

## Marilyn Hacker

### Proof by the Birds—Marie Étienne

No one sees anyone.

From time to time, someone goes all the way to the bottom, no one can get over it, he touched something, but what?

One stays open to him.

The child was outside, facing the sky: —The night is always blue.

She dreamed that she lost her shoes, lost her clothes.

The garden, the house, were brightly lit, the women beautiful.

The mistress of the house, who had gone out, wanted to return home.

Policemen barred the doorway: —Prove to us who you are!

She answered —My name is Ang.

—The local doctor has never seen you, a policeman answered her.

Darkness, wind.

Someone, in the house, was wailing.

—You've uprooted it, it was still good, it might have flowered.

Someone moved away, to vomit up a wavy, consistent dough.

One could recognize Ang, who was trying to extract things from her mouth.

Weeds or flesh that were not her body, which occupied her body without blocking her throat.

As she pulled, some of it came out, but not enough.

Pulled again, it was a real effort, hopeless, annoying.

Her chin and her cheeks stained, she tried to wipe herself off, but she had no handkerchief.

A policeman offered his.

She refused, wary, sensing he was fickle, ready to turn hostile, or wanting to distract himself, to mock her.

I won't complain, she thought, crossing the very wide street, through her neighborhood.

Everything that, in her life, had any importance, was located there.

The street was not tarred, the street was a river, its course was golden, earthly and not liquid.

On its banks two low walls served to separate its sand from the sidewalks.

Right at the end, a square, earthen like the street, and like the street stirred up by a strong wind.

—Where is the person in charge? Ang asked the secretaries who were working near their window.

—On a tour of inspection, they answered.

She passed the church on the left, she crossed the square and reached the post office.

It looks like a school, like a village town hall, Ang thought.

She entered.

On the wooden panel to her right, papers tacked up.

They were fine sheets covered with her own handwriting, which she had sent, and which came back to her.

But the envelope was open, and the sheets came out, like the things from her gullet.

Beside the sheets of paper, on the wooden panel, a message, scribbled.

The Radiant One is leaving on a journey.

That was what she used to call her husband.

He took the word back, he struck her with the word.

She received the blow, went out, bent over, on the sidewalk where the child was waiting for her.

Later, when she went to bed, she would be a sheet of paper that was cold.

The child said:

—It's too beautiful out to go to sleep.

The delectable certainty.

She met the Bitter One, smiling and lively, who invited her on a trip.

—We'll go away.

And they did go away.

The park at the foot of the window, its hundred-year-old trees.

A nearby dream.

Impossible to walk there, one could only look.

A promise. Entirely a promise.

The Bitter One said:

—You are the only one. And then: —Let's make love again.

She answered: —Yes, but often. And he, uneasily: —Was it good, then?

He kissed her, she in her turn uneasy: —Not in front of the others.

—Yes, that's just what I meant.

A flower-vendor passed, hopeless, separated them. Ang chased her away, the vendor threatened her, fists full of flowers: —You look like death.

Conversation. Excitement.

And overblown promises.

One cries out. Fatigue.

The countryside, outdoors, magnificent.

One governs minimally. But at least decides what's possible.

Every idea of death leads back to the lack of love. Every death: that one.

The effort to be in the world. The struggle.

To keep one's eyes open when one's eyelids are weighed down.

A nightmare.

Awakening and salvation.

The injustice of conversation.

Marvel of writing, taste for writing.

It's others who are exhausting.

My necessary dose of solitude.

To do something else elsewhere.

Not to see, not to know.

To exhaust one's fatigue. Divest oneself of it. Reinvent oneself?

For lack of taking it in, to take what it isn't, to go where it is not.

It's in the evening, in the sun's absence, when anguish seizes her.

Between fear of the end and fear of the moment, the terrible swiftness of the present, fears follow on each other, the fear of possible deaths.

And, especially dreaded, the one he inflicts when he leaves.

It's right away. They hurry. It's now.

—I want to fill you up.

—But you do fill me. When you move away from me, I lose you.

He shook his head, skeptical.

He is cold.

He holds back and he chases away.

Much gentler and attentive and desirous of doing no harm than it first seemed.

Mute for the key words. His passion wants the body.

Does love, O Lord, model itself on injustice? Murdering  
 the one who cherishes it, by pure caprice.  
 Life is soon over.  
 They were heading for the woods.  
 Ang saw herself stretched out in the grass, calmly, to sleep.  
 Near the road, they were laying a nurse down, covering her  
 with a sheet.  
 The fairy of the woods approached to slice her in pieces  
 with a pair of shears.  
 On the road, Ang knew it, death would be there, a huge  
 devoured corpse.  
 The previous night also, there had been death.  
 —I must go to the cemetery in my village, said the child,  
 they will bury me there later.  
 —Me, I'd like to be buried under the dressage ring, beneath  
 the horses' feet, replied his friend, already a horsewoman.  
 On the road, Ang would be alone.  
 She recalls him saying:  
 —Remember your role, it will be the last one, and you'll be  
 old in it. He was talking to the actress.  
 All the same, Ang marveled, the house belongs to me, it  
 expands when I explore it, constantly pushing the wall.

I want to love no one but you, I don't want to lose you.  
 You are lyrical.  
 His eyes. To describe his eyes one day.  
 And his lightness, his slender limbs.  
 Ang wants to look at him, to look at him, to look at him.  
 His unbearable face.  
 Cold passion. Passion as dry as a stick.  
 For you my body is naked, and its fragile parts, more naked  
 for being fragile, more fragile for being naked.  
 —It's surely too late, he says.  
 When you die hard, very hard, do you die?  
 —Tell me what you want, he says, but violently.  
 He has no breastplate, he has no beliefs, his sex is at the  
 center.  
 He was there in the house where she slept, she saw  
 him, she got up, kissed him with her eyes closed.  
 He kissed her, happy.  
 "Any proof by the birds is strange."

At the next table, a man is eating, another one arrives.  
 The one who is eating says:  
 —Have a seat.  
 But his face is closed tight, one might ask oneself if it  
 doesn't contradict the invitation to join him.  
 The second man hesitates, makes as if to leave, changes his  
 mind and sits down.  
 In this exceptional circumstance, to make himself feel  
 better, he will eat all the desserts.  
 That's a man who doesn't share anything. I like him, thinks  
 Ang.  
 Towards the rear of the café, a woman makes a fuss.  
 The waiter shouts:  
 —I'm going to call the police.  
 She takes out her passport:  
 —I come from far away, forgive me. Let me go, I'll come  
 back tomorrow.

But the waiter is adamant.  
Should I pay for her? Ang doesn't know.

A nightmare. Ang accepted it, once more.  
A nightmare. She was trying to see him, in vain, to say  
farewell.  
Alienation by kindness. Obey me because I create you.  
Every man is a danger.  
It's love itself that threatens her.  
In order to exist, she needs to be guaranteed.  
I've got to live without him, I must get out of his light.  
Well then, I get out of his light.  
A few principles, only a few.  
The world is malleable, the world can be sculpted and such  
force in oneself!  
Pleasure in spite of everything since devastation is at the  
end of it, like a drug.  
To calm oneself down, to know knowledge.  
Calm love calm.  
Let the contortion of the senses cease, the shame of love, so  
one can think one's thoughts.

From *King of a Hundred Horsemen* by Marie Étienne