

The White Dog

Georges Limbour

Translated by Donald Heiney

I'm writing to you from this inn perched up here—inn, however, is saying too much—it's a little café near a hamlet, on the rim of a high valley, a place I thought might be suited to profound meditation, since it's at the limit or even beyond the limit of human habitation, as though it were already withdrawn from this world and so closer to your own.

It's been night now (a particularly icy night) for some time, although in other parts it can't be more than nine o'clock. Here, as soon as night falls (and what else can night be but darkness?), we're immediately in the middle of it. With the disappearance of the light, time is immobilized more quickly than the streams, as though the clocks too were hung with crystalline stalactites like the eaves with their diamond icicles. And through this cold we enter a kind of eternity.

To tell the truth this is the third night I've come up here. From my village it's only three or four kilometres on the snowy road. You know that diamond precision of the cold—how fond it is of cracks, ridges, splinters, and points. That first night all the stars were shining in a naked sky. The Milky Way displayed its tiniest gems, the Bears their sharp claws; the whole celestial menagerie darted down its pitiless glances. The animals in that vast cage up there were quiet but you couldn't trust them, because their cruelty is terrible. Their door is wide open, and they're only waiting for you to fall.

At this altitude there are no trees but a few stunted larches. Did I forget to say that there was no moon? There's no border or ditch along the road and it merged with the uniform whiteness, the only shadows those of rocks. I tried to follow the center of the road where it was packed by the sleighs, guiding myself by the crackling sound of my feet on the hard snow; I knew I'd strayed when my feet sank into a softer whiteness. Such difficulties aren't conducive to reverie, but by dint of zigzagging enough you can sometimes achieve a trance.

You know how sometimes there isn't a breath of wind up in those valleys. The immobility is absolute, almost inconceivable. Everything is fixed, fascinated, as though by a serpent's stare. That's when the danger starts, when life itself is in peril. Because the traps are all around, as peacefully, as quietly and cunningly as they're laid. It's treacherous the way these things lure you into their fixedness. This falsely amiable tranquillity invites you to lie down and dream awhile in the

Translator's Note. "Le Chien blanc" was originally published in *Botteghe Oscure* 14 (1953). The manuscript has been lost. The *Botteghe Oscure* text, set by an Italian printer, contains numerous errors and is in places incomprehensible. This present translation follows the text reconstructed by Mlle. Andrée Limbour for the posthumous collection *Soleils bas* (Callimard, 1972). Translation is by permission of Editions Callimard, Paris.

snow. You're tempted to stretch out on your back in the crystal globe of bliss, of perfect serenity. But you mustn't let yourself go; the cage of heaven isn't locked. An ecstasy slightly prolonged, and without the slightest pain my soul would go to join yours along that peaceful path of torpor and sleep.

Staggering a little now and then, I carried a warm and blurred image inside me: your image, in which it seemed to me that in this total whiteness all the colors of the universe were gathered and concentrated. I hoped to extract the colors from this rainbow saved from the general annihilation, so that, suffused with a new vigor and youth, they would go out to reconquer the world. Only a few more steps and this enchanted night would come to life; a light shone at the door of the inn.

The tiny room was empty. There was a splendid stove to heat it; my ears and fingers began burning a little. A steam, such as condenses on metal in such changes of temperature, dulled my vision, and I felt an impulse to wipe it away for safety's sake with a non-existent piece of chamois. I forced myself to draw a few pieces of paper from my pocket, and—as though it were a flagon filled with some rare essence—I uncapped my fountain pen. The hostess appeared and poured me a glass of spirits. Soon I was drowsy, then asleep. I was awakened by a large white dog licking my suspended hand. I patted his head, pulled the long hair of his neck, felt his fine fat paws, in short all those energetic caresses that dogs like. He was a fine animal and a pleasant companion.

A short while after that they put me out; it was closing time. Where was my enchanted evening in an imaginarily lighted inn? Yet enchanted I was when I found, under the stars, a large white dog that I imagined was following me in the snow.

I came back the next evening. The night was even colder. On the road the idea came to me now and then, with a warm pleasure, that I would find the dog again in the inn. I thought of him as one of those constellations I was walking under. Perhaps drawing some celestial chariot—a constellation more benevolent than the others, since he licked my hand so tenderly. My uneasiness had left me. But when I entered he wasn't lying by the stove. The room was empty, as it had been the night before. When the hostess appeared I ordered tea, since I was afraid of going to sleep. She peered at the white pages—already a little soiled at the edges—that I spread out on the table. "But where's the dog?" I asked her. She told me he had gone out. But I insisted; had he gone very far? all alone? She responded to this indiscretion drily, in a tone that made it clear I wasn't going to get any more out of her: "Gone off with his master to neighbors." I gathered she had already noticed my friendliness toward the dog and didn't approve at all. When I asked what time he might come back she only shrugged. I repeated that he was a fine dog and inquired as to his age. But she said that if I had an idea of buying him I might as well forget it, and it would be better if I didn't bother to come back. Besides he was very mean, and once he had almost eaten up a child. She seemed almost as ferocious herself, with her sly and persistent malice. I stopped talking about the dog in order not to provoke her open hostility, because I wanted to come back again. And also because, as I now saw,

it would be some time before I finished my letter, and this was the only place I could write.

I had got through a sentence or two when I thought I heard the dog at the door. I could already imagine him, his fur glistening with frost as though he'd been rolling in the sky. But instead it was a man who came in and went directly to the kitchen, and this worried me.

Neither the dog nor his master returned. A short while later the woman appeared in the kitchen door and told me from there that I had to leave; it was late and she was closing up. Surely this wasn't true, because there was no other way for the dog and his master to come back in.

I left anyhow, looking around on the way to see if I could see him coming. I passed through the three or four lanes of the hamlet. Everything was so quiet that, I must say, a good deal of imagination was required to believe that there were people in those wooden houses, even asleep. The snow sparkled under the white fires of electric bulbs hanging naked from the poles. It was as though all mankind had perished in some silent cataclysm, and those lights would go on shining in the deserted world until they were shattered in some more violent catastrophe. The lights were less a sign of life in the night than a presentiment of death, suggesting the thought that you were perhaps the last man in the world. The last man, and with letter-paper in his pocket.

A rather large stream flows through the hamlet under a wooden bridge. Now it made no sound; two-thirds of it was frozen and the water still running flowed through blocks of ice.

In this universal immobility that congealed the air itself, the water was the only moving thing. A princely flow, passing under transparent ice-arches pierced by the lunar rays from a nearby lamp, flowing through bridges of reflecting crystal, and disappearing at last under certain enormous whitish and opaque carapaces. (In Venice I've seen glassblowers, their faces glowing in the light of incandescent coals, clumsily smashing their work.)¹ Sparkling crests and filaments, fragile but of an unshatterable solidity; in this world nothing could break any more.

Still I could perceive this transfiguration only through a cloudy dream, since the spring was nearby and the water smoked. A long phantom of mist wound over the river on its way to the white-shadowed valley below, a reminder of the profound heat of the earth. And since all things in this world tend to the shapes of large bodies of women and animals, this dream of warmth, this vague spectre of sensuality quickened before my eyes into an elusive human form lying in the river, breasts glittering and limbs spread apart. Bent over those disturbing and inebriating vapors, I made out in the trembling of the barely-running water a long-desired visage whose fleshly charm I knew well. The rainbow of her changeable eyes played in the translucent ice-arches; sparks of golden locks and rouged lips fled in the mists; it was a river of punch.

¹ This sentence, in parentheses in the original, was perhaps intended for deletion by the author.

But this is not entirely true. Happily and miraculously, there was nothing palpable there, nothing ponderable. Still I was fascinated by this creature floating in measureless space, sometimes transparent with things visible in it as though the ice and running water were its secret viscera, at other times dense enough to hide the things behind it, changing constantly in shape. The form was not under water as though drowned. Neither did it play in reflections over the water, nor was it suspended in air. It was neither standing nor lying, it was nowhere and everywhere, no larger than a basin of water and yet vaster than the night. The fair shape disrobed and re clothed itself; I saw virgin meadows, gowns in flashy or subdued colors, luminous and faded, solar, lunar. Stemless flowers turning on the vapor like butterflies, dancing around the wandering eyes, like a pavement of tiny fire-blue transparent gems in a constellation.

I was bent over an immobilized river, fixed there, my elbows on the railing, by its charm and seduction. Then behind me in the hamlet I heard the sound of barking. My dream dissolved in an instant. I tore myself from the railing and went off with reluctant limbs. I took the path that led back to my village. But when I sought to make that fascinating form appear again I only heard in my ears that mythological barking, its breath sweeping the sky which meanwhile had turned to a field of camomile with sleep descending from it.

Here I am once more tonight at the inn. During the day I walked over the broad snowfields to the foot of the glaciers. As the weather was worsening, I came down quickly again to the pass. There the wind blew violently and the snow fell in flurries. The valleys on either side had disappeared. There was only a round arch of road dissolving at its ends into the cloud, a sort of weightless canopy suspended over a void that was no longer even white. By the roadside was a chalet of dark stone, much like the stables hereabouts for cattle. Skiers had planted their skis in the snow by the entrance. Inside it was completely dark. The windows were only slits and the shutters were closed. In an uncertain cavelike light from the kerosene lamps, aided by a few candles, I could make out the faces of a score or more people standing around drinking and smoking, since there were no chairs to sit down in. Along one wall was a long table with the usual goods spread out for sale, to no one's very great interest: cotton scarves several times refolded and flung back on the heap, their crude colors catching the light of the kerosene lamp that projected shadowy butterflies onto the stone ceiling. At the far end of this lair a bohemian-looking girl was heating water over a meagre fire to make lukewarm instant coffee. Behind her, barely visible in the gloom, an old man busied himself at some invisible task.

After a while they brought in through the door—as though there was still room in the place for anything so dramatic—a young woman with a broken leg. They stretched her out on the table with the scarves; I only caught glimpses of this in the silhouetted shadows, and it was as though they were laying her onto a pyre. Since her feet were cold they had taken her boots off. When the warmth of this motley bed revived her a little she began a soft moaning, soon followed by a crying spell. The girl came with a glass of spirits, but she must have thrown it

onto the pyre, because great flarings leaped up, heavy and fervent complaints that threw intermittent reflections on the ceiling like those of a wood fire. Pain is a luxury up here, as you know. No one has very much pity for those who suffer; it's a sort of privilege. So her suffering seemed to come not from the broken bone, as though it wasn't the leg that caused the pain, but something very deep and obscure in herself; her outcries charmed like flowers from Mediterranean shores. I watched while they bound up her leg in scarves, turning them all over to find the finest ones: dragons, lions, bears, fish, ships, constellations. The whole scene still moaned very faintly; it was a chimera that was winding round her ankle.

The old man then emerged from his night and came to count all these flags. His face was as sooty as a stoker's, but it glowed with joy as their number mounted, as though it were not in the lamplight but the sun of an enchanted bay.

Since my own neck wasn't very well protected I bought a scarf from the old man. To show me its beauty he held it out before me and snapped it in the air. On the blood-colored background, decorated at the corners with snowy peaks, was a large white dog.

I came back down by a ski-trail. The squall was spent now but the snow was still falling, with a whisper like a great tree softly touched by a breeze. The confusedly shredded walls of the mountain floated on the fog. I stopped to brush away the ice glued to my lashes and weighting down my eyebrows, and I saw a skier coming down the slope above in a patch of fog, drawing a small sleigh behind him. He disappeared several times among the rocks, and when he reappeared I saw a red cross on his armband. The litter slipping along behind him was empty, or rather there was nothing folded up in its canvas but a small corpus of snow, dry and very white. The young man stopped near me; he had the naive expression and accent of the mountaineers. As ski patrolman his job was to gather up before nightfall any injured he might encounter. He didn't want me to linger up there, but I promised I would come down right behind him. I watched him as he lost his solidity; this unnecessary herald of distant hospitals guided his light litter through the rocky turnings with an easy grace, as though he brought a new message to that awful place: there is no more pain on earth.

And in fact his noiseless passage seemed to deliver that ravine from the curse that hung over it. The horror was dissolved, the madness calmed, and it was gently now that the day seemed to fade. The eyes that had been gripped in the frozen river reappeared now in the glance of these confused rocky walls themselves, emerging from their hard and savage mystery. The ice had effaced eyebrows and lashes; there were no bushes or vegetation, only the pure glance of the rock gleaming in the golden, slate-colored, and greenish stone flakes: the eyes of the High Valley. I sought their glance but it wasn't me they were looking for. I don't know what they regarded, in their blind beauty, when they turned away to fix into empty space. Now and then, veiled in a thicker patch of fog, they lost their mineral quality and took on, oddly, the gentleness of some small and unknown furry animal. I liked them, as blank as their glance was in that sterile place. If sunken ships go down to the gulfs of sea-bottoms, lost glances mount to the

High Valleys. This, perhaps, was only the enchantment and fascination of death.

When I reached the foot of the trail and found my way back onto the road, the skier and his litter had disappeared. Later I went back to the inn. The dog was lying by the stove. I took off the scarf I had bought, thinking no more about it, and laid it on the table. The woman saw it and said nothing, but obviously she was displeased. She took the dog by the collar and dragged him into the kitchen. As he passed the door he turned and looked at me, but I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Yet everything is clear to me now. I am approaching that night in the inn I have dreamed of.

Unfortunately the evening hasn't even begun yet, and in a short while the woman will put me out.