

## *Philip Kobylarz*

### *FROM La France*

#### SEWERS OF PARIS

Are underground; the glory underneath the glory. Filled with the bones of captured mummies, of broken, stolen obelisks. They contain stashes of great art hidden by departing Nazis. Reenactments of Roman catacombs, with buried treasures, vases, statuettes, wall paintings done by nomadic Etruscans. They are the bowels of the city filtering the spore-filled waste of the world's best food and wine, processed into bile, the richest paté of fertilizer. Built with the monoliths of druids. Concentrically circle the great town leading down to a Plutonic cesspool of regeneration. Provide get-aways for the *Wanted*, including the cave-like abode Jack the Ripper inhabited in his last, miserable, rat-like years of existence. Lead to secret bunkers where the armies of France, and her many Kings and Emperors concealed treasures earned in victory: golden samovars, a jade-studded crown of a caliph, the first horologe (made of silver and ivory), an original copy, in gold leaf and camel leather, of the Koran. What in them is still to be found.

#### MISTRAL

The mistral is a wind. Technically speaking, it is born by the presence of a depression occurring in the Gulf of Genoa. Cold air from the peaks of the Alps funnels into the Rhône valley, picking up speed near the city of Valence, then this mass of air becomes an entity of pure energy and blows whatever is in its way, away. Its duration, according to the locals, lasts from one to three to six, even up to nine days.

It comes at first in bursts, ebbs and flows of dry air. Sometimes, it arrives as a constant force, knocking over trees, uplifting roofs, downing antennas, dispersing clothes from the laundry line, and causing the usual havoc. Once it begins, it is like a gigantic fan on a Hollywood set used to simulate wind storms, turned on high. Only the mistral is all too real.

Cats commit suicide when the mistral arrives. Beach-goers mourn the loss of their new, expensive kites. It clears the skies and brightens them and tempts the unknowing to leave the safety of their homes. It keeps hat makers and milliners in business. It knocks on doors and windows throughout the night.

Basically, it pisses everyone off.

It has been known to reverse the direction of those on mopeds. It has raised and sunk boats from their moorings. It has tumbled fences of stone. It deposits leaves and refuse on well-kept terraces. It efficiently dries laundered bed sheets hanging outdoors, minutes before it rips them to shreds. It defruits trees. It disperses seeds into the sea that will eventually become buddings in foreign countries.

It inhabits your clothes, and tries to remove them, by force, or by depositing in them sycamore seeds. It creates new hair styles. It increases gas mileage if you happen to be driving in its direction. If riding a bicycle, it blows directly into your face no matter which way you turn to avoid it.

It is the sole topic of small talk when it's in town.

The mistral howls and screams in celebration of itself. One suspects that fish swim deeper the days it's around. It prunes unsightly shrubbery. If it also happens to be raining, it is better to hole up in a telephone booth, for days, until it has calmed. It tinges the air with a bitter pill of coldness sharp as an icicle.

In its ability to dismiss fog, mist, pollution, it brings the surrounding mountains closer, and gives to them the appearance that they are moving seaward. It tears clouds into wispy shreds, knots the threads, and then burns them with matches of sunlight, spears of reflection off the water. It bankrupts outdoor markets and stalls racing horses.

The mistral is a reminder that we are merely the pawns of nature; of the forces that engendered us, and of human folly in general. The only way to defeat the mistral is to stay inside, lock the windows, close the doors, and wait it out over the pleasant weather of steam rising off a hot cup of tea.

*Des gueux disputent aux animaux les os jetés à la poubelle, des milliers d'hommes et de femmes ramassent les mégots, le chien épie l'homme, le rat épie le chat, et tous lorgnent, parmi les ordures vers le même morceau de viande pourrie.*

—Joseph Roth  
*Croquis de Voyages*

## IMPRESSIONS

Things you don't see much in America profoundly strike your attention here. The occurrence and re-occurrence of circuses. If not broadcast on television, then live, in fair grounds, under a real big top. At least once a month. It is always the same menu: high wire acts, women riding elephants, strong men, expert jugglers, flame/sword swallowers, maniacally acrobatic men, more clowns than are ever necessary, young women in very skimpy costumes. Soundtracked American and British background music. Sometimes with added French verses.

Random productions of *Guignol*—his bright red and yellow mug on nearly every corner. Endless variations on this one particular puppet theme. Pagan religious ceremonies diluted into the kitsch of the contemporary. Homunculus with a stick whose consumatory act is to hit others.

Parades and public masques, with music and Halloween-like costumes. Sugar coated apples. Traveling carnivals, the rides named in English: Dragonfly, Whirl and Twist, NASA Rocket, Speedway of Thrills. A difference in the carny culture: the people here are relatively well-dressed, lack tattoos, and are friendly and don't harass passersby into wasting their money. They are quite willing to give away their plastic, or stuffed junk as prizes.

Telephone booths that lack vandalism and graffiti. Pigeons that stay up in the roof tops. Seagulls on the beach that don't beg for food. Less trash on hiking trails. Restaurants full on week nights. Streetlights that don't blink on and off at night, flooding the quiet empty rues in pools of yellow.

## LEAGUES

Looking up from the depth of ten feet below the sea, waves breaking into surf on rock, presents another weather. The surface of the water resembles clouds erupting with rain or snow, the cliffs covered in sea vegetation, with creatures such as urchins and mussels, look like the sides of not so arid steppe, and fish, swimming alone or in bands of many, seem to be air or spacecraft going through docking maneuvers. Otherworldly is the feeling, yet its deterioration into cliché gives a clue to a truer nature.

This is the first world, a primeval one that is immediately recognized. The quietude under water is unmatched. The lack of horizon and surrounding

blueness obliterates a sense of perspective: all that can be sensed is within feet from the viewer. It leads one to wonder if fish have a concept of the future, or even distance in a greater meaning than what is continuously arriving within the range of sight. There is no meaning in this realm, other than the bizarre phenomenon we label life. The maritime world is clearly existential.

Breaking the threshold of surface, where distance reigns, are arid islands, white, barren, torturous in contour, ironical reminders of the inherent contrast and the paradox of being. Thorns of desert relentlessly weathering amidst plains of life-bearing water.

Easy access clarity. On the crowded summer beaches, approximately only five to ten percent of the sunbathers even enter the sea. The secrets of the underworld can be revealed for the minimum price of a pair of goggles or a diving mask. It seems the topographies of mostly unclothed human bodies hold more interest than the kingdom of Poseidon, constantly churning and moving about, just below a blue extending horizon.

#### LES GOUDES

It sounds too close to “the goods” to not be true. This tiny village at the southern extension of Marseille, and at the beginning of the wild region known as the *calanques*, doesn’t even try, couldn’t even try, to conceal its embodiment of heaven on earth. Minutes more to the south, in what amounts to a dead end to sea, hillside, cliff, and pine forest (with looming hoodoos for emphasis), only the tinier inhabitation of Callelongue rivals its outcrop and watery edge-of-nothingness.

This is where paradox collides: where desert meets sea/ forested cliffs overlook a forest of life and plants on the underwater shelves of the Mediterranean/ carpets of resilient shore vegetation manage to survive and bloom/ views seem to be of continents, of endless Dovers, falling into an abyss of sea/ wind is the only song with accompanying crooning of seagulls, piercing calls of kestrels, the sexy hum of cicadas/ the western world in the style of a true to life Japanese print/ the manifest symbol of both beginning and end materialized (preter)naturally/ a place beyond pictures or words.