptured to scabs.

After almost a month, it has become easier. We take our meals in relative silence and call our friends. Like last night, we are able to go out.

A morning then of particular closeness, I don't want to leave Edwige sitting on the bed. She knows I must leave, but it's the way she looks at me. Her black hair is partially over one eye as she unconsciously rubs her stomach from which I can almost see a paunch. The suffering has brought us closer in these weeks. I must go to work. We need money. The French government will only provide so much. That morning, it's the

way she looks at me, asking if I'm ready. I feel closer, and I ask her if she trusts me. I trust you, she says. She rips me into fifteen pieces as I take her.

She is looking down at the linoleum floor and watching me as I take my black leather jacket out. She always finds it ridiculous I wear this so long into summer. You're going to get that filthy, she said. I tell her she's right and throw it on the bed. I'm edgy. It's been a long few weeks. She sits up, situates herself on the edge of the bed. Noé, let's do it just one more time.

I am uncomfortable, but I can taste it like iron at the edge of me. Are you sure? I ask. I know she's picked up what I've been thinking. It sounds better than the monotonous work of laying concrete. One more time cannot hurt the baby. Heroin is better than anything ...better than any story, I say. Laughing, my stomach feels raw.

I work on laying concrete this morning. Some of the guys I know from dealings at the plaza of Saint Michelle. No one mentions Jerome though I know some of them knew him, and I am quiet. I shift in my clothes. It is guilt, in part, I know. I should be stronger. On the other hand, I am excited. When Edwige and I are together on heroin, we don't need to speak. When we do, sometimes I read Baudelaire, not only in French. In English the translations are in paragraphs.

While I lay concrete near Bastille and look at the destruction from the recent riots, I am thinking of touching Edwige and how the baby will add to us.

In my mind, there are Suicidal Tendencies, Black Flag, and Dead Kennedys, because this is the only way I can move through the mundane. With my music and the rhythm in my mind.

It is filthy work, but it is work. Time drags longer than I can imagine, and there are no breaks. I breathe, envisioning a cigarette between my lips or touching Edwige. One of the other workers reminds me of a dream in stone. It is not only for the concrete that is in his hair, which I always manage to avoid. It is the way he is so stoic. Unlike me, he expresses nothing on his face—not joy, not disdain. It is maybe complete presence.

We all wear clothes that by the second hour are filthy. In the early morning half-light, I look at where our forms will go. Wing walls for this bridge. Over the Seine, the ridge of concrete will grow bigger. I know I will never look at it the same. I will think of what my government has done for me, how they supplied some cash to our life and habits—our contributions to this nation. And the infrastructure will grow bigger.

There is something about this work: the side by side 2x4s, the rebar, the way they are pinned together, the metal casting. However tall the wall will be. How long, how wide, how high. And the oil to oil it down. The cement process holds something. When it pours, it pours like rock and sand and silt. It looks like an unnatural version of my mother's northern stew. This morning I almost miss her.

There is the big vibrator, because this mix must be vibrated. And then shimmied with wood side by side to get the extra debris out. And then we can work on it. Shafting. Or trawling. We smooth it out as a finished product. The marks on cement from trawling look like windshield wiper marks left over from a hard rain.

Because it is summer, there is no break. I must start from one end of the bridge and complete the process. If it takes four hours to do it, it takes four hours. That day I had no break. It was a good eight hours of monotonous work. I consider leaving early but remind myself we need cash. And when I finish, I am relieved. The metro never felt so good. *Metro boulot dodo*. Metro, work, sleep. The vicious cycle.

On the way home, I see couples walking along *Allée des Cygnes*, and I feel heavy. These jobs won't do. I wish Edwige and I were in Berlin, or Sydney, or New York. Some wild place. What I need is to hear Edwige this instant. To touch her, to love her. Edwige with her beautiful eyes who I declared my love to one day at the Fontaine des Innocents two years ago. When I think about it, it must have been the most romantic thing in my life. Cars move around the low light outside like insects.

When I get home, I unlock the door, and the loud click is a welcome noise. Edwige, I call her. The building is gravely silent, unusually so. The neighbor's children must be outside, usually they make plenty of racket by this time. I come up the metal stairs, and smell trash. God damn pit in the old quarter of the twentieth arrondissement. What Edwige and I would really like is a place near the Fontaine des Innocents. Or Saint Michelle.

When I get to the door, I unlock the door, it clicks and then sticks, and I walk in. Edwige, I call. I scan the room, and things are out of place. My stomach feels bottomed in concrete. My paintings in our living room have been ripped off walls, and I am afraid. Edwige, I call out to her again. There are dirty dishes in the kitchen, silverware on the floor, the coffee pot is on—burnt to evaporation. Edwige, I call again, as I head to the bedroom. She is not on the bed where I left her; she is laying on the floor. I smell vinegar. I wrap what's left of the piece on plastic back in the balloon, tuck it next to the spoon.

I can tell by her color she has been gone for hours. I lay down on the floor beside her, nudging the needle further away. I picture myself leaving work early for the day, or Edwige calling the hospital rather than ripping paper from the walls. I lay down on the floor beside her, put my head in her hair turn towards her, I reach down to her stomach, and it is very cold. My right eye begins to twitch.

The three neighbor children run up the stairs so loudly I can hear them scrambling in one after another tumbling into their door while their father screams them to be silent. I close my eyes, and I don't move yet, because I fear my legs or stomach won't hold me. I feel like a skeleton and begin to sob.

As the sun begins to go down, the light between the blinds is striated. The gold on our one plant is the same gold that falls on her face, and I get up to go to the phone and call SAMU, misdialing 15 twice. Two fucking numbers. 1 5 1 5.

Before they arrive, I already suspect strychnine. I don't take what's left out of the house. I will answer their questions. Besides that, I am quiet. I feel like they can hear my eye twitching. What they see though, I think, is a strange calm. I am remembering the man at work like a stone. I have put Edwige back in bed, put a sweater on her, covered her with a blanket.

When they arrive, they confirm my suspicion. I don't care how they look at me when they tell me it was bad shit, but I am glad right now for long sleeves. As I look at one of them in the eye instead of looking down, the thought comes to me: deaths like these don't make the news.

When they leave, I pick up the phone. Jerome's roommate Lucian answers. I am alarmingly unagitated, and it freaks me.

Lucian, I say quietly, Edwige scored some shit today, do you know where she got it? Lucian has learned nothing from Jerome's death. Of course he knows. Lucian says yes, he saw Edwige earlier with Sebastian for a while. Then he saw her go home. I ask

him what time, and I don't need to know anything else. Sebastian makes sense. We never went to him unless we had no one else, and we had cut off other connections over the last few months or so.

I haven't cleaned the house, and I haven't eaten for days. Edwige's family took the body, after I found her father's number and delivered their news. I was not told of the funeral, and they never knew she was pregnant. I'm not hungry. In fact, I feel nothing as I search the apartment. Everything out of the closet is thrown behind me over the bed, where I found Edwige. Or on the bed where I haven't slept since.

I pretend it is one of my art projects, one of my paintings. I take the 2x4 and move to the breakfast table. Outside the small window that does not open in the kitchen, I see a plastic bag floating down slowly through the courtyard. It is so grey today, and the courtyard almost dark. This is the saddest thing I've seen in my entire life. I hammer rusty, nine-inch nails into my 2x4. I stand it up on its edge and hold it with my palm. I take the blanket from the bed, and I wrap my project.

When the sun sets, I put on my leather bracelets, with metal studs. I put on my black leather jacket. My Suicidal Tendencies painting on the jacket is coming off. I put on my jeans, my black steel-toed boots.

In the streets the hustlers pass me, they know better than to ask. The smell of the cafés makes me near nauseous. Sausage and the red wine drunks. It does not take me long to find him. Sebastian is speaking with a couple, for a short time. I follow him.

It is two years ago that they began to call me Noé, it was for all the animals that followed me. I had a rat, two dogs, and a snake. It would have been more appropriate if I had had two of every animal. Still, I liked the name, and it stuck.

It's Paris, no one sees the ridiculousness of this blanket. It could be a body for all the streets care. A prostitute turns and grins. When Sebastian approaches an alley, I call to him. Sebastian, I grin, hello. I can tell by the way his eyes slit then widen, he believes I want more. Let's walk down here, I say. He looks warily at me, sensing something like a fear of the cops.

I club his body and remember Edwige. I told her I had special power. I look around and throw the bat and blanket into the dumpster. Sebastian's long hair is matted, strewn across the gravel.

Rappelez-vous, l'object que nous vîmes, mon âme, Ce beau matin d'été si doux: Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme Sur un lit semé de cailloux. Remember the object that we saw, love of my soul, that fine sweet summer morning: at the turn of a path a vile carcass on a bed strewn with pebbles.

Night like a paragraph. Like last sentences of a story. Like a deep-black *cheveux*. Her face. Edwige, long fingers stretch across ivory and black.

I stir my parouquet, the green syrup settling in.