

'In The Forest'
(extract from a forthcoming novel)

To Bieiris de Romans

Laure pulled off her Lord's boots, then shifted the earthenware bowl closer to the bed. She turned to the open slit of the arrow loop. The music bounced with the maids around the courtyard. Guibert was acting like a goliard! Strange, she thought, that I should feel jealous of those common women, their mutton feet calloused and broken by decades of stone and dirt and idiot dancing.

All around them, the heat was melting lard. Clutching the linen, she began to follow the ritual, but instead of crouching over the water and making preparations to wash Marc's feet, she turned back towards him. Yet already, he was right up against her, his breath cold on her skin, his eyes, blue ice in the flickering, dying light.

In the Holy Land, temptation is manifold. A few are killed, but most take a new wife and remain in Acre or Tyre or else in the mountains which lie to the east of Damascus. Some turn infidel and melt into the realm of the Saracen. In fifty years' time, their children will be the enemies of our children.

She flinched. His mouth suddenly seemed ugly, a scar. A scraping sound, disturbing, out of tune, as his right foot, half-dust, half-bone, struck the side of the bowl. The fresh stream water eddied into arcs.

Such is the way of fate. Loyalty, religion, objects of love, nothing is set in iron. He paused. The song of bared bone had reached a crescendo (or at least, Laure hoped that it had).

And I think that you too, My Lord, have been transfigured by these years. Or perhaps, it is simply by life itself that we are moulded, just as, in the tableau, the dancers are sewn by the strains of the music.

He closed his eyes and began to sway from side-to-side. The tallow sputtered, fractured the air.

In a small oasis near Nazareth, our column was ambushed by a group of Turks. We had been drawn there on foot by the sound of water, but also by the promise of women dancing like fireflies upon the sand.

Laure inhaled sharply. The arc of his movement broadened in alignment with the sound of the viol and the steps of the dancers. His mouth was a wound.

Only one escaped, though not unscathed. He drew the extremity of his index finger, slowly, down over his neck.

And yet, I feel that I should have died there, in that lonely oasis, in the midst of my perfidy. A lizard, clasped in gold.

Laure glanced down at her leather sandals, at her perfectly sculpted toes, each one bound and readied in finest calf leather, at the stilled water in the bowl. She, too, closed her eyes, pulled the lids tight at the seams. Taking other women was commonplace and she knew that over the years, Marc had had matched sole and breath with countless serfs and had fathered at least twelve bâtards. But for him to express guilt in this manner meant either that in the Holy Land, in the midst of sin, he had acquired a sense of morality, or else that for some reason, the episode had been of a higher order than any previous bestial encounters. Fast beneath her lids, the eye of the bowl. And there, as through the alabaster, she saw it.

The sea is deep blue. The woman is crying. By her side, a child, almost two years old. She stands there in the sun for hours, so that beneath the black gown, her skin is burning. The child begins to weep and the woman offers comfort, lifts it to her breast and shows it the white ship which is taking away its father. The child falls silent, and together, they watch the vessel merge with the horizon. Carrying the sleeping babe, the woman turns away. The sand eddies around her sandaled feet. As she crosses the last ridge of sand, she wipes her face with the elongated sleeve of her gown.

Laure opened her eyes. He stood before her, stock-still. The water had grown stagnant, putrid, opalescent.

She felt that he must have thought about this return for months and that as he had sailed on that very ship which the woman had watched vanish over the western edge of the world and then, as he had ridden across the lands of Fraxinet and Toulouse, he would have rehearsed its geometries, as he might, those of a battle. But this baring of the heart was misplaced, otherworldly. Through Guibert's music, amidst the torches and the stone and the sweating, big-breasted serfs, she sensed the terror of the real. The gentility of his voice unnerved her.

I know everything. In my dreams, it is as though our eyes are woven, one to the other, with bone needles.

Laure's chest was being crushed by a giant's limb. She sank sideways onto the small seat which framed the lower margin of the window, and gazed upwards. She could see only a tiny crescent of sky yet it seemed as though all the stars of the night had fallen into the arrow loop. She wished she were on the other side of the wall. Perhaps, at this moment, the woman in Acre also would be staring mutely into the black, trying to place her lover, herself, amidst the tableau of stars. Far below, the music had changed again. Guibert, the love-poet of her garden, was barking out the sounds of brothel-keepers.

*Down the broad way do I go
Young and unregretting,
Wrap me in my vices up,
Virtue all forgetting.
Greedier for all delight
Than heaven to enter in
Since the soul in me is dead,
Better save the skin.*

The slap of feet had grown rhythmic, pounding, so that the combined effect was like the sound of drums, beating before an execution. Laure felt as though her head were turning to blood. She was unable to distinguish between Le Comte and Le Troubadour, between the murk of the room and the black of the sky, the darkening bowl of water that lay between them and the great sea. From somewhere in the chateau, she heard the sound of a child, crying in its sleep. Perhaps, soon, the rain would come.

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