

At night I lie still, like Bolivia.  
My furnaces turn blue.  
My forests go dark.  
You are a low range of hills, a Paraguay.  
Now the clouds cover us both.  
It is raining and the movie houses are open.

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FICTION / GERALD JAY GOLDBERG

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### The Secrets of Malaterre

From all indications, Madame Blaise would be difficult. She was in her late seventies now, a suspicious age when generosity is little more than a dry sponge. If she proved to be anything like my grandmother had been, it would be hard for a stranger to get the time of day out of her, let alone the letters and diary. Pearlmutter had barely been able to squeeze out two short notes, when everyone knew she had boxes of unpublished material, invaluable documents, God knows what in her possession. And that was almost ten years ago! No, it was definitely not going to be easy.

As soon as I arrived in Paris, I carefully drafted an appeal to her, bowing and scraping in my most courtly French. "I thank you infinitely for your cooperation, chère Madame Blaise," the letter concluded, "and beg that you will accept my respectful and devoted sentiments." Somewhat effusive, I admit, but this was no occasion to stint. Holding my breath, I sent it off. It could be a week, even two, before I had a reply. The thought that she might never answer was a black cabinet I refused to open.

Not to waste time while waiting, I climbed the steep cobblestone hill to the Jacques Doucet—the *bibliothèque littéraire* across the street from the Pantheon—where I spent the next few days examining the correspondence with Gide. Pearlmutter's magnifying glass had been everywhere. The admirable thoroughness of the man, I'm ashamed to say, depressed me profoundly. But while studying the 1912 letter in which my Malaterre told Gide of his esteem for him, of his own restless boyhood, of his quest for a "noble and pure" mentor, I was suddenly struck by the fact that here was Assistant Professor Stanley Blum of the University of Delaware (Bronx bred and coarsened) holding Malaterre's original, just as he wrote it, right between his reverent fingertips. The thrill almost made the expense of coming to Europe seem worthwhile. As for the contents, unfortunately, everything was in Pearlmutter. But Pearlmutter's biography of the poet had been flagrantly

sympathetic. A static state-portrait with few if any of the odd blemishes that historical accuracy required. Who needs more saints? Besides, such generosity was finally no service to Malaterre at all, for only when seen with all of his human imperfections could his artistic achievement be truly appreciated. Somewhere in the long correspondence with his close friend, the cubist painter Max Blaise, there was unquestionably a treasure trove of indiscreet curiosities, scandalous tidbits. I had to have those letters. It was Madame Blaise's duty to Malaterre, to her deceased husband, to scholarship and French twentieth-century literary history to help set the record straight and let me have them. How could she say no?

At six when the library closed, I wandered about the city visiting Malaterre's old haunts. The decrepit building on the Boulevard Raspail that had once housed the tiny office of the magazine he briefly edited in 1913 was still there. A Spanish family was now living where history had been made. My nose was full of their dinner frying in olive oil. I carefully explained everything to the intelligent-looking man who opened the door. He slammed it in my face. Nevertheless, I had had a fleeting glimpse of a crowded laundry line strung across the middle of the room and several small, dark faces peering timidly out from behind their mother's back. I was elated. There had been changes over the years, naturally, but my poet had once worked in there, had once stood in the very hallway where I was standing. (*"Vertige, châtement, dans les ombres du couloir!"*)

At the Café du Dôme, surrounded by its faded photographs and bathed in the orange glow of its lights, I ate beneath the large mirror at the rear—Malaterre's table—that marvelously cranky piece of furniture immortalized in his "Chanson Chez Dôme." It was here that Braque, Blaise, Serge Ferat and the other painters joined him to talk about the future of cubism. It was at this table that Anna Flamante told him to go to hell. I pressed my elbows down hard on the edge just to make certain. Sure enough, it wobbled.

After dinner, I went across the street to La Rotonde and had my coffee where Malaterre had always taken his. It was bitter without sugar but he never used any. Malaterre seemed very close to me at that moment. I could feel the presence of his many poet friends, Max Jacob and Apollinaire, Paul Fort and André Salmon. They clustered around him like kernels around a cob. Who else could stroll with such unaffected ease across the Boulevard Montparnasse and bridge the gap between Dôme and Rotonde, between art and literature? The world knew Malaterre only as a great poet. I would show them a damn complex human being.

The building on the corner of the rue St. Jacques where he lived until his death on August 9, 1921 (no suicide note was ever found), had been stupidly torn down more than eight years ago, but standing in the rain and ignoring the dreary modern structure that had replaced it, I could almost see his

old apartment on the fifth floor just as it appears in the photographs in *Malaterre: Documents Iconographiques*. The long, narrow, book-lined hallway. The cramped study with his pipes still resting side by side on his desk. And, most interesting of all, the intimate bed-setting-room with its low ceiling, cozy fireplace, and incredible collection of paintings. The best known of these were the cubist portrait of him done by Picasso hanging beside the door and, on the far wall above the divan in the corner, the large horizontal group portrait by Anna Flamante showing him seated calmly in the center of her affections, his fingertips not quite touching. At the head of the divan, a pile of fringed pillows casually propped up against the adjoining wall. And above those pillows the tiny gimlet hole, almost undetectable unless one knew. Ten years ago when he had had the chance, Pearlmuter might have looked straight at it and never noticed. But it had to be there. Everything pointed to it. Good Lord, what I wouldn't give for the right chunk of that wall!

On the morning of my fourth day in Paris, my spirits rose as if yoked to the sun. Dressing quickly, I whistled my way downstairs to the lobby of the pension where I was staying, even skipping a step now and again out of sheer animal vigor. The morning mail was spread out on a heavy round table in the center. Postcards, a few envelopes with small cellophane windows, what appeared to be an invitation addressed to the exquisitely perfumed Frau Gross of the second floor, and three interesting-looking air mail letters from Hong Kong for our Chinese newlyweds.

I climbed lead-footed back to my room. Sitting on the edge of my bed, I considered sending Madame Blaise another letter. No, it wouldn't do. She'd think I was nagging. Perhaps if I wandered over to her apartment, rang the bell, explained that I just happened to be in the neighborhood. Blum barges in on Blaise. What was I thinking of? The woman's godfather had been Marcel Proust, for crying out loud!

There was a knock on my door and I went to open it. The concierge stood there dumbly. A shuffling Amazon whom I had found to be of remarkably few words even on the ground floor, she appeared to be winded by the three flights of stairs. "*Pour vous,*" she gasped, and turned on her heel.

I looked down at the envelope she had thrust into my hand. The word "*pneumatique*" was printed clearly on the front and underlined. Three one-franc vistas of Guadeloupe tranquil with palm trees and blue water adorned the upper right-hand corner. Madame Blaise had spared no expense in rushing the good news to me by special messenger. At last! I excitedly tore open the envelope and groped inside for the letter. There was no letter. It was a card, a glorious picture postcard. On one side the cubist portrait done by her husband of Malaterre with his ever-present pipe—recognizable even to a child—and, on the other, Madame Blaise's invitation to tea. Sunday at five,

if that would be convenient. Ah, dear lady, how could it be otherwise!

On Sunday at 4:19 I was on the Boulevard Lannes, across the street from the Bois de Boulogne. Number seventy-seven was a large, stylish apartment house built, according to the cornerstone, by someone called Duthuit in 1926. Glancing at the imposing wrought iron gate out front, I double-checked the address on her invitation. This was it, all right. No question about those sevens. Europeans have a way of adding a short crossbar that makes the number unmistakable. It was a relief to know that everything was shipshape. I walked off down the boulevard. But at five o'clock on the dot I was back at the gate, through the front door, up the elevator and, with a knock loud enough to be heard by an old woman and yet by no means an ultimatum, I stood on Madame Blaise's threshold wondering what was keeping her.

"*Qui est là?*" inquired a small, high-pitched voice from behind the door.

"It's Professor Blum," I called out. "Stanley Blum."

Had she forgotten so soon? Hadn't she herself written to set the date, the hour? There was the sound of several locks being turned and finally the door opened.

"Ah, Professor Blum," she said, backing slowly into the dark hallway behind her. "Do come in. My man has the day off today and I am alone here. Unfortunately I do not get around as quickly as I once did."

Her English accent surprised me. There was nothing in the voice to hint at the four years during World War I when she and her pacifist husband lived in New York, those four crucial years when their mailbox was filled with the secrets of Malaterre. (It was after he had seen them off at the Gare St. Lazare—October 6, 1914, according to Pearlmutter, though Reid, in his otherwise dependable monograph, curiously places it on October 9th—hatless, his long hair a tangle of curls as he kissed them both amidst the pushing crowd, that he returned to his apartment and wrote "*Les Blaise en Peaux-Rouges*," the poem that begins: "*Il y a un oiseau, on dit, qui ne vole jamais loin de son nid, / Qui dort équilibré sur un pied rêvant tour à tour / Des anges, des dragons, des Amériques énormes.*" Memorable lines!) In the dim light of the hall, I couldn't manage to get a good look at her, but then she opened the door to the living room. Madame Blaise turned out to be a handsome woman of medium height with the palest eyes I had ever seen. What remained of her short, straight, delicate white hair had been left casually uncombed, a gossamer veil through which the pink of her scalp was clearly visible. She wore a gray dress, a plain black shawl around her shoulders. Her silver earrings and matching silver necklace, though the simplest of jewelry, seemed incongruously extravagant. Clearly Madame Blaise was about to entertain not only Assistant Professor Stanley Blum.

"As you see, Professor Blum," she said, slowly leading the way, "you are the very first to arrive."

Naively punctual Blum. I could kick myself, go back downstairs, crawl around the block ten times on my belly. "I hope I'm not too early," I said.

"Oh no. Not at all. This will give us a chance to chat before the others come. Please do sit down. Try this chair next to mine. It is somewhat better than the rest. I must apologize for the furniture. From time to time I consider having it repaired but it seems terribly impractical at my age when one may die at any moment. Don't you think?"

Ignoring her impossible question, I glanced around at the furniture. There must have been a dozen swaybacked chairs in the room, their frames chipped and broken, their worn upholstery calling to mind the faded striped awnings of old beach houses. Vases holding the stiff remains of withered bouquets in subtle shades of tan were everywhere. Her husband's brilliant canvases covered the walls, providing the only note of color. There was a disconnected portable radiator, an empty easel, a serving cart crowded with bottles of Scotch and vermouth. The large oriental rug revealed itself in snatches. From end to end, the room was an eccentric mess, a picturesque clutter. I liked it.

"This is fine," I said, and sat down. The seat of the chair, its springs broken, sank beneath my weight until my bottom was no more than two inches off the floor. I was literally at Madame Blaise's feet. She smiled down at me. I wriggled my long, Dacron-covered legs into a decorative arrangement and smiled back.

"So you have come to Paris to learn of Malaterre," she began. "I can tell you a good many things about him, although perhaps you have heard them all before. He was the sort of man about whom stories are told. He knew everyone. He had a genius for making friends." She unwrapped him like a precious stone and bewitched by the splendor, fell silent for a moment. "A wonderful creature," she added wistfully.

"Yes indeed. No question about that," I agreed, "but we all have our little flaws."

"I think I will start the water boiling. Would you mind passing me that pot?"

There was an aluminum pot with a plug attachment on the table beside me. I handed it to her and waited, my eyes on her every second, my ears at her service, my notebook tactfully tucked away in my pocket and anxiously biding its time.

Madame Blaise picked up a heavy pitcher of water. She poured it into the pot, on the table, all over the floor.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"Oh no. It is really quite simple."

Fumbling, she plugged in the pot. The frayed extension cord made me weak. A short circuit here and Malaterre's letters could be lost forever.

From a roll of blue toilet paper, she unwound several sheets and tore them off.

“Not good-looking, mind you,” she said, as she very carefully wiped the inside of her porcelain teapot. “His face was painfully thin. Salmon once said—rather cruelly, I think—that he had a nose like a scabbard. But that was nothing. He radiated youth, charm, energy, a wonderful optimism.” Tossing back her head, she held it motionless, chin high, lips slightly parted, eyes wide open in expectation, altogether under his spell. The resemblance struck me at once. Uncanny. I had seen Malaterre holding his head in exactly the same fashion in dozens of photographs. “His manners?” she said, as if I had raised the subject. “He had the most delightful manners imaginable. Perfectly charming. And above all, he was sensitive, as great poets must be. If he entered a room and felt hostile presences, he would retire into a corner, but among friends his conversation could be dazzling.”

“So I understand. But isn’t it true that he was often very ironic?”

“Yes,” she admitted after a moment’s hesitation. “Yes, I suppose he was, though never with the deliberate intention of wounding anyone.”

“I see. But do you remember any specific examples of his ironic turn of mind?”

“Many,” she said, and went on to tell the story of the Douanier Rousseau’s banquet where, when the *gentil* artist put down his violin and asked Malaterre how he had enjoyed the music, Malaterre had replied, “You are the greatest painter of the age.” She recounted his famous exchange with Diaghilev after the riotous opening of *Tomate*. She described his amusing comments about Reverdy, Cendrars, Biques—things he had told to her alone on those many occasions when she had visited his apartment on the rue St. Jacques to discuss her own youthful attempts at poetry. All innocently witty. All known. All quoted in Pearlmutter.

“Now about his drinking, Madame Blaise. He did drink rather heavily, didn’t he? Surely you’re aware of that. His drinking problem.”

“I have heard such rumors. I doubt them.”

Dammit, this was getting me nowhere. I was about to bring up the subject of the unpublished letters when she began to laugh. It was Malaterre’s reaction to Blaise’s portrait of him. It wasn’t funny. I had read it elsewhere, but I laughed along with her out of nervousness, discomfort, a desire to please. I had the annoying feeling that I was being used.

“Perhaps he did tend to be a bit frivolous,” she continued. “Perhaps he was too caught up in the social world. My husband thought so. Blaise was a very serious man. He believed that Malaterre was a bad influence on young artists. One day after the war when we had returned from America, Blaise said to him, ‘Our friendship is over. I want nothing more to do with you.’ Of course I was furious. But I came to see that Blaise was right. Mala-

terre had a great talent but he wasted too much of it on meaningless relationships. He never achieved what he might have."

The break with Blaise. September 17, 1920. Fully reported and documented in at least three different sources.

"When I wrote to you, Madame Blaise, I inquired about the letters that Malaterre wrote to your—"

"Excuse me," she said.

There had been a knock at the door and as Madame Blaise made her way past me I noticed that there were bandages wrapped around both her legs. Arthritis, I guessed. It seemed to take her ages to hobble out of the living room. It would take her forever to come back. The poor woman. I considered the pile of envelopes and portfolios by the side of her chair that had earlier caught my eye. Could Malaterre be among them? It was ridiculous to think that a sane person would keep important historical documents in such a haphazard fashion. How could anyone be so irresponsible? She didn't deserve to have them at all. Do something, Stanley! Now's your chance. Hurry! What's the matter with you? I'm a coward, I confessed, and sagged back down in my seat.

The new arrival was a quiet, elderly man who was introduced as Monsieur Gambon, an old friend. His short gray hair stood straight up and harmonized melodiously with his constant look of surprise.

"We were talking of Malaterre," explained Madame Blaise.

"Yes," I eagerly picked up the thread of our conversation. "I was just asking Madame Blaise about some letters that he wrote to her husband."

"Malaterre," spoke out Monsieur Gambon all at once, breathing heavily. "Naturally Malaterre. Indeed Malaterre. It goes without saying. A great poet. A credit to France. Her favorite subject. Let her get onto it and she can talk about him forever. Interesting man. Important."

He stopped quite unexpectedly with his mouth tightly closed. I felt almost as surprised as he looked. Before I could pull myself together and begin again, there was another knock at the door and Gambon went to answer it.

"How nice," she confided when he had left the room, "that we were able to have a quiet talk together about Malaterre before everyone came." She looked at me to see if I understood. I understood.

"The water's boiling," I pointed out glumly.

"So it is," acknowledged Madame Blaise, removing the plug. "And just in time."

The guests included a young, rather plump interior decorator and her escort, a Captain Fagout. Obviously, they knew nothing about Malaterre. Madame Blaise, for some reason, seemed quite taken with them. Throughout the afternoon, the Captain, in turtleneck sweater and gray flannel slacks,

kept darting gracefully about giving out teacups, bringing in slices of lemon from the kitchen, passing around little cakes and cookies, making himself generally useful and making me look like an uncooperative lout. There was also Madame Blaise's niece, a thin woman in a long, ugly print dress who never removed her hat. She was extremely awkward, painfully self-conscious, and her aunt spoke about her as if she hadn't yet arrived. Madame Blaise, in response to repeated questions, also spoke about health.

"I have been doing a great deal of fainting recently," she explained to me. "My doctors say that I am lacking in red blood cells. They are forcing me to eat literally pounds of a most horrible-tasting radioactive substance and return next Tuesday for an examination. Do you have such awful things in America?"

I listened, I nodded, I smiled, I drank cup after cup of tea, I nibbled on countless cookies and waited for the rest of them to go home, praying all the while that I wasn't the only one who had not been invited to dinner. By seven-thirty, it seemed to me that Madame Blaise was glancing meaningfully in my direction. I helped myself to another cookie. At a quarter to eight, Monsieur Gambon was in the middle of what for him was a very long sentence that had something to do with his car when, apparently forgetting what it was he had wanted to say, he abruptly got up, kissed his hostess on both cheeks, and shook hands all around.

"*Au revoir*, Monsieur," he said to me on the way out. It was the most eloquent thing that had come from his mouth all afternoon.

Gambon having shown the way, the other guests quickly followed suit. Within fifteen minutes, they had all gone and only my hostess and I remained amidst the empty teacups and fallen cookie crumbs.

"It was a lovely party, Madame Blaise. Thanks so much for inviting me. I hope I haven't overstayed my welcome," I said, making no effort to leave.

"There is no need to rush off," she replied halfheartedly.

She looked pale, tired, amenable to suggestion. This was my chance.

"You're very kind. I was wondering if perhaps before I go I might be allowed to look at the Malaterre correspondence. I would hardly trouble you about this if it weren't so terribly important to my work. You wouldn't mind, would you?"

"Of course not. I have no objection."

"You don't? That's wonderful! Wonderful!"

"Though naturally I could not show you anything without Vitez's approval. He is literary executor of the estate, as no doubt you know. Our French laws are very particular about such matters. If you were to take something from those letters without his permission, I might be sued. I have to protect myself, you understand."

I nodded vaguely.



“So you must write to Vitez,” she advised, looking, I thought, somewhat relieved. “For years he was Malaterre’s publisher. He is quite old now. I have heard that he is a very difficult man to reach. But you can try if you like. Why not?”

Clearly she didn’t hold out too much hope, but I had good news for her. “I’ve been in touch with Monsieur Vitez.”

“You have?”

“Yes, I wrote to him before I left the States. I knew I’d need his permission to look at the material in the Jacques Doucet collection.”

“And he gave it you?” she asked incredulously.

“Oh yes.”

“In writing?”

“Well, I don’t have the letter in my pocket,” I admitted, “but yes, of course in writing.”

“Forgive me,” she said, smiling apologetically, “but one must be very cautious about these things in France. Well then, there does not seem to be any reason why I can not show them to you, does there? Let me see. I think they are somewhere around here.”

Leaning over, she went right to the pile beside her chair. I knew it, I knew it! She began pulling at the envelopes, dragging one after the other out like human organs at an autopsy, only to glance at each one briefly and toss it away. It was horrible. I offered to help but she waved me aside.

“They are really not very interesting letters,” she said, no longer bothering even to look inside an envelope before discarding it. “How annoying.” She stood up.

What else could I do? I scrambled to my feet and followed her to the door.

“When you come again,” promised Madame Blaise, “I will be sure to have them all ready for you.”

“Next Sunday?”

“Perhaps. We must wait and see. It depends on what my doctors have to say. I will call you.”

A disappointing afternoon, but at least I had made a start. Now it was only a matter of another tea and the letters would be mine. If I survived the people. And the moths. The way they had been all over me I might have been a woolen sock. I was riding home in the Métro, looking up at a sign stenciled on the window that said old people and war veterans had first claim to my seat, when I remembered. She didn’t even have my damn phone number.

She’d write. That’s what she had meant to say. An honest slip by a bushed septuagenarian. Big deal. I was getting excited about nothing. I took my

heart out of my mouth and put it back where it belonged. She had written once, she would do it again.

I spent a large part of the following week downstairs in the lobby of my pension leafing through old copies of *Elle* and *Marie Claire* while keeping the center table under close surveillance. There were two mail deliveries a day. By Wednesday, the concierge had begun to eye me suspiciously. By Thursday, there were no more magazines. Sunday came and went like a submarine. I decided not to jump to conclusions. But then another week went by and still there was no word from Madame Blaise. I didn't know what to make of it. Perhaps her doctors had found something. She might be ill, seriously ill. She needed my help. I called.

The phone rang three, four, five times. My God, had she died! Left town for the summer?

"Alooo?" said the small voice at the other end.

"Yes, hello. Madame Blaise? This is Professor Blum. Is that you, Madame Blaise?"

"Oh yes," she recalled, "Professor Blum." Her voice seemed to fade, sounding smaller, fainter, farther away. It was a terrible connection. "I have been meaning to telephone you."

"You have!" I said, delighted by her good intentions. "It's my fault. I forgot to leave my number. I've been thinking about you, Madame Blaise. I hope the doctors had good news last week. Are you all right?"

"They have not told me yet. I must go back for more tests. They never seem to have enough of them. It really is quite boring."

"Yes, it must be awful. Perhaps you'd like me to come by this afternoon and cheer you up?"

"I happen to be very busy today."

"Tomorrow then."

"No, it is out of the question. I am sorry, Professor Blum, but I can not have anyone looking at those letters."

The receiver shook in my hand. "You can't?"

"I have much more important things on my mind at present. I have very complicated affairs just now."

"I understand. But you said—"

"Anyway they are completely uninteresting."

"But you let Pearlmutter see two of them."

"That fellow. That Pearlmutter! An unprincipled wretch!" she began to shout, her shrill voice scraping in my ear. "He completely distorted everything. *Everything*, do you understand?"

"He did?"

"Turning a great French poet into some sort of sexual adventurer, as if

every woman he had ever known was a passionate love affair. This is nonsense.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“But *I* do,” she insisted angrily. “He sent me a copy of that book of his. The man is a charlatan.”

“I hardly know him. Maybe I spoke to him once at an MLA convention. Who remembers?”

“I should have sued him. I was going to but my friends advised me against it.”

“Of course. That’s best. Would it be all right if I came in a few days when you’re feeling better?”

There was a long pause filled with static and then several loud clicking noises at the other end of the line as if teeth were striking the mouthpiece. I wondered if she had fainted. A voice toneless with fatigue came on and said, “Let me ask you, Professor, how long is it that you plan to be in Paris?”

“Only three more weeks. August first. Less than a month. That’s why I’m so anxious to get at the Malaterre material as soon as possible. You see?”

“Well then there is still plenty of time. Goodbye.”

“Wait,” I pleaded. “Madame Blaise, wait! You don’t have my phone number. Here it is. Are you ready?”

The dial tone surprised me. There wasn’t a trace of static. I listened for several seconds before hanging up.

On the day before my departure from Paris, I put a rubber band around the few skimpy notes I had gathered, packed my suitcase, paid my bill at the pension, and decided that Madame Blaise was not going to get away with it. I had been exploited like a backward nation. She had counted on my good manners, my patience, my timidity, but there was nothing to lose anymore. Somehow I was going to get those letters.

Arriving at her apartment, I unshackled the real Blum—gutter-wise Stanley of the Bronx—who banged authoritatively on the door. Who needed her lousy invitations? Blum knocked harder, as if he had a search warrant. This was wonderful. The door opened wide and there stood a bald man in a rumpled blue smock that was stained all over. About sixty, I judged, but his face was country fresh, his cheeks red as raspberries.

“Who are you?” I asked.

He was Maurice and he worked for Madame Blaise. There wasn’t a suspicious bone in the old boy’s body. If there was something to sign, he was willing. A raffle for sale and he’d buy it. I boldly announced Professor Blum to see Madame Blaise, revealing my travel plans. He took the news rather well, I must say, but thought she was resting at the moment. He’d go see. I told him to step on it.

"Is that you, Professor Blum?" she called out from inside. "Please do come in. I had no idea you were leaving so soon."

I strode into the living room. "Madame Blaise," I began loudly. It was so quiet I could hear the moths. I glanced about. "Madame Blaise?"

At the far end of the room sitting in a forest of dead flowers just as I had left her, the god-daughter of Marcel Proust watched me, on her face the sort of conventionally polite French smile that never failed to chill my blood.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I whispered, "but I've come to say goodbye."

"Already. What a pity. It is too bad we could not have seen more of each other."

"Yes it is," I agreed.

"Ah well, another time. On your next visit to Paris perhaps."

"I may never be back. Who knows?"

"Pity!" she exclaimed, and held out her hand to me. "I wish you a safe journey home, Professor. *Bon voyage.*"

Conspiring in my own dismissal, I politely shook hands with her. The smugness of the woman infuriated me. If I wasn't to have the letters, I would at least have one small final satisfaction—setting her straight about Malaterre.

"Did you know, Madame Blaise, that there was a hole in Malaterre's wall?"

She looked puzzled.

"That's right, a hole. Above the bed."

"Above the bed," she repeated. "I do not understand."

"Of course," I said gleefully. "But it's all in his one novella. I'm sure you're familiar with *Le Canard*. Remember the scene when the poet, Lopic, is in bed with the infatuated countess, while his lover, the cubist painter Astrud, watches them in amusement through the wall?"

"But that is fiction."

"*À clef*, my dear Madame. *À clef!* The scene is much too vivid, the details far too close to everything we know about Malaterre's life to be anything but the truth. Women finally meant nothing to him. The hallway where Astrud stood, the soiled cotton plug he removed, the cool perfume-scented air that struck his eye as he peered through the wall were facts taken from reality. The apartment was Malaterre's. I'm convinced of it. There was a peep-hole on the Boulevard St. Jacques."

"A Judas hole!"

"Whatever you call it."

Madame Blaise leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath. "That," she wet her lips, "is nonsense."

"If you like," I said coolly, "but I have no doubt your husband knew all

about it." I pointed to the pile of envelopes beside her. "And the evidence is right there in those letters."

She regarded me with pale, unforgiving eyes. What was she seeing? Cannibalism in the Donner Pass? The Dallas Book Depository? Vietnam? Pearl-mutter? She rose grandly from her chair. Turning her back, she walked stiff-legged to a small secretary that was buried behind two chairs in a corner and unlocked it.

"I will not have his memory slandered. You may see for yourself." When she turned around, she was holding a dark-brown leather briefcase in her arms.

This old woman was as unpredictable as a heart attack. Hurrying to her side, I grabbed the briefcase before she had time to change her mind, and tore open the zipper. Sure enough, the letters of Malaterre!

I counted forty-six of them, forty-six brilliant possibilities with exciting postmarks, revelatory return addresses. The stationery was varied in size but basically the same good quality as that used in his letters to Gide. A tasteful page—simple, white, understated. It was the contents that were disappointing. A little dull gossip, a little complaining about money and health, a great many bitter remarks about Vitez's unwillingness to spend more to publicize his work, some comments on his cat's fur balls, his concierge's temper. If not for the fact that in one letter he wrote of missing his tailor who had been drafted, the war seemed hardly to exist for him. The only things of the slightest interest were two casual references to someone he called Chou-Chou, though in all frankness I must say the context promised nothing. The statements about theater openings, concerts, and art galleries were of the routine sort that might be found in any newspaper of the time. I felt sick.

"The rest," I demanded. "Where are the rest?"

Madame Blaise shook her head. "I did not think that *you* would find them of interest." She reached possessively for her letters.

"Wait!" I went through each one again searching for some indication, some clue to his real relationship with Blaise, but without success. There was no warmth. No affection. No peephole. Nothing. I knew that she was cheating me. Don't ask me how but I knew. The way a child knows that something stinks when five knotted handkerchiefs can be pulled out of an empty hand. But he applauds anyway. As for me, I apologized.

It was three years later that my book came out. I had finished it in a burst of energy the previous summer working round the clock, my office door locked, my kidneys bloated with instant coffee. In the time that we had been together, I felt that I had come to know Malaterre as well as anyone and perhaps better even than he had known himself. He had allowed me to

share his life like an old friend and in the process had given me my first gray hairs, a slightly stronger prescription for my left lens, more pleasure than I could ever tell him. And the book? It immediately became the center of a furious controversy among the handful of Americans to whom the name Malaterre means anything. Which didn't surprise me in the least, its thesis having been so totally original, unexpected, difficult to digest. Curiously, it was Pearlmutter himself who helped to settle the matter. In the review that he did for the *Yale Studies in French*, he wrote, "This extraordinary portrait of the poet as sexual deviate would seem absurd if not for the new material the author presents. His evidence from the poet's hitherto largely unpublished correspondence with the painter Blaise appears to be incontrovertible. It leaves us no choice. Professor Blum has made a significant contribution in helping to unravel the mystery of Malaterre."

It pleased me enormously. Euphoric, I considered sending an autographed copy of the book to Madame Blaise but finally decided against it. After all, she herself had told me of the countless evenings on which she had visited the poet's fifth floor apartment on the Boulevard St. Jacques. Why upset an old lady with scholarship?

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FOUR POEMS / JOHN ASHBERY

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River

It thinks itself too good for  
These generalizations and is  
Moved on by them. The opposite side  
Is plunged in shade, this one  
In self-esteem. But the center  
Keeps collapsing and re-forming.  
The couple at a picnic table (but  
It's too early in the season for picnics)  
Are traipsed across by the river's  
Unknowing knowledge of its workings.  
To avoid possible boredom and the stain  
Of too much intuition the whole scene  
Is walled behind glass. "Too early,"  
She says, "in the season." A hawk drifts by.  
"Send everybody back to the city."