

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.

* * *

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

vituperates against the clumsy zeal of the maids: “Those blockheads stuck the apricots right against the cold roast pork!” Still, she condescends to offer me a gloved paw, and I surmise that she’s smiling at me with a deep-sea diver’s grace. Maggie, barely awake, slowly becomes conscious of the outside world and smiles in English. We know all that she’s hiding under her long overcoat, a bathing outfit right out of a vaudeville routine (the shrimp-fishing scene). The Silent One, who speaks not a word, smokes energetically.

8:45 A.M.—On the flat road that twists unnecessarily and hides, around each bend, a peasant and his cart, Marthe, at the wheel, brakes a bit suddenly and grumbles in her diving suit.

8:50 A.M.—Sharp turn, peasant and cart. Lurch to the left. Marthe yells, “Cuckold!”

9:00 A.M.—Sharp turn: in the middle of the road, a little boy and his wheelbarrow full of manure. Lurch to the right. Marthe just brushes the kid and yells, “Cuckold!” Already? Poor kid.

9:20 A.M.—The sea, to the left, between the rounded dunes. And that sea is even farther out than it was yesterday evening. My companions assure me that while I was dozing it rose right up to that fringe of pink shells, but I don’t believe it for a minute.

9:30 A.M.—The Shacks! Three or four black coffins made of tarred planks stain the dune, the dune of a sand so pure here, so delicately mammillated by the wind, that it makes you think of snow, of Norway, of lands where winter never ends.

Without moving, yet rolled,
The fine sand hollows out an alcove
Where, despite the cries of the mauve
Seagull, one can hide, and the dune molds
A bed in its charming folds,

murmurs The Silent One, a modest poet. Marthe, excited, leans over the wheel and... sinks two of the car’s tires. Faster than a little bulldog, she jumps out, gauges the damage, and calmly declares: “This spot is good, anyway. Farther up the road I couldn’t turn.”

We arrive at the end of the earth. The dune, completely naked, shelters between its rounded knees the black

shacks, and in front of us lies the desert that deceives and fortifies, the desert under a white sun, its gilding washed out by the mist of hot days.

10:00 A.M.—“Papuan Tribe Conjuring the Spirit of the Bitter Waters”—that’s the caption I’ll write on the back of the snapshot that Maggie just took. The “natives,” with heads like wet seals, in the water up to their waists, strike the sea with long poles, howling rhythmically. They beat the fish into a net stretched across an elongated lake, a huge arm of the sea abandoned here by the tide’s neglect. Brill are swarming there, and bay shrimp, and flounder, and sand dabs. Marthe flings herself out and digs around the moving sand banks like a good ratter. I imitate her, first taking tentative steps, because all my skin bristles to feel passing between my ankles something flat, alive, and shiny.

“Get it, get it! Good God! Can’t you see it?”

“What?”

“A sand dab, a sand dab, right there!”

There? Yes, a flat plate, covered in mother-of-pearl, that flashes and escapes between two waves. Heroically I search the sea bottom, down on all fours, flat on my belly, dragging along on my knees. A quick yelp: Marthe cries out in triumph and her streaming arm raises the flat plate that writhes and lashes. I’ll die of jealousy if I come back empty-handed. Where is The Silent One? The coward, he’s fishing with a shrimp net. And Maggie? She’s fine, she’s swimming, only worried about her figure and her suit of raspberry silk. I’m only competing against Marthe—Marthe and her cap of red hair stuck to her head, Marthe knotted up in a huge blue jersey, a little sailor with a round behind. The creatures, the creatures, I can sense them, they’re mocking me. A large sand eel in mother-of-pearl flashes from the soft sand, draws in the air a sparkling monogram with its serpent’s tail, and dives back down.

11:00 A.M.—The Papuan tribe has finished its conjuring. The Spirit of the Bitter Waters, responsive to ritual howling, has filled their nets to the brim with flat fish. On the sand, still held captive in the tarred mesh, the beautiful, suffering plaice, with their very moving bellies; the insipid flounder; the brill indelibly spattered with blood. But I only want the prey hunted down by my own flayed hands, between my knees scraped by sand and sharp shells. The brill, I know it now, it’s a big canary that nosedives between my ankles drawn together and gets jammed there—

SEFLA JOSEPH

Beach House, 2014
Acrylic on Canvas, 60 x 90 in



COURTESY R.BLITZER GALLERY

the sand dab is just as dumb. We fish side by side, Marthe and I, and the same yelp escapes from both of us when the catch is good.

11:30 A.M.—The sun bakes our napes, our shoulders emerging from the warm and caustic water. The waves, under our tired gazes, dance in blue-green moiré patterns, in gold rings, in broken necklaces. Ouch, my back! I look for my mute companions: The Silent One arrives, just like Marthe, completely beat, and groans, “I’m hungry!” The Silent One smokes, and his huge cigar only leaves him enough room for a proud smile. He holds out to us his shrimp net overflowing with live mother-of-pearl.

Now it’s Maggie’s turn to come back, delighted with herself. She has caught seven shrimp and a baby sole.

“Time for soup, kids!” yells Marthe. The natives transport the catch to the car.

“Are we taking it all? There’s at least fifty pounds!”

“First of all, it boils down a lot when you cook it. We’ll eat some fried tonight, tomorrow morning with grated cheese on top, tomorrow night in a court bouillon. So we’ll cook some ourselves, and maybe give some to the neighbors.”

1:00 P.M.—Seated in a tent, we eat lunch, gradually sobering up. Down there, at the bottom of the blinding and shadowless desert, something boils mysteriously, purrs, and comes closer—the sea! Champagne doesn’t galvanize us, a headache hovers over our hardworking heads.

We contemplate one another without generosity. Marthe has gotten sunburnt on her little bulldog nose. The Silent One yawns and chews his fifth cigar. Maggie shocks us a bit, too white and too naked in her raspberry suit.

“What is that smell?” Marthe shouts. “It stinks of musk, and I don’t know what else.”

“It’s the fish. The nets are hanging over there, full!”

“My hands stink, too. It’s the flounder that smells musky and rotten. What if we give a little bit of fish to the nice natives?”

2:00 P.M.—Mournful trip home. We’re secretly sniffing our hands. Everything smells like raw fish: the cigar of The Silent One, Maggie’s suit, Marthe’s moist hair. The west wind, soft and burning, smells like fish. The car exhaust, and the dune glazed with blue shadows, and this whole day, it all smells of fish.

3:00 P.M.—Back home. The villa smells like fish.

Fierce, nauseated, Marthe shuts herself in her room. The cook knocks on her door:

“Would Madame tell me if she wants the sand dabs fried or with grated cheese tonight?”

A door bursts open furiously and Marthe’s voice vociferates:

“Do me a favor and make all that sea crap disappear from this house. And for the next week, I forbid you to serve anything but soft-boiled eggs and roast chicken!”

—Translated from the French
by Zack Rogow and Renée Morel

Colette (1873–1954) wrote many novels, including *Gigi* and *Chéri*, made into popular movies. This story is taken from *Shipwrecked on a Traffic Island and Other Previously Untranslated Gems*, a collection to be published by SUNY Press in November 2014.

Zack Rogow’s is the poetry editor of *Catamaran Literary Reader*. His translations from the French include work by André Breton, George Sand, and Marcel Pagnol. He has received the PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Prize, and teaches in the low-residency MFA in writing program at the University of Alaska, Anchorage. Rogow is the author, editor, or translator of twenty books or plays.

Renée Morel is a translator and adjunct professor of French at City College of San Francisco. She founded the popular Café Musée series of lectures on French literature, art, and history.

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Fresh Air, 2014
Acrylic on Canvas, 36 x 36 in



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