

SEFLA JOSEPH

Sur La Mer, 2014
Acrylic on Canvas, 36 x 36 in



COURTESY R. BLITZER GALLERY

COLETTE

Gone Fishin'

This story takes place along the beaches of France that border the English Channel with its extreme tides. The character of The Silent One is probably based on Colette's friend and confidant, Léon Hamel. The character of Maggie may be modeled after the writer Meg Villars, who married Colette's first husband after Colette divorced him. First published in Les Vrilles de la vigne, 1908.

FRIDAY.—Marthe says, “Kids, we’re going fishing tomorrow at the Headlands! Café au lait for everyone at eight. Anyone who’s not ready, the car leaves behind.” And I lower my head and say, “Terrific!” with a submissive joy, and not without irony. Marthe, a combative creature, inflicts happiness in a harsh tone of voice and with abrupt gestures. Decisively she lays out the agenda for our holiday: “We’ll have lunch there, on the beach. We’ll take you, and then The Silent One, who’ll carry all the fish, and also Maggie, so she can finally wear her pretty new bathing outfit.”

With that, she turns on her heels. Later from afar I see, on the terrace that commands the sea, Marthe with her reddish-brown bun of hair, questioning the horizon with a threatening and challenging glance. I think I can tell from the way she’s shaking her little warrior’s brow that she’s muttering, “Just you let it rain tomorrow, and you’ll see.” She comes back inside, and rescued from the pressure of her stare, the sun can set in peace beyond the Bay of Somme, a humid and flat desert where the sea, as it pulls back, leaves oblong lakes, round pools, vermilion canals where horizontal rays are bathing. The dunes are mauve, with a rare head of hair made of bluish grass - an oasis of delicate convolvulus, their pink-veined umbrella skirts torn by the wind when they open.

The thistles on the dunes, in azured sheet metal, mix

with the restharrow flowering carmine, restharrow that pricks with a thorn so short that you don’t suspect it. Meager and hardy flora that hardly ever wilt, and brave the wind and the salty waves; flora that match our combative little hostess, that handsome reddish thistle, with the look of a shameless schoolboy.

Yet here and there the sea fennel turns green, fat, juicy, acidulous, the lively and tender flesh of dunes pale as snow. When Marthe, my annoying friend, exasperates everyone—when you’re ready (because of her look of a young fury, her boyish voice) to forget that she’s a woman—then Marthe laughs abruptly, adjusts a reddish lock of hair that has come loose, showing her arms—light-colored, glowing—which you want to bite and which would crunch, cool, acidulous, and juicy to the tooth like sea fennel.

The Bay of Somme, still humid, darkly reflects an Egyptian sky: raspberry, turquoise, and ash green. The sea has retreated so far out that you have to wonder if it will ever come back. Yes, it will return, treacherous and furtive as I know it here. You don’t think of it; you read on the sand, you play, you sleep, facing the sky—right until a cold tongue insinuates itself between your big toes and rips from you a nervous yell: the sea is there, just flat; it has covered twenty kilometers of beach with the silent speed of a snake. Before we could anticipate it, it soaked a book, blackened a white skirt, drowned the croquet set and tennis racquets. Five minutes more, and there it is—hitting the wall of the terrace with a soft and rapid slap-slapping, with the submissive and content motion of a dog wagging its tail.

A dark bird zooms out from the sunset, an arrow shot by the dying sun. It passes over my head with the rustling of stretched silk, and it changes, against the darkening west, into a snowy seagull.

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SATURDAY MORNING, 8:00 A.M.—Blue and gold fog, cool wind, all is well. Marthe is delivering an oration below and the multitudes tremble, prostrate. I’m rushing: will I arrive in time to keep her from putting too much pepper on the potato salad?

8:30 A.M.—We leave! The car purrs, decorated with floating shrimp nets. From deep within a greenish raincoat, from behind a pair of convex lenses, Marthe