

# Mauve Desert

**NICOLE BROSSARD**

Translated by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood



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Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood

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- Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood and Nicole Brossard

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Reading is going toward something that is about to be, and  
no one yet knows what it will be....

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ITALO CALVINO

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# Mauve Desert

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Laure Angstelle

*A*

ARROYO PRESS

The desert is indescribable. Reality rushes into it, rapid light. The gaze melts. Yet this morning, very young, I was already crying over humanity. With every new year I could see it dissolving in hope and in violence. Very young, I would take my mother's Meteor and drive into the desert. There I spent entire days, nights, dawns. Driving fast and then slowly, spinning out the light in its mauve and small lines which like veins mapped a great tree of life in my eyes.

I was wide awake in the questioning but inside me was a desire which free of obstacles frightened me like a certitude. Then would come the pink, the rust and the grey among the stones, the mauve and the light of dawn. In the distance, the flashing wings of a tourist helicopter.

Very young I had no future like the shack on the corner which one day was set on fire by some guy who 'came from far away,' said my mother who had served them drinks. Only one of them was armed she had sworn to me. Only one among them. All the others were blond. My mother always talked about men as if they had seen the day in a book. She would say no more and go back to her television set. I could see her profile and the reflection of the little silver comb she always wore in her hair and to which I attributed magical powers. Her apron was yellow with little flowers. I never saw her wearing a dress.

I was moving forward in life, wild-eyed with arrogance. I was fifteen. This was a delight like the power of dying or of driving into the night with circles under my eyes, absolutely delirious space edging the gaze.

I was well-acquainted with the desert and the roads running through it. Lorna, this friend of my mother's, had introduced me to erosion, to all the ghosts living in the stone and the dust. She had described landscapes, some familiar, some absolutely incompatible with the vegetation and barren soil of my childhood. Lorna was inventing. I knew she was because even I knew how to distinguish between a Western diamondback and a rattlesnake, between a troglodyte and a mourning turtledove. Lorna was inventing. Sometimes she seemed to be barking, so rough and unthinkable were her words. Lorna had not known childhood, only young girls after school whom she would ostentatiously arrange to meet at noon. The girls loved kissing her on the mouth. She loved girls who let themselves be kissed on the mouth.

The first time I saw Lorna I found her beautiful and said the word 'bitch.' I was five years old. At supper my mother was smiling at her. They would look at each other and when they spoke their voices were full of intonations. I obstinately observed their mouths. Whenever they pronounced words starting with *m*, their lips would disappear for a moment then, swollen, reanimate with incredible speed. Lorna said she liked moly and salmon mousse. I spilled my glass of milk and the tablecloth changed into America with Florida seeping under the saltshaker. My mother mopped up America. My mother always pretended not to notice when things were dirtied.

I often took to the road. Long before I got my driver's license. At high noon, at dusk, even at night I would leave with my mother yelling sharp words at me which would get lost in the parking lot dust. I always headed for the desert because very young I wanted to know why in books they forget to mention the desert. I knew my mother would be alone like a woman can be but I was fleeing the magical reflection of the comb in her hair, seeking the burning reflections of the blinding sun, seeking the night in the dazzled eyes of hares, a ray of life. 'Let me confront aridity/and I would floor the accelerator, wild with the damned energy of my fifteen years. Some day I would reach the right age and time as necessary as a birth date to get life over with. Some day I would be fast so fast, sharp so sharp, some day, faced with the necessity of dawn, I would have forgotten the civilization of men who came to the desert to watch their equations explode like a humanity. I was driving fast, alone like a character cut out of history. Saying' so many times I have sunk into the future.'

At night there was the desert, the shining eyes of antelope jack rabbits, *senita* flowers that bloom only in the night. Lying under the Meteor's headlights was the body of a humanity that did not know Arizona. Humanity was fragile because it did not suspect Arizona's existence. So fragile. I was fifteen and hungered for everything to be as in my body's fragility, that impatient tolerance making the body necessary. I was an expert driver, wild-eyed in mid-night, capable of going forward in the dark. I knew all that like a despair capable of setting me free of everything. Eternity was a shadow cast in music, fever of the brain making it topple over into the tracings of highways. Humanity was fragile, gigantic hope suspended over cities. Everything was fragile, I knew it, I had always known it. At fifteen I pretended I had forgotten mediocrity. Like my mother, I pretended that nothing was dirtied.

Shadows on the road devour hope. There are no shadows at night, at noon, there is only certitude traversing reality. But reality is a little trap, little shadow grave welcoming desire. Reality is a little passion fire that pretexts. I was fifteen and with every ounce of my strength I was leaning into my thoughts to make them slant reality toward the light.

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*And now to park the car in front of the Red Arrow Motel Heat, the Bar. The bar's entire surface resembles a television image: elbows everywhere leaning like shadows and humanity trash repeating themselves. I have a beer and nobody notices I exist.*

# CHAPTER ONE

---

Longman puts his briefcase on the bed. He has been hot, he loosens his tie. He heads for the bathroom. He thinks about the explosion, he thinks about it and it's not enough. Something. He knows some lovely little footpaths, delicately shaded areas. He hesitates in front of the mirror. He washes his hands. He thinks about the explosion, he thinks about it and nothing happens in his head. He removes his jacket, throws it on the bed. A ballpoint pen falls to the floor. He does not bend down. He lights a cigarette. He fingers the brim of his felt hat which he almost never takes off. He thinks about the explosion. For the pleasure of sounds he recites a few sentences in Sanskrit, the same ones which earlier delighted his colleagues. He paces the floor. His cigarette smoke follows him about like a spectral presence. Longman knows the magic value of formulas. He thinks about the explosion. The slightest error could have disastrous consequences. Longman stretches out with white visions then the orange ones then the ground beneath his feet turns to jade – I / am / become / Death - now we are all sons of bitches. Longman rests his head on the equation.

I had the power over my mother to take her car from her at the most unexpected moment. My mother had the unsuspected power to arouse in me a terrible solitude which, when I saw her in such closeness to Lorna, devastated me for then there was between them just enough silence for the thought of their commingled flesh to infiltrate me. One night unexpectedly in the obscurity of their room came upon my mother, her shoulders and the nape of her neck braced like an existence toward Lorna's nakedness.

I'm driving. Howling, rock-jaw'd, mouth full of lyrics I sing to the same beat as the woman's voice exploding the radio. A voice of doom interrupts the song. I howl. I lean on the announcer interrupting the music until the earthquake ebbs into the distance, tidal wave, resorbs into the Pacific blue. The desert is civilization. I don't like leaving my mother at night. I fear for her. Mothers are as fragile as civilization. They must not be forgotten in front of their television sets. Mothers are spaces. I love driving fast in my mother's Meteor. I love the road, the vanishing horizon, feeling dawn's fresh emptiness. I never panic in the desert. In the middle of the night or even in the midst of a sandstorm when the windshield slowly covers up, I know how to be isolated from everything, concrete and unreal like a character confined to the steering wheel of an old Meteor. In the dark of the dust I know how to exist. I listen to the dreadful sound, the roar of wind and sand against the car's metal body. I yield totally to blindness. I lightly press two fingers against each eyelid and look inside the intimate *species*, at times going by in the back of my mind. I see seconds, small silvery scars, moving along like creatures. I recognize the trace of creatures who have passed through there where seconds form pyramids, spirals among the remains, beautiful sandstone chevrons. Only once words I was unable to read. And the form soon faded as if it were a partial transcription of light deep in the mind.

I was driving avidly. Choosing the night the desert to thus expose myself to the violence of the moment which propels consciousness. I was fifteen and before me space, space far off tapering now down like a civilization in reverse, city lost in the trembling air. In my mother's Meteor I was an exemplary solitude with, at the tip of my toes, a brake to avoid all disasters and to remind me of the insignificance of despair amid snakes and cacti in the bluest night of all ravings.

I am my mother's laughter when I pale in the face of humanity's distress. Never did my mother cry

I never saw her cry. My mother was unable to imagine that solitude could be like an exactness of being. She trembled when faced with humanity's noises but no solitude really reached her. In the worst moments of her existence my mother would conclude: 'This is a man, we need a bed; this is a woman, we need a room.' My mother was as obstinate as a man struggling with the desert. She did not like men but she defended the desert like a feeling leaguering her with men. She was a woman without expression and this frightened me.

Every time I think of my mother I see girls in swimsuits lying by the Motel pool. This motel purchased in 1950, my mother renovated it and spent fifteen years paying it off with polite gesture and discipline and energy repeated in the heat of Tucson afternoons. But before Lorna's arrival, everything is vague. Vague and noisy like the to-and-fro of travelers, of suppliers, of the chambermaid.

Lorna's presence will always be linked in my memory with my first years of school and especially with learning to read and write. I liked to read but don't remember reading otherwise than in Lorna's presence. She would watch me, static watcher, monitoring every blink of my eyelids, spying any flutter of sensation, the slightest sign upon my face liable to betray an emotion. I would follow her little game with a discrete eye but when I happened to look up, it was my turn to follow upon her lips the strange alphabet which seemed to constitute a dream in her gaze. I would then invariably ask the question: 'What are we eating?' as if this could keep her at bay or protect the intimate nature of what she had experienced while reading.

One day when looking for some blank paper to draw on I saw, at the far end of the kitchen, Lorna and my mother sitting on the same chair. My mother was on Lorna's lap, who was holding her by the waist with her right arm. With her left hand Lorna was scribbling. Their legs were all entwined and my mother's apron was folded over Lorna's thigh. I asked Lorna what she was writing. She hesitated then spun out some sentence to the effect that she was unable to read the marks her hand had drawn. I was about to exclaim, to say that... it made no sense when I noticed the ease of Lorna's hand in my mother's hair.

Yet that night. Very young I learned to love the fire from the sky, torrential lightning branched over the city like thinking flowing in the mind. On dry storm nights I would become tremor and detonations, total discharge. Then surrender to all the illuminations, those fissures which like so many wounds lined my virtual body, linking me to the vastness. And so the body melts like a glimmer of light in the abstract of words. Eyes, existence give in before that which comes forth inside with certitude. The desert drinks everything in. Furor, solitude.

In the desert there is the pursuit of breaks clouds sometimes make. Sometimes they are like little lead pellets the sun shoots toward the horizon to signify tomorrow's coming future. I am well acquainted with lead, copper, cartridges and all weapons. I know weapons. Any desert girl learns at a very young age how to hold a weapon and to drive a car. Any young girl learns that what glitters under the sun can also hurt or excite feeling so utterly that shadow itself turns to crimson.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

Longman is not asleep. He is thinking about the explosion. He has stretched out fully dressed. His shoes are dusty. He is thinking about art, the art of the energy spectrum. He gets up and walks to the dresser. In the second drawer the small magazine in flesh and purplish tones lies in its place under the white, orange and jade colored folders. He takes the magazine, lies down again after rearranging the pillow. He turns the pages, watching and waiting for something to happen. 'Now we are all sons of bitches/The explosion will occur. In the silence of the room the man eyes the genitals, their coloration. He does not see the faces. The faces, shadow of shadows, make white circles around the genitals. The circles make a noise like an explosion. He shuts his eyes. Dust falls slowly like that winter in Princeton, the eve of his twentieth birthday. Longman is unable to sleep. Neither can his neighbors in the next room. To the right he hears him pacing, to the left he hears him shuffling his math sheets. Longman knows *beautiful* blue lakes, the *great petrified* forest with its amethyst trees everlasting. He dreams of a past. It is snowing in the everlasting. The spectres are splendors. Now that earth and dead and tongue became thy shall not. Longman hears the noise of the explosion. Heart leaps, body leaps. A final shiver. He strokes his felt hat. He lights a cigarette.

Here in the desert, fear is precise. Never an obstacle. Fear is real, is nothing like anguish. It is necessary as a day of work well done. It is localized, familiar and inspires no fantasies. Here there are only wind, thorns, snakes, wolf-spiders, beasts, skeletons: the soils very nature.

At the Motel though, fear is diffuse, televised like a rape, a murder, a fit of insanity. It torments the mind's gullible side, obstructs dreams, bruises the soul's trouble.

I was fifteen and I'm talking about fear, for fear, one thinks about it only after the fact. Precise fear is beautiful. Perhaps it is possible after all to fantasize fear like a blind spot producing a craving for eternity, like a hollow imaginary moment leaving in the pit of the stomach a powerful sensation, renewed effect of ardor.

I remember that when Lorna arrived my mother often spoke of fear. A livid fear, she said, a sloping fear. Lorna seemed to like this fear. When talking, when laughing, when walking, in everything, Lorna fanned my mother's fear, a fear that made her restless and transformed her voice. Whenever Lorna launched her muscled body into the pool, my mother would cry out: 'Lor, please' but Lorna only dripped all the more wetly, enjoying my mother's uneasy fear with her eyes. Then her arms would sweep me away with her and my mother once again, my mother would lean over the water, her face worried. I could see the shape of her body. The shape of her head was above the water like a comet. My mother was a giant and then I would surface.

Some day perhaps I will tell my life story. Some day when I am no longer fifteen with a head whose spirit has a sense of wonder. Its saying it all when I talk about the night and the desert for in so doing I am stepping through the immediate legend of my life on the horizon. I have abused the stars and the screens of life, I have opened up roads of sand, I have quenched my thirst and my instinct like so many words in view of the magical horizon, alone, maneuvering insanely so as to respond to the energy traversing me like a necessity, an avalanche of being. I was fifteen and I knew how to designate people and objects. I knew that a hint of threat meant only kilometers more to go in the night. I pressed on the accelerator and clash, sweat, fear, oh how fragile the body when it's so hot, so

dark, so pale, immense silence.

Night! Yes, I have seen dawn. Often. But at night, dawn was already beaming spectral in the spectacle of swirling sand. I was driving. I was howling in life, at night on the highway. By day it was the pool, girls in swimsuits and my mother at the end of the line busy with Motel business or in front of the television set, busy with fear. Lorna would approach her and my mother would let herself be cherished and my mother would choose her. It was daily and true, informal between them except that my gaze would come and suspend their gestures thus compelling their bodies to strange rituals to compensate for the lost equilibrium or the ripening trajectory of loving arms.

Some nights the dryness was dark and it fascinated me to think that dark, dryness was a word just like I myself was a girl like a word in life. But I could exist without comparison. This was certain, as certain as the thirst to come when precautions are not taken before heading out and lips wrinkle, crack in the strong dry wind.

I was always certain of everything. Of faces, of the time, of the sky, of distances, of the horizon. I was certain of everything except words. The fear of words. Slow fear. Strains to say. Strains to hear. Pain in all my veins.

At the end of a May afternoon, when I had veered off the road to get a closer look at an old *saguaro* half-wounded, half-agonized silhouette, and was singing as usual - fever, fever, forever going away -, I felt fear heavy to bear. The *saguaro* swayed, real and unreal. The *saguaro*, words, and my reflexes were in slow motion and soon there was no more day, no more dawn, no more road, no more cactus, barely the instinct to think that words are nonetheless but words.

In the glove compartment, under the revolver, was a little notebook I used for keeping a record of oil changes and other details concerning the car's maintenance. A pencil from the Helljoy Garage makeshift paperclip, held the unglued pages together. So I wrote about that, I wrote *that and that again and more, that excited me, grabbed me like you cant believe to write all that with explosions on my head, little chalky trails through the canyons. I know the parchment-like epidermis of the great agonizing cacti, all of it, the burrowing animal leaving its trace.* Fear goes away, fear slopes away.

The horizon is curving. Around the great *saguaro*, the trembling atmosphere. On my way back to the Motel I run the last light filled with the desire of my mothers face and Lornas. My mother is absent. Lorna is watching a television show. Crazy gleam of light in my room and my fingers then that's it, there, yet sways, amuses me, *awaysmt*.

That same night the awareness of words circuited my feeling, wrapped round it, got it turning in the wrong sense. My impression was of a thousand detours, of grave gestures within matter. The sensation of living, the sensation of dying, writing as an alternative among images. Then reality became an IMAGE. I fell asleep at dawn, strapped in my sheets, *object* of the image.

I now know delayed-action fear. I spend hours in front of the television set. I think and come close to all that like a child skirts silence and the muffled noise of voices transmitting anxiety. I know reality. I know humanity so suddenly like a shadow in my eyes. It moves slowly, so slowly, humanity in its desires, slow snake in the desert, it hides, it sheds. It moves no more, is nothing but desert skin. But the skin is there, similar, hollow, just like life at the foot of *senitas* and *ocotillos*. Fear of the hollow skin is 'devilish' like a little fetish reality on beautiful orange and jade footpaths. Skin frightens tourists. That's skin.

That same month my mother was sad and Lorna like my mother. I harassed my mother to make her read the *little* I had written. My mistakes! I wanted her to correct it all. I would leave the composition book on the television set or on the Hoor, in plain view. At night I could hear her telling Lornastories she had read in *Timeoi* in *Contention irlobe*. At the end of the story someone would die, leave

reveal a secret, So I would turn up the television and devote body and soul to the overpowerful fear reality.

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Ever since I had written in the maintenance notebook I could truly see reality close up. Customers came from Texas, from Wisconsin, from Minnesota. A lot of old people. A few travelling salesmen once or twice some women together for whom existing seemed really well-founded. I sometimes eavesdropped on conversations at the bar. Customers talked about sports or money. Some supported their statements with numbers, others pounced on a word to turn it into a juicy sentence and provoked laughter. Shoulders shook, you offered your neighbor a cigarette, you toasted. Then boredom, broad and business all over again.

One evening I was finally able to see this Angela Parkins my mother often talked about. She must have been forty years old. She was a geometrist and came here every first Tuesday of the month. She sat at the bar and always talked with two men whom my mother said were engineers. That evening I sat at the bar hoping to overhear a conversation that would unravel the mystery my mother had created around Angela Parkins. But the detailed discussion concerned structure and perspective in words mostly unknown to me. Then Angela Parkins turned to my mother and chatted with her a bit, now using simple words that resonated inside me, tasty and colorful like some intimate thing.

The evening went on as usual until Angela Parkins raised her voice, hysterical, bordering on intoxication. Her voice got carried away, tumbled into the smoky space, Angela Parkins left the Bar before eleven and I retired at about the same time. Reality had a meaning, but which one?

The next day I informed my mother of my departure for New Mexico. I had telephoned Grazie, my cousin living in Albuquerque, and she had invited me to spend a few days.

## CHAPTER THREE

---

The man's eyes were wild and arrogant. He was raising his head then lowering it and every time the explosion in his head. There was the floor, the ceiling, the walls and the explosion. Everything was on fast forward in his body subjected to his thoughts. He was lost. The dust was there, cold reason falling out on his shoulders. He would never recover from winter, he who so loved little footpaths and dew smells. The walls of the room were, against all logic, full of his shadow. He tried concentrating on a Sanskrit poem. Too late. Already the ashes, already the blood, already the cries, tremendous mouths, stilled in the night's silence, glistened like crystals in his every neuron. So longman started drawing figures on the walls full of his shadow. Then his exhausted body slid down the wall. The long shadow faded. The explosion was perfect in jade.

I was driving slowly. It was broad daylight, hot and sweat. Total insanity to be driving like this in the high noon sun. An exhausting solitude I inflicted upon myself as if to recapture that time from before writing, before reality. I was driving and the desert was now real, dangerous, full of dagger blades and venom. I had sworn not to drink anything during the first five hours. I wanted heat and thirst whole, excessive. I wanted my body feverish, to lose nothing of its fluency, of its exuberance. I wanted it both in focus and out of the frame, overlaid on the hyperreality of blue, compelled in its every cell to acquire a taste along the reality of roads for all the ephemeral shapes crossing my gaze. I wanted no part of myth. Only what's body, sweat, thirst.

I sum up reality in the slowness of kilometers. I sum up my life in the blinding light. One day between Phoenix and the petrified forest, I had a dream, as flamboyant as a rapture, a drift in space *throat has crazy cracks horizons horrible zones of laughter, cascades that ransack the ages and the cages of eyes bewildered in the impossible beauty of the lapses and torments that burden thinking.*

I had now entered the fear of the unspeakable, in the frenzy of words involuntarily I was abdicating to silence. In the desert one gives in without ulterior motive with the pliancy of a being surrendered to space. The horizon is a mirage that orients the thirsting body.

I was driving, restless thinking, heading toward Albuquerque and Grazie. To Grazie I would talk about Angela Parkins, I would talk to her about a woman met in the night of a Tuesday. I would shiver, I would stammer. I would talk about Angela Parkins like about a dream in the petrified forest. Grazie would understand, she would say: 'Talk, go ahead and talk. Tell me all about it. Talk to me about Angela Parkins, about all her secrets yapped out in the Motel Bar, Talk to me about the woman and about Angela, their gestures, their devastating laughter, their eyes and their smiles meeting, about fear that alarms thoughts. Talk to me, volatile and flushed, be snake and slowness with beauty, be fire and rigor. Light me so that the desert may sink deep into us and the ultrasounds of our childhood be reborn. Light me because I might some day.'

Grazie was two months older than I. We were 'distant sisters,' meaning girls whose mothers had named them thus one evening when both pregnant they had seduced each other and shared something like a twenty-four hour hope. We were daughters hoped-for in the night of our mothers being lovers. I know reality. My mother had talked to me about a trip to Dante's View, had told me about a walk taken and a vantagepoint, the most striking one at Dante's View, the most gorgeous at Badwater and Artist Drive. Then she had added: 'Mélanie, nonetheless night.'

I'm driving slowly toward plain certitude. Grazie is expecting me in Albuquerque. At the junction of  and  are dozens of motorcycles, guys smoking as they look at the sky. Two girls are talking. One of them flashes me a peace and love sign while the other one, barely set back in the spatial plan, gives me a violent fuck with her finger, then with her fist. I press on the accelerator. I know reality. Fear, it doesn't matter when you accelerate; fear vanishes like a dark spot in the rearview mirror.

The road was a time warp lost in the horizons trembling air. I was fifteen and ahead of me reality help me bypass existence. And then there was freedom! Where I grew up freedom is worn heart-sick like a weapon. It can just as well serve to overcome fear and nostalgia as to make noise inside kidneys, jaws and vaginas. Where I grew up women would put freedom on their cheeks: it smelled like incense, sleek skin, medicinal, while the men got off a good shot of freedom at everything that moved.

I lost the desert. I lost the desert in the night of writing. There is always a first time, a first night that blurs passions, that confuses our sense of direction. A first time when it must be acknowledged that words can reduce reality to its smallest unit: *matter of fact*. Now *matter of fact* must bring the desert back to life and color be returned to troglodytes, to coral snakes, to rufous bobcats. The antelope jack rabbit must once again be able to quick-change the color of its flanks from tan to white and the mysterious stones walking Death Valley to leave traces of their passage in the clay. *Matter of fact* must return like a desire of the desert so that once again images can help me create a vacuum though they were tiny little suction cups lodged in my mind.

There are memories for digging into words without defiling graves. I cannot get close to any you. There is no otherness, only alternation in appearance. I need flexibility and tension. Albuquerque must not explode in my head.

Why do I think words like this, why upon entering Albuquerque a fit of laughter, the fatigue of a fit of laughter, fever upon entering reality's sudden beauty of a game?

Grazie proved tender a companion. She was completely captivated, both mocking and curious, but the tattoo on my left shoulder, traced its outline with her soft fingers, said that some day she would get a unicorn on one of her buttocks. Then we made sand witches like when we were children and I drank two liters of water. Are you alright? Yes, there's a dance tomorrow. My dress and look, you'll see, it's wonderful.' There are sentences between us. Who said that? I'm tired, tomorrow. Then we'll go there. It's great. It was beautiful. I hurt my index finger. It's like falling into a trap or into a blue word. I put a photograph near the big mirror. It's such a likeness. In the half-light a piece of wood reminded me. Oh yes! What for? We're fine here, together.'

I'm thinking of Lorna who never takes the time to breathe between sentences. Lorna is intelligible only in my mother's arms.

'Make room for me in the bed. Move over. OK, I'm turning the light on to read all night. Grazie, you know our mothers were once lovers. Now it's time to go to sleep. If you want to stay up, I you I need I yes so sleep otherwise... What! Yes, it's soft. You're taking up the whole pillow. This is my side. Grazie... just this once, it's so soft.'

Life is like a sensation on remote location. Tonight I will lie next to Grazie's desert and her incense-filled sleep.

## CHAPTER FOUR

---

Somewhere in the night of his black-out, longman recovered his senses. It was night's silence. No body was moving, neither in the room on the left, nor on the right. Longman got up with difficulty if he had been drinking all night. He leaned against the wall then leaned over and picked up his hat which lay on the floor. After all, he thought, *tomorrow* the sky will be blue. But daybreak lay shattered all over in his mind. On the walls, figures oozed and merged with the words that followed him, they followed him all around the little room. Longman who had invented the explosion like a hope for beauty knew he would be unable to survive the beauty of the equations. He would not survive his image. Longman felt fragile, full of a bitter solitude. He saw himself broken, mirror, fraction incapable of figuring out his wound. So he sank impotent into prayer. Eyelids closed, hands joined, he pleaded for a long time, insensitive to the debris falling out on his shoulders.

This morning Grazie and her mother have gone out to run some errands. Here I am, motionless in the room, watching what is going on in the street. Nothing. Only reality. Oh to take my leave! Someday I will exit reality, the scandal of it. Beauty is before reality.

Today I will take the desert road again and get back to my mother and Lorna as well as the murmurs of girls in swimsuits by the side of the pool. Reality will be real like a G-string in the jukebox glow lights, like a hired killer looking at his instructions manual. The mind is fragile, it takes many superstitions to win it over without damaging anything around it. There is no more desert. Grazie will never be fifteen.

On the way back I drove fast, fast so fast. Why linger while imagining kisses, embraces, while thinking how beautiful the light is among the *ocotillos* and *mariposas*! Motels rush by, trailers, tents, shacks, pylons, car wrecks, old tire heaps. That's the desert. I bought a case of Coke, I can't stop drinking. I'm thirsty. Reality makes me thirsty.

I was fifteen and I was watching reality encroach on beings like a tragic distortion of beauty. Humanity's trembling aura hovered in the harsh light.

Reality was rushing by, I was diving into humanity. It was a look around at trailers and snack-bars. Reality was a woman in a T-shirt, huge in her breasts, ten times as large with children imprinted on her loins, onto her thighs. Reality was rushing by skirting fate and destinies. It was a body half-buried under the hood of a car, it was a washed-out pair of jeans, of boots. It was in alternation reality the desert with long stretches in thinking. Parentheses when approaching cities. Yes, I was fascinated by reality and more precisely by its impossible dimension. Reality is only ever the possible accomplished and as such it fascinates like a disaster or offends desire which would like for everything to exist in its own dimension. I was nothing but a desiring shape in the contour of the air surrounding humanity. Reality is a becoming spaced throughout memory. There it must be taken by surprise like an essential shape.

A body was required to face the unthinkable and this body, I would produce it, omnipresent at dawn on storm nights keeping lightning away. I would filter this body of ignorance, of knowledge and of the unthinkable burdening it. This body would be a life equation tapping impossible reality itself.

I was driving, perfect on the edge of solitude. Desiring only the horizon, cacti and a little light naturally during the day.

It was cold in the desert night and everywhere heat brought beings to life, I trembled about turning reality into an episode by getting close to beings.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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Longman was under the shower. He enjoyed the water on his head. He liked water running over him. He liked that water was beyond compare on his skin like a mental torture and then his whole body would surrender. He was singing and the water was entering his mouth. Longman would have liked his body muscular. He would have liked to touch that other body, caress its powerful torso, thighs, hard buttocks. He would have felt unburdened of figures and his hunched back would have straightened up ready for the fight. Yes, wrestling body-to-body with other men would have been intoxicating. Longman imagined the muscles straining, the heart throbbing, the veins pumping, the sweat of fear which would not have been like his perspiration during the hours spent doing figures. He would have loved the action and wholly his enemies' bodies. Longman had forgotten the explosion. He had entered the body's instinct fullblooded and his whole being coursed silently through the muscles of the one he would have liked to be. Longman went to the mirror, saw his hollow cheeks and a bad days stubble. He dressed hurriedly. Outside it may have been daytime but longman did not want to think about it. The curtains were drawn and only the light from the explosion fell upon his movements. Longman did not see the large white envelope slipped under the door.

I could see Angela Parkins again just like the first and only time I had seen her, mouth uttering threats against humanity as if she had had the power to realize them. What did she see, Angela Parkins, when she looked through her theodolite? How did she tolerate heat and thirst, how did she shape her letters, her numbers? How did Angela Parkins make love when she wasn't on the brink of intoxication?

Soon I would be back home and nothing of reality would be changed. Evenings I would watch football on television. During the day I would watch girls in swimsuits, at night I would listen to the conversations in the bar. During the day my mother would be a woman, day and night, Lorna would be with my mother and I would cherish their winged presence. Sometimes I would take the Meteor. At this time my gaze would be elsewhere turned toward the unthinkable and I would be mindful of everything. I would not faint in the face of reality. I would in no way yield before the tragic aura. Some day I would know the perfect moment of exaltation and indifference in synchrony. Some day I would know the silence and the secret that lives on inside beings so that other civilizations may be born. Beauty was before reality and reality was in writing, open work.

## CHAPTER SIX

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Longman knew that day was there behind the curtains. He did not feel quite ready for the light day. He lit a cigarette and picked up the first book he came across. He read like before, calmly. The calmness seemed to want to spread through him but, as he felt it seizing all his limbs, he experienced an opposite cold, mental excitation that made every nerve intolerable in his calm body. His breathing was slow. His entire being was being performed within the limits of the possible. Longman put the book down at the foot of the bed. He spotted the envelope. He got up, parted the curtains, and stared at the early morning reality. On the motel lawn, a woman was bending over a watering can. Water was sparkling out. Longman leaned over and picked up the envelope.

I had been driving all night. Tucson was just a few kilometers away but I was not yet ready to encounter panic fear again.

I would stop at that motel run by a friend of my mother's. I would tell of my tiredness and need for sleep. She would offer me a room. I would go back to the Meteor for my bag. In the glove compartment the revolver would be hot. I would take out my composition book and the pen. In the morning, I would write. The air-conditioner would be noisy. All around me, reality: the see-through curtain, the color of the walls, a superfluous watercolor, a television set, my body still in front of the mirror. I would have the impression of an ultimate understanding of the night, of the desert and of the succession of intimate chances that come up in us like a law of reality. My hand would be slow. Humanity would be unable to repeat itself. I would exist alert in the questioning.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Longman looks closely at each photograph. No doubt about it now, the explosion has taken place and was a perfect success. A photograph is striking evidence. Reality is no longer in Longman's head. Reality is in the photograph. Longman is free. There is no more explosion in his head. It's nothing! It's nothing! It's all in the photograph. Longman pins each photograph to the wall. He steps back a bit, moves up. He looks at the explosion. He turns the light on. He turns it off. He opens and closes the curtains. He is seeking proper lighting for the explosion. Then it's as if suddenly the black and white of the photographs were overtaking the room. Longman looks out the window. Outside the lawn is green. There are girls in swimsuits around the pool. Longman lights a cigarette. The whole room is solarized.

Everything is so real around the pool. I entered the life of my fifteen years like a character. Unexpectedly, unsuspecting. All around the pool the light is bright. It contours arms, breasts, thighs, backs, sweeps into eyes. The gaze melts.

A young woman is taking pictures of her two friends. They are posing. They smile but their smiles fade, bleached out by the light. There is always music around the pool. The light is harsh. Eternity begins again at every moment. They laugh as they talk, small talk they exchange in the taste of cocktails. For the pleasure of the tongue. A man comes and sits beside them. He starts a conversation in French. The man is thin. He is wearing a black and white towel around his hips. I can't hear what he is saying. The young women laugh. He gets up and heads for the bar. The light is bright. He returns with a glass of whiskey. He speaks in short sentences. He talks with silence between his sentences. He is not from the area. He is not French. I'm thirsty. I turn my head toward the bar. Somebody dives into the pool. The dripping wet man passes in front of me. He stretches his body out on the towel. The light is harsh. Time wears thin. The girls stir their legs about in the water. I dive in. Reality is a desire spaced throughout memory. Motels are all the same. I am up to my neck in reality.

I will swim a little more butterfly, dolphin, do the frog and do the dog then shower when the tourists leave for a brief outing into the desert, at that hour of the day when everything is so beautiful. When they return I will be at the bar and to reassure herself, the owner will tell me I've changed a lot 'in a little time,' that I must surely be nineteen by now. Then I will witness the procession of customers coming to take their place around the tables or at the bar, eyes still in a daze of mauve and orange.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

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Longman is reciting Sanskrit poems as he knots his tie. The explosion is far away. The photographs lie amid the equations. He feels light, finally ready to meet the authorities. One last night in this place and he would regain his proud bearing, his charm. He knew how to argue and convince, he would be impeccable. Longman saw his awkward body in the mirror. He put on his jacket and headed for the Bar.

The Bar is filling up. It's a Thursday night. A lot of tourists and accents. Some regulars come and sit directly on the stools set in a semicircle around the bar. I know all of this.

The desert resolves all plots including the one which behind the eyes solicits invisible humanity on the horizon. In the desert one cannot survive without one's fifteen years of age. One must always be ready for everything, imagine cascades, torrents, the rain, stop the sun and reverse the probabilities of desire. Here in the Bar of the Red Arrow Motel the desert does not really exist. Only thirst which disperses desires, bits of debris in the soul. I grew up in the desert and have no merit in loving it save in the solitude that preserves me from filth.

The man with the accent has just come in. He nods slightly in the direction of the table where the poolside women are sitting. I order a beer. The owner repeats as if to herself that I must surely be nineteen by now. She greets the new arrivals with an air of both welcome and discipline. The music is too loud. Couples are dancing. The corrida of limber bodies and sunburned skins. At the far end of the room, the thin man is leaning against the wall and smoking.

Dawn is a principle which exacerbates energy. I want to understand to excess my desire for dawn, my need of dawn. I order another beer. Somebody touches me on the shoulder. Angela Parkins is there, alert, alive, raw and I am so slow in understanding how much her presence thrills me. She says something trite then goes walking among the tables. The music is too loud. The three women have found partners. The man from the pool is now strong, at a table with two men. The music is too loud. Nothing is sensuous. Bodies lengthen and east shadows resembling hair against the girls' faces arrange their suntanned smiles. Everything is sensuous. Angela Parkins looks in my direction, makes a circular motion in the air with her hand, yes as if she were signaling to me, then points to the dance floor. The music is too loud. The music is too soft. Angela Parkins' body is fanatical, filled with urgency. It leaps like a spirited, capricious animal, flutters and wildly soars, wild Angela Parkins. Eyes are upon our every movement, our every gaze. Beauty is suspended, the beauty that precedes reality. Angela Parkins is singing passionately, half syncing, half live, her mouth rounded by explosive sounds. Her hands swirl above our heads. The palms of our hands, sometimes her hand slides over my hips, sometimes, our acrobatic and aerial fingers clasp one another as if to spin the sense of sound above our heads, all around us, sometimes her gaze, her cheek.

I don't really know Angela Parkins and yet here we are, bodies close for a moment, then distant long and slow in the distance of America. We are inseparable and distant in the midst of eternity. We are the desert and *matter* of fact as shadows set. Perhaps the night and the color of dawn. The women have drawn close to us. They seem to be enjoying themselves. The music is too loud. Angela Parkins offers me a drink. 'The same.' Then I stop existing. She is talking, talking, takes off who knows where, she says it starts all over, speech, paths, butterflies and that she just loves words' inevitably.

slowness, she says that when in distress everything is overcome by the sound of words and then everything then becomes impossible to understand, she says things are exploding in her head and then everything must be attempted again like a backhand, a lob in mindspace, she repeats the mind fragile but the eyes, but the eyes, Mélanie, she says one must not give up, that nothing is impossible in the realm of the improbable memory realizes the certitude which in us keeps an eye out for beauty on the horizon, she talks about our attachment to certain words, that they are like small slow deaths concise reality.

It is half past midnight and the Bar is still full of customers. The music takes hold of everything. Everything is fluid and slow in Angela Parkins' arms. I lack time to understand. There is no more time. Time has entered us in minute detail like a scalpel, time compels us to reality. Time has slipped between our legs. Every muscle, every nerve, every cell is as music in our bodies, absolutely. The Angela Parkins' body moves slowly. Her whole body is pulled downward. Her body is heavy in my arms. My arms are heavy with the body of Angela Parkins. There is no more music. Angela Parkins' sweat against my temple. Sweat on my hands. Angela, silence is harsh. Angela! A tiny pattern on the temple, a tiny little hole, eyespot. Angela, we're dancing, yes? Angela Parkins has no more hips, no more shoulders or neck. She is dissolving. Angela's eyes, quick the eyes! There is no more balance between us. My whole body is faced with disaster. Not a sound. The commotion all around like in a silent movie. At the far end of the room, there is Longman's impassive stare. The desert is big. Angela Parkins is lying, there, exposed to all eyes. Angela is dissolving in the black and white of reality. What happened? He was after all a man of genius. Of course Mélanie is night teen.

Reality, dawn. Furor in the dawn and the galaxies. Policemen, chalk around the corpse of Angela Parkins. The customers didn't see a thing. I didn't see a thing. The desert is indescribable. The galaxy melts.

Then came the mauve of dawn, the desert and the road like a bloody profile. There are memories for digging into words without defiling graves. I cannot get close to any you.

# A BOOK TO TRANSLATE

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She will never know why her whole being plunged into a book, why for two years she spent herself, stretched herself through the pages of this book written by a woman she knows nothing about except the presumed evidence of an existence cloistered in the time and space of a single book.

All told this book was *innocent*. It rested, thin slice of paper between book ends. It was a December morning, of a spectral whiteness which eroded objects. She was thinking slowness while with her gaze she abstracted the book's equilibrium. And it fell over in the slow motion of silence arousing the throbbing desire that never quit her. Horizontally, the book resembled a tombstone: a name, a title and the cover's brightness.

The universe was a risk. She was a minimal presence, a misted space in front of the window. A marker perhaps between this book and its becoming in another language. This remained precisely to be seen.

Around her everything was noises of the moment, images to conquer. It would have required saying in a single breath. It will require exceptionally many illusions. Like as many appearances, the recourse to some sensorial data she cannot yet claim as hers though dazzled by the nature of the risk.

She would have to name, to converse at length from the inside until perplexed, until the little temptation to translate moved her to the point where one word stretched out taking the shape of an animal or the color in the distance, mauve and, once again in her desire, always to document starting from the horizon surrounding her.

It was possible that none of this could come about unless, by way of detail, she entered the realm of the narrator whose name, Mélanie, let her glimpse a profile outlined against the night.

In this early December as the first snow falls, Maude Laures is gathering all together the clues of her desire and her reading notes which like so many vocal outbursts and days without rain surround the Motel swimming pool. She dives in, is this mistake or strategy, her hand pushing away the first

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