



T H E

TRANSLATED BY OANA AVASILICHIOAEI

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LAV E RDUR E

N EP TUNE

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The Neptune Room

Bertrand Laverdure

Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

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*for Aimée Lévesque
and for my dear mother*

Life is every person's means of getting through solitude.

CARLOS LISCANO

Reality is that which,
when you stop believing in it,
doesn't go away.

PHILIP K. DICK

Sandrine, there is no god, no soul. We all conceal thousands of plants, a hundred thousand stalks that sprout, wither, and die. The self's militant bees get lost in the melee of our garden. Some forget to pollinate their choices. Our piece of earth turns back into humus with a determination that is always beyond us. You are a trillion cells looking for light, a colony of organic beings struggling to breathe, live, wilt in the fields, and shrivel from use.

Tiresias is talking to Sandrine, who's drugged up and asleep. She lies on a soft bed whose comfort she can no longer appreciate. Once the appropriate derivative of morphine has been administered, the doctor comes to see her, tell her buttressing stories, like a modern-day Scheherazade, short breviaries of fine wisdom to confront the constant wasting away of her organs.

Every end of life is a bleak or gracious tale, told by a distant doctor.

Here, in palliative care, fatherless, motherless, Sandrine is a land ceded to calamities. She's in the Emily Dickinson Home, a hospice that takes in terminally ill children.

And in a few hours, the last agonizing breath of an eleven-year-old child.

Eric Berthiaume in his car, 2006

In the world of 2006, the immutable might have come in the guise of Johnny Depp's love for Vanessa Paradis, the life of Gaétan Soucy, Christina Aguilera, the Charest government, the anonymity of Julian Assange, Carla Bruni before Sarkozy, the Orange Julep on Sherbrooke, and Eric Berthiaume's health.

We all go through flat stages in our lives where everything is weightless.

For a moment, which could last several years, our vision constructs a politico-cultural landscape that seems permanent. It is natural for our brain to produce this strange illusion. Because our bodies have been designed to forget the chaos and invent comforting cultural references.

Eric Berthiaume was in his 2003 Subaru, driving on Route 116 toward Richmond. He was happy as a TV researcher, satisfied with his work environment, which was stimulating without being rigid, and always took perverse pleasure in challenging himself. Content with his fate, his paycheque, the type of show to which he was contributing, his role as a father, still in love with his girlfriend, he was clearly going through a flat stage cradled in the illusion of the immutable. What's more, wherever he went, he lugged around the lighthearted, carefree attitude we

tend to confuse with the dangerously incarcerating concept of “happiness.”

He was floating. But on what? In what material? On what surface?

Eric Berthiaume, nervous, edgy, son of Syntonie Hundon married to Thorgal Berthiaume from Saint-Félix-de-Kingsey, young father of Sandrine Berthiaume-Côté, sped along Route 116 toward Richmond. Sandrine was five. The sky was clearer than most poetry. The road disappeared as quickly as it appeared; all was well in the realm of benign indifference. The horizon was flat, contained. In the hopscotch of life, no one in the Berthiaume-Côté family had yet stepped on the lines. Chance still whistled its mocking tune in an old Bourvil film.

The car’s interior, artfully finished, inspired the most conventional cheerfulness. It was just before noon. The heat cooed like a mourning dove. The asphalt patiently eroded Eric’s tires. The belated father listened to Vanessa Paradis on the CD player. “Always the same theme, tandem, ditto.” The Gainsbourgian album recorded by this Lolita of the taxi lay in ambush in the CD player of a car speeding toward the Gainsborough landscape.

All was well in the best of worlds.

Ninelle Côté at the same time

At the same time, Ninelle Côté, a Baroque cellist in a mystified Montreal and Eric Berthiaume's partner, is struggling with an arrangement. Her left eye carries the patina of those who know they are better than others. Hierarchies are bizarre concoctions that nature provides to justify our annoyances. Yet the only hierarchy that could exist ought to begin with the Big Bang. Are you before or after the Big Bang, sir? Madam, do you come from the same split atoms as me or are your origins unknown to me, galactically speaking? There would be no hierarchy if everyone based their charter of rights and freedoms on our universe's threshold of existence.

Ninelle is tense, the string of her bow just as agitated as her. She has suffered several intense bouts of depression; the musician wasn't born under the same star as her lover. It's well-known that optimists get into bed with cynics.

Love is brought on by the virus of memory, which is utterly rampant. An instrument of coercion amply reinforced by endorphins, it makes our sojourn on Earth, which Marguerite Yourcenar calls "the prison," temporarily sugar-sweet.

An odd couple, this union of opposite forces should have led to a failed household. Yet all opposites strive to reproduce this very thing: their attraction. The outcome: a child has emerged from the mesh of this net.

On Montreal's streets, Sandrine rides her bike, runs on all fours. She has friends and plays pickup sticks.

On the morning of 2006, on the 116 toward Richmond, Eric looks beyond the windshield, touches the steering wheel, presses on the accelerator.

The road is empty. Vanessa keeps singing.

Tiresias and Pollini's hands, 2006

Tiresias stretches out on her dusky rose armchair.

Her workday is done. That's the official story anyway, since a doctor is never done with others' suffering. When a doctor isn't treating someone, practising medicine, explaining medical concepts in layman's terms, we administer reproof taken right off the internet. We want to understand, and the answers are everywhere. In milliseconds, they burst in from all sides. The great brain of the network, used to consoling the most ingrained solitudes, auscultates all the atoms in our bodies.

A geek like all her patients but for different reasons, Tiresias is never without her iPod U2. As a young medical student at the Université de Montréal, she learned to juggle everyone's fears and positive biases. On the outside, a doctor looks like everyone else. Yet as a traffic officer of anxiety, a doctor is posted at the crossroads of humanity.

In our programmable and programmed civilization, only machines command our respect now, and everyone has gradually forgotten the pretentious need of human infallibility. Tiresias puts up with the normal fallibility of human beings. As she often tells herself, managing death first means dealing with survivors.

On her iPod U2, she selects Chopin's *Études* by Pollini and puts on her earphones. The track is *Étude* No. 3 in E Major. Right from the start, she recognizes the lanky

man's scandalous song: "Lemon Incest." Gainsbourg sang this tune, spicing it up with a dance rhythm. A deliberately provocative illustration of an incestuous fantasy: Charlotte, in a duet with her father, responded by propelling her voice/steam in an overheated kettle. The sustained shriek of a lamb looking for her note.

Single, attractive, and in a "many lovers, please" mode, Tiresias doesn't have any children. This situation, rare for a Quebec doctor, doesn't undermine her career whatsoever. Since she can't somatize or introject the loss of a child, she is better prepared, in a way, to bear the final agonies of these broken young plants.

Pollini's hands continue to cross modulated streams over the piano notes. Chopin reminds her that any intelligent person has an educational duty to untangle the composer's meaning for others. This also functions in reverse. Chopin produced complex musical ideas, and now she is partaking in the emotional, unbridled effervescence of a meticulous and grandiloquent fragility. One has to take in the genius and at the same time pierce its mystery. She knows that one day machines will end up understanding the mechanics of fluids. Chaos will be mapped out. We will invent other words to describe it. Tiresias has read about it in *Science and the Future*.

Eric, a deer, his car, 2006

On the road, Eric thinks he sees a deer in the distance.

Then changes his mind; it's really just a stain. Growing larger and larger, the shape now dances on his retina. A violent headache flattens him. His hearing is gone. In his skull, a minuscule blood vessel has just ruptured. A ridiculous glut in a tube no thicker than two sewing threads has just broken the dike. Total collapse, flooding.

The car slows down with almost unreal ease. Behind it, the road is empty for at least a kilometre. The sun shines. Vanessa doesn't know that she's singing a eulogy. No one has invited her.

On the 116 toward Richmond, a Subaru comes to a stop. Eric Berthiaume's last reflex is to press the brake pedal. No airbag inflates. A delicate death on a stretch of smooth asphalt.

A quick death in a burst of happiness.

Birth of Sandrine Berthiaume-Côté, October 2001

Tons of rubble. Tons of sharp tesserae of glass, long faces moulded by the offences of the initiated. Calls for aid, and a country goes to war on the springboard of money.

One month later. October 2001.

Beneath the world's dust, something previously inanimate shakes, a living being, a human, a sprout of particular sex gesticulates. Still, nothing too strange about the beginning of a life, the same as a thousand other births.

Eric Berthiaume has just cut the umbilical cord. Time commences with the exactitude of an awkward carnivore.

Sandrine cries and cries; the great narrative comes and goes, and then the short fiction begins.

Contrary to legend, not all fathers fall in the parturient battle. Eric held his own. Didn't lose consciousness.

The mother suffered, as is her lot, felt the reprehensible damage of a head as enormous as hope. She pulled the train into the station. It's the beginning of the film.

Tiresias and Marthe-Lyster, 2008

Tiresias is asleep.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, she sheds her breasts and becomes the man she always thought she was. Her sexuality flickers. His sex is random.

Wandering like an old Japanese poet in sandals and a straw hat, Tiresias (now “he”) revisits the realm of his difficult loves. Paying the ferryman his dues, he boards the small raft. Talks with the boatman. A young Vietnamese with fiery eyes.

—Are you looking for company?

—I don’t know. I’m lost in my own nightmares.

—(*The ferryman insists*) How would you rate your social loss?

—I’ve been told I’m an eight.

—That’s very high. Your neuroses are complex; what’s more, you’re probably not made for sustained companionship. Do you plan on visiting the museum of your relational horrors?

—My affairs are erratic and so are my relationship problems. I don’t have a museum of horrors. My past is terrible because it’s painfully banal.

—But by crossing the river of sexuality you are seeking answers to your questions.

—Do we ever do anything else?

The ferry then bangs against the shore. The young boatman gives a start.

In a city where sexuality is no longer an absolute value, a self-definition tipping the balance of accounts or love affairs, Tiresias stretches, almost wakes up, coughing slightly. Connecticut is not a city built by urban planners but rather an amalgam of roundabouts, cul-de-sacs, and winding alleys divided at its centre by the great Missisquoi Boulevard. Lycurgus Street is to the left. The doctor-poet decides to begin his walk there.

Then the streets of Montreal appear. Corner of Jean-Talon and Saint-Hubert. Suddenly, the mood of the dream goes haywire. In the window of a fabric store, the figure of Marthe-Lyster Dessalines greets him with cruel indifference. Tiresias feels an unpleasantness return. Painful rhizomes penetrate his body, which is wracked by a laughable, awkward amorous impulse. He keels over, reaches out his hand, runs on a tarmac soaked in gasoline. Everything is on fire, but the flames don't hurt him. A portly man wearing both a hijab and a kippah seems to be asking him to slow down and sends a squadron of motorcycles after him.

Tiresias sees a mirror and instinctually knows it's a portal to death. He thrusts a foot into the reflecting surface. His body gradually disappears behind the silvering.

*

At a conference on new medical technology and software, Tiresias sets down his wineglass on a coffee table next to a Louis XV loveseat. He doesn't notice, at first, the

intriguing programmer sipping a Diet Pepsi. She makes an offhand remark, intended for anyone standing in the vicinity of her voice.

—We'll do everything ourselves soon enough. It won't be long now.

Not understanding, Tiresias asks her to clarify her meaning.

—Soon you'll no longer be necessary. You doctors. If I'm not mistaken, you're a doctor, right?

—How can you tell?

—You were holding your wineglass by the stem and when you set it down, I didn't hear a thing. Your dexterity is excellent.

—That's not a very distinctive characteristic.

—Since we're at a conference of computer scientists and doctors, it's possible to separate the two professions by observing the etiquette. A computer scientist bangs away, a doctor stitches up. The border stands there.

The conversation then flowed of its own accord. The young computer scientist's sharp mind intrigued and seduced him. A programmer of medical computer interfaces, Marthe-Lyster Dessalines explained to him at length that bearing in mind a classic evolutionary scenario, the middleperson would lose their importance in the future. The patient would then take sole control of their healing, using the nanobiological instruments placed at their disposal. By caricaturing the position of doctors in our contemporary societies, she even went so far as to predict that within a century doctors would no longer be any more important than poets.

Struck by such foolish impudence, Tiresias then lec-

tured her on the crucial societal contribution of bards in past centuries, naming a handful of greats, at whose mention she made no reaction. Constantly seeking new poets, he even quoted the title of a poem by Tao Lin that had made a strong impression on him: “A stoic philosophy based on the scientific fact that our thoughts cause our feelings and behaviours.”

—Poets are becoming ridiculous philosophers while doctors are slowly becoming poets.

—Your comment is stupid and disingenuous!

The stormy exchange continued unabated until Tiresias was on his sixth glass of wine. The young cynic then placed a surprise kiss on her interlocutor’s lips. Seized by the invitation, the doctor unfolded his cinematic arms, grabbed the shrewd woman’s neck, and kissed her on the mouth as you would expect.

*

Three months later, the couple were living together in the doctor’s condo.

Most relationships begin lion-like. This one more than others, but in general, nature is in a rush. It doesn’t take into account the climate or region. Magnetism works just as well in geology as in humanology. No one is immune. No one actually puts up a resistance. Tiresias took hairpin curves with as much skill as he went in tiresome straight lines. But with Marthe-Lyster, he reached unprecedented speeds. Neuropsychologists tell us that our actions are, in a way, preprogrammed and our consciousness gives us the impression that we are the ringmaster of this constant

circus. Every time we think we will decide what will happen, our body has already beaten us to it. Sometimes by ten minutes, sometimes by three hundred milliseconds. Delayed-action self-awareness. At times, nature, the earth, or any other all-encompassing entity seems to prevail over our will. We then feel predetermined, connected to mysterious laws that govern large groups.

Yet the illusion of our individuality is so rooted in our moral standards that no one understands the fact that an independent mind is a trap. We are networked, predictable, self-aggrandizing. Leaden imitations, we plummet into fiction like everyone else.

In the early hours of a winter day—bagel wolfed down, Kusmi Prince Vladimir tea squeezed into a tea infuser spoon, grapefruit cut lengthwise in slices (easier to skin)—the routine, which is synonymous with “immutable normality,” was unfolding accordingly. In bed, the frizzy hair poking out from under the pillow indicated that the mattress was still serving a human body. No blizzard while the sun’s out. Not many blizzards in Montreal.

When Marthe-Lyster’s eyes grasped the substance of the day, as she raised herself from the sheets, something happened in her cerebral biodome.

She was no longer the same.

Possible causes: the fight of the previous night suddenly took on gigantic proportions; the thoughts about her future, which she’d been pondering secretly for over three weeks, were already having an impact; various scenarios of reorienting herself now seemed necessary; the annoying discovery that it was just a fling had opened her eyes; her lover’s hands, less enterprising than three weeks

ago, indicated a change in his desire, and she realized that she too had just passed stage three, which culminates in platonic indifference, and didn't want to open the sluice gates of habit any further; a burgeoning and unsettling distress was urging her to plunge back into solitude.

Tiresias felt a neural paradigm shift in his lover's eyes. Sometimes, as though inside a cerebral labyrinth, we have no way of finding the minotaur at the root of our urgent, dumbfounded desire. In fact, we hide thousands of minotaurs inside us, making thousands of decisions affecting our human course, decisions that are final and jump the track of our previous whims.

Less cheerful, though still somewhat playful, Marthe-Lyster suddenly became an actress, a mime, the curtain drawn over the performance unfolding in her mind. He couldn't attribute this attitude to any well-founded cause. He simply smiled, ate with her, gave her a kiss when she left for work, and pretended that nothing had happened in the subsequent hours. Yet something had shifted. Irrevocably. For over a month, in moments of extreme fatigue, when she coped with stress at work by seeking decompensation in their intimacy, she would send him vague breakup messages. Nothing definitive. It would all end in apologies the next day, isolated texts of "I love you," lengthy embraces when he came home at night. Then, one day, a message popped up on his iPhone 3. Dry, empty words that didn't explain anything but at the same time said it all. The magic formula that broke all spells.

Disappointed by the turn of events, Tiresias felt a deep shame that was unlike him. Not having anticipated this

outcome, the fact of having hoped to the very last and projected himself into the future with such naïveté offended him. This love affair of barely four months undermined several of his interpersonal convictions and made him doubt himself. As someone who had never before needed to love to such a degree to be with a woman, he became jealous, hateful, and even felt the lover's sidereal melancholy in the absence of the beloved.

Afterwards, of course, he continued to frequent the female sex, but it was only a game: a spoiled child demanding his sugared almond one lonely evening; a health professional looking for a few thrills in a Harlequin novel and the bar of a three-star hotel. He was nothing more than a cliché in episodes. He blamed himself. But what else could he do to claim the last notes of his love requiem? The composer left much to be desired, and the music dragged on. Each dotted note on the score seemed to come from afar and required too much of his time. After several months, he knew he should see a psychologist colleague. But his determination to not show his confusion held him back. In the end, it was only once he had left the hospital and began working full-time at the Emily Dickinson Home, the palliative care centre for children, that he found some kind of solace. No matter, he would become a poet of grief, a doctor who eases pain and talks with his patients. It was clear that poetry, which speaks only of death, is in the spotlight in these contexts where the Grim Reaper is the main screenwriter. With a cynical wink to his ex's joke, and not without feeling fatalist and harsh, he would spend the end of his days comforting ter-

minally ill children. He would become a poet and anticipate by a hundred years the loss of social influence of the College of Physicians. A great farce defending privilege that he told himself couldn't last *ad vitam æternam*.