

## **The infamous VCS file :: 1998-2006**

(Anne Rice, *The Vampire Chronicles* series)

by mazaher

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## **Louis: T'ung Yên**

by mazaher, 1998

music: *Calling all angels*, by Jane Siberry with k.d. lang (1991)

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Oscurità piovigginosa, una sera di febbraio. La luce di un lampione sull'asfalto bagnato a una fermata d'autobus. Qualcuno fischietta piano alla cadenza leggera dei passi.

*Calling all angels...*

Un altro suono di passi, lento, sopraggiunge dalla direzione opposta. Passi pesanti di stanchezza, ma ancora netti ed energici. Il fischiottio si interrompe insieme al passo, quando il giovane si ferma fuori dalla luce del lampione, appoggiando le spalle al muro di mattoni scuri. Il vecchio avanza soprapensiero, gli occhi a terra davanti a sé. Sussulta e si arresta di colpo accorgendosi della presenza dell'altro: del silenzio innaturale della sua presenza immobile. L'ha riconosciuto prima ancora di alzare lo sguardo, l'ha riconosciuto senza averlo mai visto, come riconoscerebbe il sapore del liquido amniotico che lo bagnava alla nascita. L'avrebbe riconosciuto quali che fossero stati i suoi abiti, i tratti del viso, il colore degli occhi e dei capelli. L'ha riconosciuto dal silenzio, questo giovane snello e muscoloso, i capelli lisci legati in una coda sulle spalle, gli occhi azzurro-verdi, le mani nelle tasche della giacca di pelle nera sopra un maglione grigio, i jeans scoloriti, gli stivali inzaccherati. Odore lieve di soffitta, asciutto e polveroso; odore sottile di legno vecchio, di cose che da gran tempo hanno finito di fermentare.

—Sei tu— dice con calma, ma il cuore ha perso un battito. —Stasera.

Senza una parola, senza scostarsi dal muro, il giovane allunga un braccio verso le spalle del vecchio e lo attira a sé nell'oscurità umida. Con l'altra mano scosta un poco il colletto dell'impermeabile, con un gesto intimo, simile a una carezza, gli passa le dita sul collo, all'angolo della mascella ben rasata. Il vecchio rabbrivisce. Così gelide quelle dita. Così bagnata questa sera di febbraio. "*Solve et coagula*," pensa. In un lampo gli torna in mente ciò che stava andando a fare, la cosa importante che voleva portare a termine, a cui pensava camminando assorto...

Subito quelle mani delicate e implacabili lo lasciano, come se l'altro avesse percepito i suoi pensieri e questi avessero risvegliato un interesse irresistibile.

—Lasciami un'ora— si ascolta dire. —Cinquanta minuti. L'ultima seduta. E' importante, non solo per me. Poi verrò dove vuoi, come vuoi, te lo prometto. Credo che potrebbe evitare molto dolore. Se puoi aspettare solo cinquanta minuti.

"Sono pazzo a chiedere tempo alla mia morte" pensa nei pochi interminabili secondi di silenzio. Un autobus arriva scrosciando nelle pozzanghere, passa senza fermarsi come un'allucinazione, luce arancione sui posti vuoti, luce azzurra sull'autista impassibile, si allontana.

—Sì— sente dire una voce molto bassa, morbida, seria. —Ma mi piacerebbe venire con te.

—...Non mi farò sentire— aggiunge prevenendolo.

Non ode i suoi passi mentre prosegue per la breve distanza che lo separa dal suo studio. Si gira a guardare, ed è lì a un passo dietro di lui. Vede la pelle troppo candida del viso risplendere alla più fioca delle luci. Si meraviglia di quanto gli sia naturale camminare su quella strada familiare sapendo che è l'ultima volta; girare la chiave nella toppa mentre l'altro aspetta cortese, paziente; salire le scale sulla passatoia rosso scuro, aprire il portoncino di larice antico, accendere una sola luce sullo scrittoio. Prosegue attraverso la stanza, apre un'altra porta:

—Puoi restare nell'altra camera?

—Sì.

Si guarda attorno, il giovane. Le librerie a vetri su tutte le pareti, i pochi quadri (un Dufy primaverile, un Burri, un disegno a china di Greenaway), i mobili comodi di legno chiaro, l'I-Ching aperto sulla scrivania.

—T'ung Yên, la fratellanza... la quinta linea mobile... diventa Li, la luce che perdura—. Sembra al vecchio di udire quella voce con l'anima e non con le orecchie, tanto è sommessa e quieta. Prende gli occhiali dalla montatura leggera di metallo, poggiati sulle pagine un po' ingiallite del vecchio libro, e li inforca.

—Quando due persone si comprendono nel più profondo del cuore, le loro parole sono dolci e forti, come la fragranza delle orchidee— legge a voce alta.

Alzando gli occhi vede che il giovane è scomparso dietro la porta dell'altra stanza. Sospira. Ora arriverà l'ultimo dei pazienti della sua lunga vita di psicologo infantile. Per cinquanta minuti parlerà con una bambina condannata da una malattia che la fa invecchiare ancor prima di crescere. Curioso che l'ultima delle persone che ha aiutato in tanti anni gli chieda come affrontare la morte anziché la vita. Come spiegarle che non è un problema? La sua propria morte è nell'altra stanza, e lo aspetta, cortese, paziente. Non gli sembra appropriato pensare a lui come a qualcuno da affrontare.

"Piuttosto, che ti si accompagna" gli viene da pensare. Questo è un pensiero interessante. Ne parlerà con la bambina, tra poco. Curioso che, alla fine, si trovino ad aiutarsi l'un l'altra.

"Ma si impara solo quello che si sapeva già" dice tra sé "e lei ha imparato molto in fretta".

E' venuta, se n'è andata serena, col suo camminare incerto da vecchia.

"Dodici anni, non ancora donna, e il suo corpo ne ha ottanta come me" pensa il vecchio fregandosi gli occhi sotto le lenti. Sa che l'altro ha udito ogni parola, detta e non detta. Ora lo attende, nella quiete densa del suo studio quando è calata la notte, tra le ombre familiari negli angoli, l'odore dei libri e il ricordo del tabacco da pipa. Una grande pace è su di lui e dentro di lui. Tutto è compiuto, tutto è in ordine per la notte lunga che comincia. Non alza gli occhi quando sente la porta aprirsi e la stanza riempirsi del silenzio più intenso della presenza di lui. Lo percepisce accanto a sé, dietro di sé. Assapora con calma il proprio respiro. Sente le sue mani, gentili, sulle spalle.

—Lo sai che sto per morire comunque— dice piano. —Hai sentito il mio cuore. Ti ringrazio per essere venuto, e per avere aspettato.

Silenzio. Soltanto la carezza lieve della punta di quelle dita fredde che si muovono sulla sua pelle attraverso la giacca. E un breve sospiro, come per soffocare un singhiozzo, e una goccia tiepida di sangue scivola sulla sua guancia.

—Lo so— dice, la voce calda di compassione. —So quanto è difficile essere testimoni del dolore, soprattutto quando colpisce qualcuno tanto indifeso. Non so come ho avuto il coraggio di passare la vita così... forse solo perché ce ne sarebbe voluto ancora di più per non farlo. Le mani posate su di lui tremano leggermente.

—E' giusto piangere per questo. Fa bene piangere sull'inevitabile.

Senza voltarsi, solleva una mano a stringere quella dell'altro. E' fredda e liscia come il marmo, ma è una mano viva, esprime l'angoscia come tante mani di bambini e di adulti che ha stretto in cinquant'anni: la sua stessa angoscia, per loro e per sé. Si alza in piedi, si gira, si abbracciano, e senza suono piangono finché tutta la neve delle lacrime non è scesa a valle e le cime sono di nuovo nitide e nette.

—Ora— dice piano il vecchio, e sente di nuovo le dita dell'altro scostare gentilmente il colletto. Sente la sua sete, il desiderio, e la pietà disperata per i viventi. Delicata la puntura, delicate le labbra. Si sente svuotare della vita, e non resiste; sente uscire da sé ogni momento che ha vissuto, ogni ricordo e ogni pensiero, e li lascia andare. L'ultimo, stupito, ad attraversargli la mente mentre l'altro a sorsi beve la sua morte e i loro pensieri e i loro desideri si fondono come quelli degli amanti: l'immagine di lui seduto al suo scrittoio, leggermente chino in avanti mentre parla intensamente a una bambina di forse sei anni, bionda e bellissima, che lo ascolta attenta.

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## **Louis: Une lettre**

by mazaher, 2000

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Padova (Italia), June 15th, 1980

M. Louis Du Pointe Du Lac  
par la courtoisie de M.e Anne Rice

Monsieur,

je Vous prie de moi pardonner si je Vous écris en italien, car mon français est assez mauvais, and my English is not much better either.

Vorrei attirare la Vostra attenzione -se mi è concesso di toccare un argomento così delicato e personale- su una considerazione che, a mio modo di vedere, ha un'influenza determinante su questioni di portata assolutamente fondamentale per me quanto, mi sembra di poter ritenere, anche per Voi.

Tenterò di esprimermi nel modo più conciso possibile: E se la differenza tra esseri umani e non umani non fosse poi così significativa? Se il dolore, così come la strana condizione dell'esistenza, fossero in fin dei conti uguali per tutti, per gli uomini e le donne come per i cani i gatti i topi i cavalli i passeri i ragni le farfalle, e i vampiri?

Se così fosse, allora il principale problema non sarebbe la morte di per sè, ma la sofferenza che accompagna la morte così come accompagna la vita. Allora forse la morte data senza dolore e senza paura a un essere umano non costituisce per un vampiro una colpa, più di quanto costituisca una colpa la morte lenta e dolorosa di un cervo sbranato dai lupi, o di un luccio divorato da un falco pescatore mentre ancora si dibatte, o anche solo la fine del pesce fritto con le patatine che un ragazzino divide col suo cane.

Credo che ciò che tiene lontana la maggior parte degli umani dal riconoscere e abbracciare la propria eguaglianza con tutti i viventi, non umani e disumani, sia il timore di dover affrontare un pensiero spaventoso: che cioè gli uomini non hanno alcun fondato motivo di ritenersi più protetti, più al sicuro e più amati da Dio di quanto lo siano gli altri. L'erba del campo, che è vestita con più magnificenza di Salomone in tutta la sua gloria, e che tuttavia da un giorno all'altro è tagliata e gettata nel forno; i molti, più che molti passeri, che tuttavia sono venduti sul mercato a cinque a cinque per un soldo; i vitelli in fila per il macello; le zanzare che bruciano sulle griglie alla luce azzurrina delle lampade nelle notti d'estate.

Ho perduto anch'io una che amavo quanto me stessa, e l'ho perduta per causa mia: per non aver saputo prevedere ed evitare il male fatto da chi me l'ha sottratta. E colei che ho perduto non era un essere umano. Forse che questo rende meno straziante e irrimediabile il mio dolore, o il suo? Forse che scusa la mia incapacità di difenderla? O che posso perdonare agli altri, e a me stessa, il male fatto a lei? E cosa mi resta da fare ora che è troppo tardi, e che non basterà tutta la vita per rimediare, se non accettare un dolore ormai inevitabile quanto ingiusto, e ricordare in ogni momento che è giustizia combattere la sofferenza per quanto riesco a fare, chiunque la provi, umano, non umano o disumano che sia?

Ogni singola vita crea dolore, proprio e altrui, per il solo fatto di esistere. Per negare il dolore si dovrebbe negare la vita. Ma gli umani, e i vampiri, hanno a disposizione mezzi che mancano agli altri viventi, per evitare almeno in parte la sofferenza della morte altrui. Può darsi che si tratti di un dono: non meno grande dell'innocenza dalla quale sono benedetti i lupi e i falchi e gli scorpioni.

Non sappiamo e non possiamo sapere perché le cose stiano in questo modo intollerabile, ma si è costretti a riconoscere che la vita procede divorando se stessa. Allora dare la morte senza dolore è cosa benedetta quanto proteggere la vita: la vita di un lombrico come quella di un rospo o di una rondine o di un bambino, o di un vampiro. Il valore delle vite dipende solo dal punto di vista, e -come sapeva Amleto- nessuno è del tutto innocente e nessuno è del tutto colpevole.

A modo mio so cosa vuol dire essere senza pace. Ma stasera ero in piedi nel pascolo di erba alta con la vecchia cavalla alla quale so di dare anni di vita sicura e felice, e i rondoni sfrecciavano davanti e sopra di me nella luce limpida; e quando farà buio siederò in giardino a

guardare la notte accanto ai gatti che dividono con me la casa, e si sentirà l'odore umido della pioggia recente, e riesco a immaginare che cosa possa mai essere, la pace.

Allora forse posso tentare di sostenere l'ipotesi che perfino il mio posto nel mondo sia legittimo, nonostante il male che non riesco a evitare di fare ogni giorno e ogni minuto.

Senza dilungarmi oltre, rispettosamente vi porgo i saluti più cordiali

Sirrah

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**Lestat:** Τύραννος  
by mazaher, 2000

*Translated and remastered as the second epitaph within Double preface in Plague of Dreams*

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Una primavera dopo l'altra, il calicanto  
risveglia in me le peggiori passioni.

LdL

::

Ecco risuona  
la spaventosa risata degli dèi, puro potere  
immune da coscienza e da ragione.  
Sul patibolo l'abbiamo immaginato,  
ma il despota rivive e vive ancora,  
solo intento a quei suoi progetti arcani  
a cui necessita multiforme morte  
e nascite, e dolore rinnovato.  
Ritorna la tremenda primavera  
e non c'è forza per il tirannicidio.

Ma io sono il tiranno, quella faccia  
impassibile che ancora beve cuori  
e non vuole saper quel che non sa.  
All'alba, si può uccidere il tiranno  
e liberare il mondo dalla pena  
o questa pena dal mondo che la lega.  
La scrittura fitta delle cose, graffita  
sull'anima dal tempo con l'acuta  
unghia del dubbio critico, non lascia  
spazio all'alternativa. Me ne vado.

Sulla soglia del sole mi richiama,  
inaspettato, odor di calicanto.

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**Lestat: Alba Nigra**  
by mazaher, 2000  
*Translated and remastered as epigraph within Choice*

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L'alchemico splendore del mattino  
illuminò la gazza bianca e nera  
mentre s'alzava in volo dal guard-rail.  
E la magnifica coda romboidale  
disse la spaventosa verità.

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## **Lestat: Care & Maintenance**

by mazaher, 2001

Reference is made to the series of Specs written between 1995 and 1999 by Sheri Richardson, comprising Another interview, Resurrection, Citadel of grace, and Afterword to the Louis stories.

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### *1. Why a Lestat*

- a. Good investment: Practically indestructible. Said to get better with time.
- b. Good-looking. Quite.
- c. Sense of humour, provided you like it wicked.
- d. Immensely rich. Usually generous, also.
- e. Can fly.
- f. Always eager to pass an evening out.
- g. Much more cultivated than he'll let you guess at first sight, although mostly self-taught. Loves The Bard.

### *2. Not choosing*

Appliance tries so hard to be the one who does the choosing, that he never realizes when he does get chosen. This can easily lead to misunderstandings about who's loving and who's loved, and to the unfounded assumption that he can't be both.

To overcome this fault, a new and upgraded model is currently under beta-testing at Sheri Richardson's engineering plant on Divisadero Street, San Francisco, CA.\*

### *3. (Un-)living with it*

- a. TLC: Won't work. Ever. It gets about the same response as calling in a 13-year-old boy from playing cowboys and indians, and ask him to kiss welcome to an old aunt come for tea.
- b. Taking the lead: He won't let you. Don't try. Don't even think about it, he'd know.
- c. Letting him take the lead: sure to get results. Which ones, he doesn't guess himself.

### *4. Advanced functions*

- a. Insert danger at one end (whichever), more danger comes out on the other end.
- b. Insert love at the right end (which one is right may vary), you never know what will come out, if ever, at any end. It's always worth trying, though.
- c. Insert new interest in any drive, appliance will start a routine which isn't going to stop until all bits of information about the topic present on Planet Earth's hard drive have been irreversibly processed and output has been produced.
- d. Locate on stage with appropriate instruments, props and band or acting company, and will perform brilliantly.
- e. Designed to be proficient, if somewhat messy, at wolf-hunting. Function now disabled on ecological as well as humanitarian grounds.

### *5. Troubleshooting (on sight)*

- a. Appliance sulks. Try ignoring it for a while. If the problem persists, results may be obtained by awakening his curiosity.
- b. Appliance recriminates. Careful balance needed. Avoid succumbing to guilty feelings.
- c. Appliance has a talking fit. Don't let it become a talking match. Just throw in a word here and there to show you're listening, and wait it out.
- d. After a spell of boredom, appliance concocts some scheme for stirring up things. Don't try to find out the details, don't try to talk him out of it, Scream For Maharet At Once! Immediate assistance needed!



## 6. *Technical Specifications*

- a. The appliance comes complete with one oversize ego, extra thick skin, a store package of stubbornness, a set of spare resources, and fully clothed in expensive garments of dubious taste.
- b. Never expose any part to ultraviolet rays. Never let appliance try to, either.
- c. Do not expose to temperature over 451° F.
- d. Expose frequently to hot showers, preferably in suitable company.
- e. Regularly feed by plugging standard PC (Pulsating Current) fangs into main artery of vertebrate, preferably *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Cold-blooded vertebrates may supply temporary buffer in an emergency.

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## **Louis & Lestat: Coming home**

by auden and mazaher, 2001

Lestat written by auden, Louis written by mazaher

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*Lestat:*

I wish this city did not feel like home to me. Sometimes when I return I think its beauty feels like corruption. The thick wet heat of the evening, overloaded with scents of past and present. The flowers in the Garden District like a hideous alien life-form strangling the city with long thin fingers as they bind themselves to the decaying buildings. The sound of the river calling plaintively from where it in turn has been strangled by the city in a previous age. The broken tombs in the cemeteries look abandoned as if the dead themselves have no interest in their own monuments. And the mortals like flickering candles, living, loving and dying, unaware the city will swallow them as it has their parents and grandparents.

Sometimes I hate coming here. I resent the way that house on Rue Royale calls to me. I object to everything which screams at me with unwelcome familiarity. Tonight I don't want to renew my acquaintance with this city. I'd rather deny it.

Turn again Lestat. Turn again and leave. Go back to those seductive hotel suites in skyscrapers high high above the disease of the streets and immerse yourself in luxuries. I don't want to be here, in this place, in this time. I think sometimes I hate this city with its mingled ache of memory and desire.

I can't see anything here as it is. The past intrudes too much and then the present intrudes on the past and I wonder if I am really walking here or just hallucinating the whole thing. The city a hideous Jungian symbol conjured out from where it squats in the hindbrain of my consciousness. Perhaps New Orleans stands for the state of my soul?

Here is the fountain point for these memories. This house is too well known now. Someday someone will seek me out here and, not finding me, burn it to the ground. We destroy each other's houses with a savage joy, knowing it was once one of the worst crimes among us. Back when there were still laws to break. When this house burns I think I'll be glad to be free of its demands on me. I'll be laughing when I hunt down the one who killed it.

The last time I was here its perfection was so intense it squeezed my heart in a vice. Now I am stung by its slow progress back into decay. The flowers in the courtyard have grown and are crawling up the side of the house. Dead leaves fill the fountain. Nothing is broken or cracked but it seems to me this house is trembling on the cusp of disaster.

The house is not empty although the curtains are drawn. I sit down on the little stone rim of the fountain and wonder if he will come out to me. I know he's here. He has to be. And I know that everything I've thought before was a lie. I know why I resent this sense of coming home. I know what beauty it is that terrifies me. I know what stands for the state of my soul. Did you really think I wouldn't?

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*Louis:*

I love this city. This is home to me, it has always been. The life and death of me, the life and death of innumerable creatures past and present, human and inhuman. I also love San Francisco. I love Paris and her heartbreaking beauty, but this damp heat is home, this vegetation forever growing from decay is home.

It is not so for Lestat. Home is not a word of comfort for him, because he could never find any comfort in any of his homes. Moreover, this is a place with a past: devouring itself in such tropical lushness as an everlasting homage to the past forever unrolling behind its present. And Lestat is always escaping toward the future, as though only future is real for him and past and present alike are but imperfect prefigurations of a platonic perfection yet to come. Such is his faith in life.

So perhaps I can guess what's keeping him here, after all. Why, so uncharacteristically, he restored our former house and, so uncharacteristically, he asked me to once again divide it with him. What reasons he has for a move that roots him so firmly in our shared past. This house is alive. Buildings made before reinforced concrete came into being usually are: quiet, long-lived creatures spanning many human generations, like trees. Or vampires. This house slept for a long time, trying to dream away the shock of what happened within its walls the last time we lived here. Now it's awake again, and waiting. Waiting for what? A new disaster? Or a new beginning?

The curtains are drawn. The lights are out in here. Not even the faint glimmer of the stars is filtering into this darkened room where I am sitting, silent, still. But I am startled now, as though the house itself is trying to make me aware of something. A presence. The garden whispers around it. Suddenly, I want to be there. I run down the stairs. I turn the handle of the garden door. And there he is, sitting at the fountain, looking away, and I stop on the threshold with my hand on the jamb, surprised at how I'm feeling breathless just at the sight of him.

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*Lestat:*

Suddenly there he is. Beauty's ultimate expression. As with moonlight the garden seems suddenly miraculous when cast in his shadow. I hoped to find him here. Hoped against hope without knowing why.

Why did I come here again when all I feel for this city is resentment? Why did I invite him to live in this house? Why did I wait so long to come and find him? Simply this. He is there and I have forgotten to breathe.

His eyes are luminous where he stands in the doorway. Soft and liquid and heart-stoppingly lovely.

Why do I do this to myself? Why do I always come back to worship at this shrine when I know that sooner or later we'll teeter over the brink and fall back into the chaos of our eternal feud between love and hate? Why?

Because I am drawn back here as inevitable as the ocean is drawn to the shore. Sooner or later the tide always brings me back to cast me at his feet again. Echoes of earlier tides in our relationships chime softly in my head with memories of other times we have stood in this place. And it is as myself, and as those other versions of myself, that I move forwards to greet him.

"Louis.." I say, possessed by the wish to name him. To claim this ethereal beauty is here and real and, more than that, mine.

And then I realise I don't know what comes next and I do what I have been wanting ever since he first appeared there and I reach to take him in my arms. He doesn't resist and stands quietly as I envelope him in my embrace and breath in the scent of the night through the silken mesh of his hair.

I want to crush him tightly to me and cover him with kisses but I am terrified of scaring him away and, when I realise I am shaking, I step back and try for the old razzle-dazzle. A smile forms on my mouth as I look at him and I turn it into a brilliant grin.

"Louis," I say again. But this time it is from a wish to separate myself from him. "Always the Beautiful One."

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*Louis:*

He turns to look at me and once again a cold finger of fear touches my heart.

I do think I can guess why he wishes me to be here. It is something to do with me, with his feelings toward me. I know he's trying to re-establish some sort of relationship, but whether he wants to make it up between us, or see me suffer for deserting him, this I do not know. He won't say. I only know that my bliss at seeing him here, safe, equals my fear.

I am afraid that his anger will forever bring him back here to try and punish me, when I would only like to hold him and comfort us both for what we suffered. I am equally afraid that his anger may once again take him away from me; that he will seek new lethal dangers, just to spite me.

But this time I won't leave. Whatever it be, I want to stay here and face it.

He has come back. Like a wave comes back to the reef, full, shining, arching under a crown of foam, as smooth and translucent as blown glass. The wave breaks on the rock, the rock crumbles under the impact. They separate again, both worse for the encounter. Must we forever seek each other, only to crash and break? Maybe it is only that I am too slow for him. He's a glorious bird, a flaming phoenix, come to rest for a while among the branches of the horse-chestnut that I am. When he flies up again, maybe never to return, will I ever be able to uproot myself and follow, scorched branches and all, unless in ashes blown in the wind of his wake? Will ever the rock follow after the retreating wave, unless as broken, crushed pebbles dragged and uselessly rolling after it? I wish I was faster.

He says my name, and I shudder, first in shock, then in happiness, because his voice is soft as velvet. As the black velvet of the ribbon with which he tied my hair is his voice, and now his arms come around me and between his arms is surely the very best place to be in the whole world... But already he's leaving me, almost before he even touched me.

His voice is not velvet anymore, it's clear and cold as the blue crystal of his eyes.

"Louis," he says. "Always the beautiful one".

"No, Lestat," I answer. "Just one who loves you".

Even his silence now is warmer than his last words. His eyes meet mine. For once, just for once, I have not been too late with him. I have grazed with my hand of leaves the flamboyant tail of the phoenix streaking away, and the phoenix has turned back to look at me.

But we can't face each other any longer, or he will be sure to bolt away after some wild scheme of his to fill up what's left of the night, and I am still far from having had enough of his presence, tonight. I don't want him to go yet.

It's strange how for two centuries I tried hard to find out how to live with the aching void of his not being there, and now I am striving to find a way to live with his presence... Desultory, unforeseeable, overwhelming. As hard to brace for as his absence. Neither is easy, and I am tired.

So I sit down on the steps and put my hand lightly on his to ask him to sit beside me. I wonder why he's trembling.

Without speaking, he sits down, looking away, beyond the fountain, like he was trying to count the Queen's wreath flowers whose scent is filling the darkness on the other side of the garden. I am relaxing now, but he seems to have wound up instead. Is it my fault? It has to be.

"Allow me," I whisper, and slowly, leaving him the time to stop me, I bring my hand at the nape of his neck and begin massaging him lightly with the tips of my fingers, like I was scratching a cat behind his ears. His hair is soft and sleek as spun silk, and just slightly wavy. I can feel each single shaft where it rises from his smooth scalp. I fight myself not to grasp a handful, right there at the base of his skull, and shake and pull a little, only to feel their mass and the strength of their roots in my fist. I don't. I just go on moving my fingertips in that golden wealth of silky strands, and he lets me. Still he doesn't look at me.

Suddenly I remember Armand used to do that to me, those rare times when we rested together in the garden on a hot summer evening in the hills south of Siena, before going out to feed, and watched the stars gush out one by one in the deep blue, cloudless sky. I loved it. The discourse of touch, deeper and clearer than words. Touch never lies. I wish this touch of mine tells him what I have no words to tell by. Whatever will come next, this is a good evening already.

He seems to like it too. He is leaning imperceptibly back against my hand, and his eyes close. I can't wait anymore. This miraculous moment is surely going to be shattered, somehow, sometime soon, so I'd rather be the one to do this to myself. Gathering all my hope that he won't misunderstand me, that he will listen and feel how dear he is to me, how happy I am that he is with me now, I ask him:

"Why are you here, Lestat?"

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*Lestat:*

He breaks my heart. All that beauty. When I try to separate myself from him with cold words he looks at me with soft wide eyes and says:

"Just one who loves you."

How I want to believe that. But how can I? I've given him anything he ever asked for and yet he's denied me everything I've wanted in return. How will he deny me now when what I want is him himself?

I want to possess that fragile moonlight beauty. I want to hold it in my arms and call it mine. And now, when he says he loves me, I can't look at him. I can't let myself hope that there is hope for us.

What does he mean when he says he loves me. What emotion can possibly stir in him? When I brought him into my darkness he was passionate. Angry, demanding, even violent. In this present it is difficult to imagine that. He is so gentle, so fragile, drifting lightly across the world. So precious and so untouchable, like spun glass. He says he loves me and I wonder if blood or crystal runs in his veins.

Love isn't gentle. Love is what chokes me as I seek him out, love is what makes me want to crush him breathless in my arms, love is what makes me ache when I let him go. Love is what makes me shake when he touches me now, inviting me politely to sit down next to him.

I swallow, trying to ease the ache in my throat, wondering what to say. I smell crushed flowers and the all too familiar scent of Louis. I can't believe he's here, next to me, and I don't dare speak a word for fear that I'll break this moment somehow. Fear I'll break my heart again.

Then he touches me and I think I might die from the bliss of that moment. His hand sinks into my hair and I feel each individual fingertip as they press lightly at the back of my neck and then begin to stroke. I close my eyes and try to sink into the sensation of him touching me.

Louis touching me with having to be forced or cajoled. Surely too good to be true. I can't help but wish those slim gentle fingers would clench tightly in my hair. Grab hold and pull so that I have an excuse to fight back. I want to fight with him because I know I am the stronger, know that I can pin him down and trap him in my embrace, I want an excuse to subdue him.

But he is so gentle. So kind. Too fragile for my predatory love. His hand softly leaves my hair, almost as if he hadn't noticed it was there and had touched me as absently as one does a stray pet. Then he says, just as softly, as if he is making polite conversation:

"Why are you here, Lestat?"

I sigh. Yes, this is torture. But I knew it would be. If there are no surprises at least I can be grateful for the chance to rest. Louis will not argue with me unless I force him too. He won't demand anything from me now. He's too much the gentleman to treat me with anything but courtesy. And if I, just this once, can keep hold of my temper. If I can force myself not to impose my love upon him. If I can keep the Brat Prince in chains then maybe I'll gain something more meaningful than his polite and courteous expression of love. Perhaps this time I can win his respect.

"I thought you might appreciate some company," I say lightly. "That perhaps we could spend some time together?"

"Certainly," he says expressionlessly. "That would be.. agreeable."

His voice is empty and the hurt stabs me like a shard of ice through my heart. Does he really care that little? How valueless is such a love?

I force myself to turn and look at him and he is a statue carved of ice and moonlight. Each strand of his hair could be individually carved from crystal, so motionless is he. He looks out across the courtyard and I wonder if he has already forgotten I am here and suddenly I forget my good intentions. I want to force something from him. Some sign he recognises me.

"Agreeable?" I taunt him. "Only that, my gentle philosopher?"

Suddenly needing to move, I leap to my feet and face him so that he must look at me.

"Only that, mon coeur?" I ask again and then close my lips tight, not trusting myself to speak further. Not wanting another futile endearment to escape me.

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*Louis:*

So here we are. Stuck again, according to a script carved into the very bones of our being together. But tonight I want to break it.

I have been around for the length of three human lifetimes, without him for the most part, and one thing I have learned: patience. Patience is what has made me wait one more night before dying, when I had no reason to go on anymore. Just another night. Let's see if I can stand existence just one more night. Patience is strangely akin to hope, even when there is no hope. Yet now I am suddenly discovering patience is not enough... I should have known patience would never be enough when Lestat is concerned.

He now jumps to his feet and is standing in front of me, so that I can't avoid his eyes. 'Mon coeur,' he says, almost unwilling, and at once his lips snap shut in a thin line. I know what he is looking at, looking at me. His fledgling, his fragile child, someone he can shatter in pieces with the force of his hands, or of his words, if he is not careful, or if I make him angry. But this is not the whole of me.

I am different, he thinks me inferior. He can't think except in terms of competition, and I refuse to compete with him.

Like Oedipus, his first line, to whatever antagonist, is: 'Will you fight with me?'. I never answer, and he turns away, looking for somebody else.

I keep hoping that his question will change... that he may ask me one night, 'Do you want to know me?' or 'May I get to know you?'. Sometimes I think he holds long conversations between us in his head, doing both parts, and then he believes I actually said words he only imagined, in response to questions he never put me. But then, this is what I caught myself doing again and again, along those endless decades when I thought him dead.

I want to clear things up between us, but I don't want to fight. I'd be sure to lose, and we would not have changed a single comma in the script for all our efforts. I must do things in a different way. So I don't stand up now. I don't look him in the eyes: he's so self-trained to battle, he would take it as a challenge. I'm not fighting him, and he doesn't know what to do. I can feel warmth radiating from him. He has fed well tonight. I'm cold instead, empty, and the usual excruciating craving begins to eat me from the inside. I smell honey and flowers in his skin, seeping through his clothes, his own, inebriating personal scent. And yet I won't allow myself to taste him. I won't play Adam to his Elohim. He believes he wants a partner; but what he really wants is a follower. A magnifying mirror. Someone alike enough to him to effectively underscore his being stronger. He has not learned yet.

But now I don't want anything fragile to stand between us anymore, so if I must break, or a part of me must break, so be it. I am stronger now than I was when he made me... I wonder if he ever realized it. I want nothing else but this strength, a shared strength, to keep us together now. I won't wait another century.

So, almost brusquely, I ask him:

"What do you want from me, Lestat?"

He doesn't answer at once. I can see my question has startled him, although the only sign is his pupils dilating. I insist:

"Don't think, just answer me. Quick! I won't be hurt," I lie.

I know I love him; but I don't quite know what it is that I love in him, exactly... There is so much I don't approve. Yet my love has nothing to do with that. I don't love him *\*in spite\** of what I disapprove, much less *\*because\** of what I disapprove. The two planes are separate. Not a single word in the interview was false, yet whenever I happen to read any passage of it now I cringe with shame. He comes out so very different from who he is. Truth can be so partial. Words can be such liars. So I try to remember that my love for him lives elsewhere than in any place that can be described with words, and that I do not and never will actually know what makes it work. It's intuition, and emotions, not descriptions and explanations. He still remains silent, and I realize that I must try to tell him what I am feeling, or uncertainty will keep him stuck there forever. I am scared, because I never spoke to him like this, and it is possible that I will unwittingly hurt him. There are many open wounds, well concealed under his flashing smile, and I don't know them all.

He belongs to a breed of warriors since the crusades; the last three generations of my family were landowners, and earlier, who knows. I was trained to grow and preserve; he was trained to fight and destroy. I was much loved, without my merit, since the day I was born; there are

so many reasons to love him, yet he was never loved enough. It is hard for him to realize he is so much worth of love. I am scared for us both, but I must try to tell him. I see him tense when my words reach him, but I go on.

"I was fascinated when you made me, Lestat. What was left of my hope clung to you and your promise of a new life without pain. The promise was false, or rather, impossible... I felt let down. It took me a century to understand. Now things are different: now I love you. Do you know what it means? I don't need you anymore. I want you instead. It's not the same. Yet I can't have you... I have learned the hard way not to have any expectations about you, but I can't help having hopes. Maybe that you are going to allow me a place in your life, somehow, somewhere. Some place I can accept. What is it that you want? Is there such a place for me?"

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*Lestat:*

I hate to fight with Louis. I hate it because he always wins. Every conversation I have ever had with him has seemed rehearsed somehow. All those echoes of our past, other echoes of our future, standing close by repeating our actions over and over again.

How do I know he has walked in this courtyard for hours, pacing with soft cat-like footfalls, wondering what to say to me? I know it because I have done the same thing. Caged in this courtyard, walking, talking to myself, trapped by too many possibilities.

Just seeing him and my heart is ripped open and bleeding. I can't control myself anymore. I call him my heart and it is the truth. I understand him as little as I understand my own heart but I feel him within me, my life blood.

He speaks finally and his tones are measured. It sounds like something he has been preparing for a long time. He tells me that he doesn't need me. But he loves me. And as he says it his tone is grieving. He has come to expect that love for me is useless. That I will shuffle him into a corner of my life and leave him there. And this is my fault. I have done this to him. Pushed him away so many times that now he hardly dares hope that this time I won't do it again. He looks straight at me as he speaks and I am pinned by the gaze of those cool clear green eyes. I haven't given him this ability. This bravery. That he can speak of love openly and rationally is a gift I don't have it in my power to bestow.

I take a quick breath and it sounds to me like a sob.

"What am I supposed to say, Louis?" I ask him. "Now you love me. Now you don't need me any more. Give it another century and maybe that will pass as well."

I turn away from him. I can't look at him now.

"Or better yet," I hear myself saying and my voice is harsh with pain. "Maybe in that time you'll find someone you do need. Someone who you love from the moment of your first meeting and you know you'll love until death finally steals them from you. Someone who is as necessary as breath to you, as necessary as the blood that sings in your body each time you see them. Maybe you'll find that person Louis but for your sake..." and mine, my mind whispered although I couldn't say the words, "... for your sake I hope you don't. Because to need someone like that, so that when you're close to them it feels like pain, to need someone so much that you're terrified of that power they have over you, to need someone always and eternally isn't a thing that obeys reason. And it's not a question of learning to love them, or of finding them a place in your heart. Because your heart doesn't belong to you any more. It's theirs and always has been even if they don't recognise it lying at their feet."

I need you, my thoughts screamed. I need you so much I can't stand it when you say you love me. I can't hear it without wondering how hard you've tried not to. You've fought with me for so many years. Every breath out of your mouth has denied what I thought we felt for each other. I've loved you forever, Louis, and I can't believe you don't see it. I can't believe you think you need to ask me to love you. Since the moment I first saw you I've been fighting not to love you so much and not for one moment have I ever succeeded.

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*Louis:*

'Maybe that will pass as well,' he said. Hot bitterness. I feel his hurt. I am trying to restrain myself, to go carefully about this business of uncovering and cleaning our festering wounds, and he thinks I am acting a scene I somehow rehearsed. He wants me to need him madly, mirroring what he thinks is his need of me. But it's not me he needs — only his own image of his needing me.

Since I have known him, he's been searching for something to stop him: to anchor him to time and place and the boundaries of reality. He also used Claudia for that, like human parents all too often breed children to serve their idea of purpose in life. Their idea, their life, not the children's. But I am someone else. That may be why he fought his love for me since the very first time we met. In his innermost heart, he knows I am not that image.

He draws a deep breath which is rather a sob. His shoulders shake now that he's turned away from me, and it almost breaks my heart. I don't care for restraint any more, and I stand up and go to him and I embrace him from behind, squeezing him as hard as I can, like I could squeeze out all pain from him and release him empty and ready to be filled with happiness at last. How I wish "I love you" could be taken as seriously as "I don't need you"! He doesn't believe in love, not anymore, whatever the word may have once meant to him. It is my fault. How will I ever redress this wrong I did him?

"It is not going to pass, Lestat. Do let us pass instead through this next century together for a change... That I don't need you means that you are free, no more, no less. I am not a chain now, like I was for you in the beginning. Every single ring in the chain was shattered as each of Claudia's and Madeleine's bones exploded and burned. But do not believe my want for you to be less compelling than my former need. I am going to put whatever I am, whatever I have become and whatever I have learned into loving you. I don't want to own your heart, or you to own mine. I want you to be the master of yours, and I am going to do with mine what I want, that is to love you. And you can't do a damn about it, because you have no power on me anymore, and I won't exert any other power on you than the power to love you, wherever you are, whatever you do. How does this feel, hm?"

I sink my face into his hair and the dampness of his emotion rises from him. I can smell it. I can taste it.

I kiss softly the naked skin behind his ear, and I don't release my grip on his waist yet. I pray to Amor improbus, to Love the mischief, that he won't pull away from me just now.

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*Lestat:*

I hear his words falling like a soft pattering of rain behind me: explaining, forgiving and ever and eternally accepting. He is trying to share himself with me and I want more than I've ever wanted anything else in my life to be able to accept what he offers as easily as he lays it before me. But he has always been stronger than me and I don't know how I can explain to him in return that I don't want to share him. I want to own him. To own him and have him and keep him and be owned by him in return. We are so different he and I. How can we be so different and yet love each other?

'Yes, remember that, you fool,' I think to myself. 'He is saying he loves you. Isn't that what you have always wanted?' And I just don't know any more. Is it possible that we can reach a conclusion? Can there ever be an end to our endless misunderstandings? I am shaking with the thought. I feel as if I could break apart at any moment: every nerve ending raw.

And then he touches me and I feel his soft warm breath on my neck and then his mouth. And I \*want\* him. I need him so much I am in agony from it. Every drop of blood in my body is crying out for him and I know that if I let this go on I will give into that craving and show him the true demon of lust that rages within me at just one touch from him. I want him. I want him so much I can't stand it and I wrench away from him before I do something we will both regret and once more wreak violence upon a love I have, in all honesty, done nothing to deserve. He loves me better than I love myself and isn't that the truth, children?

I hear a soft gasp escape him and I turn to see that he is frozen in place and his eyes are no longer unreadable, they are mirrors breaking. And I see myself reflected in those splintered



shards and I realise I have done it again and I have hurt him even while intending to save him from myself.

"Oh Louis," I say and I reach to take those pale slender hands in mine and I raise each of them in turn to my lips and, closing my eyes, permit myself to brush a kiss on to each hand. "Beautiful one," I breathe and this time I mean it with every breath in my body. "Don't let me hurt you," I whisper and each word is like a sob. "Don't tell me I'm free. I don't trust myself with freedom."

I fall suddenly to my knees before him, still holding his hands, and look up pleadingly at him. "Don't set me free," I say again. "My merciful death, I can never be free of you. I'll accept you don't need me and even try to love you not despite it but because of it. But, please, don't give me the freedom to hurt you."

I can't look at him any more and I stare at the ground instead. Those smooth flastones have been worn down by us over centuries of companionship. Centuries of misunderstandings. It's so important now that he understand me and I know, I *\*know\**, that I should trust him to do so. But I don't dare.

"Teach me how to love you," I whisper so quietly I doubt he can hear me. "Make me the lover you deserve."

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*Louis:*

I am holding him still, amazed by the miracle of his acceptance for something I initiated, and once again I lose myself in his scent. He has the perfume of propolis and bitter chestnut honey, the scent of sun itself. Earlier tonight I found a single strand of his hair sticking to the wall of the bathtub at water level, as golden as sunlight. I feel a thin blade of pain pass through me at the thought of the endless evenings when I did not.

When he asked me to come and live here with him again, I hoped so hard things would change between us. I want them to change, yet I can't expect them to unless I change also, at the same time as he and our being together are changing. But I'm scared.

I have learned how to stand going on existing... alone, because any other company soon drains out my energy and my concentration on the choice to live. And now I am afraid to make room for him. I am so sure he will go away again.

Living with him is difficult enough. Living without him even more, but it can be done, as I have seen. What I can't do, and won't do, is this endless give-and-take. I lost him once, when I thought him dead. I received the miraculous gift of having him back, that night in Carmel Valley, and already the next night he was taken from me, seemingly forever. He came back, and I thought I would die there, like Odysseus' dog. But again he ran off to try and die, to try and live as a human, to try and live as an immortal. To try and be someone else, then be himself again. He counted me in without even asking what it cost me, just to be waiting for him, without his news, without a goodbye or a promise, or at least a lie to hang on to.

Assa o disassa, they say in Brazil. Tie that donkey or untie it, but quit fussing with the rope and the ring in the wall. My heart can take only so many breaks before being shattered once and for all. Whether I live or I die, I need him to tell me in truth at last: what am I to him? But now a chill runs through me, because just as the question forms in my mind he suddenly turns around and breaks my embrace, as if he had heard me spell it aloud. Panic nails me there while my heart is torn to pieces by his shifting away, surely escaping me and my pitiless questioning.

A new truth dawns on me like a crude flash. I try to be wise, to convince myself that I want to clear things up and begin anew, while I am actually only hungry for him, nothing else. He is here now, and yet, instead of being grateful, I want more. But greed I have always felt for him after all. I seem to never have enough. Whenever I can't follow, I want him to turn back and stay with me. Stopping myself from keeping him chained to me is all I could learn to do until now. Love is so selfish.

I am startled when, instead of leaving me finally once and for all, he turns to me and takes my hands in his.

How I love his hands. The bones of the wrists are thick, hidden with their sinews under the smooth skin where age did not have the time to carve out their path. I remember the dimple

that formed at the base of his left thumb when he raised it, curved and taut, to drop his pinch of tobacco powder in the concavity and sniff it. He always laughed softly after he sneezed. I love his hands when he moves them, emphasizing his words; and even more when he seems to forget them around, and I find myself staring at that strong, shapely fingers and smooth backhand, frozen halfway in a movement, while he is distracted by something else. At those times I wait for them to move, to catch up with the rest of his body. Whenever he touches me, it's bliss. His hands have a wisdom he ignores himself.

Now he lightly kisses my fingers and I feel I am melting before him like a candle under the heat of too hot a flame. It takes some moments before I understand his words. 'Don't let me hurt you,' he says. 'I don't trust myself with freedom'. I am so astonished that I can't answer for some time. What must I appear to him, silent and immobile and cold, that now he kneels down in front of me, not even daring to look up?

'Teach me,' he whispers.

I never saw him like this. I never felt this nakedness in his voice. He is putting himself in my hands like he never did before, without assuming or expecting anything... listening to me, even asking me, \*me\*, to teach him. I have not earned this. He should be turning his back on me and walking out of my life forever. I can't understand and I am overwhelmed.

I fall on my knees also in front of him and I touch my forehead with his. It is I now who lift his hands to my lips, but it's not enough for me. I take each of them and I put them on my own forehead for a moment and again I kiss the wrists where the blood is flowing, hot and scented. "My love," I say, my voice tentative as I don't feel sure of what I want to say, "for two hundred years and more we have fought ourselves and each other about the hows and whys of our love. Fear has been our companion, more faithful and constant than we have been to each other, and where fear crawls in, happiness takes flight".

A sudden sob shakes me. Will I be able to go on? Will he listen and understand something I don't understand myself? He remains silent, his hands still in mine on our lap. My words sound even lower as I go on.

"But I've had enough of fear and I don't want a single drop of happiness to be wasted anymore. I pray you, my love, let us both banish fear. It is certain that we will hurt each other at times, but we will face it when it happens. Let us not make it a nightmare laying waste to our time together. Trust me to be able to stand whatever you may happen to do to me, and I'll trust you to forgive me for my faults again, like you did in the past. It does not matter how and why we are in love. We were in love already, two hundred years ago. We were living together like we were one, without realizing what a miracle it was, and it went to waste, and it took us until tonight to meet again in this garden and look really and truly at each other".

As delicately as I can, I lift his chin and meet his eyes. I can see he is pressing his tongue on his upper left fang to keep himself from crying. He never knew I am aware of this little childish trick of his, nor that it makes me tremble with tenderness for him every time.

I don't know where the strenght to go on is coming from to me now, but I am grateful for it. Perhaps it is the need, the want, the heartbreaking discipline that glimmer in his eyes now like a breeze ruffles clear water, while he is waiting for my words and really, for the first time, listening to me.

"You ask me to teach you, my love. I have nothing to teach you. Perhaps for us both the lesson is only this: let us greet, and not question, our love for each other. Let us enjoy its every pleasure and, for the sake of the love, let us be patient about all the rest. Let us be equal in this. Let us teach each other. No more fear. No more 'no's. My love," I whisper now, while my voice is finally breaking, "A thousand years from now, the archaeologists of soul will know I have loved you. I pray you, drink from me, and let me drink from you".

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*Lestat:*

I am staggered. So many things have been said here, so much that has lain unspoken for centuries, could it be that we are breaking our pattern at last? I have fought this all the way, fought firstly for my freedom: the ability to take love lightly least it sear me to the soul with its flame. Then finally fought to abase myself: for the freedom of slavery that would allow me to escape this responsibility. The responsibility of loving Louis.

Don't say that love is simple. Live forever and then tell me how simple it was. And, in truth, it was never simple. From the moment I met him I was drowning and now, kneeling opposite each other on the courtyard flagstones, terrible waves have washed us up together on this shore. I turn his words in my head, trying to extract every last drop of meaning from them, every ramification of possibility, every twist and turn that fate could use to trap us. It's too much. In the end there's only one word that matters. One word we have said more often this evening than ever before. One word said in bitterness and rage, in pleading and denial, with inevitability and desire.

Love.

Green eyes dilate and my world contracts to those twin pools of emerald darkness. Have I said it aloud?

"Love," I say again, testing the sound of it in my mouth, feeling its reality in the cold stones beneath my knees and the slim body only inches away holding my hands in his.

He is so close to me, so close. I can see the pale skin and the tiny blood vessels underneath the flesh: each cell that makes up his body a tiny star of desire pricking me like a hundred thousand needles of pleasure and pain.

How is it possible to want anything as much as I want him? How is it possible that he desires me in return? More than that, how is it possible that anything could separate us when this, this moment, holds us joined in an unspoken promise that means more than the rest of my life.

It takes me a few tries to find my voice. As I search for it I reach out to draw my fingers through his hair, sweeping back its heavy mass, and find my fingers curving into hooks as my skin shivers to touch him.

"How is it possible?" I breathe, fisting my hands in his hair and holding him in place, or is it myself I'm holding up? "How is it possible that every moment that passes I love you more?"

A smile teases the corner of his mouth and I want to kiss him so much that my heart feels like bursting. But even though I know it's only my words that hold us back from consummating the union of our souls, I'm still demon enough to delay the moment. I'll make my promises to him to and to myself for as long as I am able and trust him to remind me of them when I am not. I promise myself centuries of falling deeper in love and if every second feels as long as these do I think I might die from it.

"You are every promise I've ever made to myself," I whisper. "Let me make them all over again with you and I'll show you how well I can keep them..."

Without intending it I am moving closer still so that a breath of air would have trouble passing between us. "...close to my heart."

He is trembling. Or is it I who trembles while he is still? Where does he end and I begin? I know the pattern of his face better than I know my own. And it must be my reflection because in it I see a perfect mirror of the euphoria of love I feel.

"Truly," I tell him, smiling now. "I have lost and found myself in you." And I bend my head at last, falling into his embrace as I bear him down beneath me. At home, for now and forever. For however far I travel, over miles and over years, I have found my journey's end in him.

::

*Louis:*

He sees me. For the first time since he made me, he's \*seeing\* me, and he listens. How many times I felt his senses pitched on me... Sight, hearing, smell, touch, even taste whenever I let him. Drinking my presence in, eating me alive, but never really seeing me, only looking. Never really listening to my words, only hearing my voice. Yet now he sees me, and I'm so thankful I can't breathe, because he makes me feel like I'm worthy of him.

Time doesn't solve any problem or answer any question for us. Death won't come to our rescue from the traps we tangle into. The passing centuries only compound our failures. But now he's facing it for us both, our failure to accept our love, and he's fighting as much for me as for himself. How brave he is, my warrior. I could barely keep my ghosts at bay, trying to get to know them, if not make friends with them; but he's chasing them away now with a flaming sword, conquering for us a new share of time. A time together. He's risking all for us,

for me, and I who waited for so long —even without hope, I waited for him— how can I respond now that I have no words left and I can't feel my face anymore?  
I'm burning and it won't stop because this time I don't want it to stop. I'm giving myself wholly to him, because this time I know he's giving me all of himself.  
'Love' he says. He sounds surprised by his own voice, saying this one word. My heart breaks hearing it, but it is not surprise. It's passion. It's sweeping me away, and this time I won't try to hold fast to the slippery rocks of prudence. This time I'll be his equal. He's taking the most dangerous risk in his life with me, and I'm going to do the same with him.  
I don't need his promises. Promises are made to be broken in shame and regret. I don't want any more debris around us. He's seeing me now, and it's enough. I'll show this to him with my blood, and my body, and my soul.  
I am hungry for him. I know this feeling so well, but this time it's a thousand times more piercing, because this time he's here, and he never was so very near before. It makes me tremble in front of his flowery body. Can he feel my desire?  
I raise my eyes to his, and suddenly I can feel my face again. I feel it because it mirrors his own. I don't know anymore where I end and he begins. And his words now, while he smiles at me with a tenderness he never allowed himself before, and which touches me like a shaft of sunlight, are the echo of what I'm feeling.  
'I have lost and found myself in you' he says, and he embraces me as I slip down beneath him. I can feel his thick blood pulsing under my lips grazing his throat. The thought that now, now at last, I'll taste him once more after an eternity of famine, makes me feel like the gates of eden are being swung open again.  
And it is bliss, for we are finally home after so many years and so much sorrow.  
Home is where we can be in each other's arms.

::

For however far I travel, over miles and over years,  
It is you who hold the lodestar, it's to you that I return.

::

**Louis & Lestat: Into a bed**

(Anne Rice, *The Vampire Chronicles*)

by mazaher, 1998

Later translated and remastered as § 2 of *Double Preface* in *Plague of Dreams*

::

Bocconi dormiva, accanto a me, su di me: grande e denso il suo agile corpo tiepido. Un braccio abbandonato di traverso sul mio ventre, l'altro raccolto tra la sua spalla e il petto, le lunghe gambe unite e distese sul materasso, i lineamenti completamente concentrati come hanno nel sonno i gatti e i bambini. Scostai piano i capelli che gli coprivano in parte il viso, passando le dita sulla tempia liscia. E sapevo che non avrei mai voluto fargli del male e sapevo che glie ne avrei fatto, di nuovo, inevitabilmente, quando l'avessi destato —come stavo per fare— per chiedere e pretendere da lui il gesto che per uno di noi è il più intimo, perché pleonastico: quello di spogliarsi. E che mi avrebbe amato lo stesso.

::

## **Louis & Lestat: Choice, or, What really brought Lestat back**

by mazaher, 2000

*Reference is made here to the comatose state Lestat finds himself in at the conclusion of Anne Rice's novel Memnoch the Devil (1995).*

::

In the alchemical splendor of the dawn  
shone the white and black magpie, taking flight  
from the guard-rail beside the highway lane.  
And the magnificent rhomboid of its tail  
proclaimed at last the most frightening truth.

LdL

::

Nothing had changed. He lay there unmoving, untouched by the passing of nights and days, untouched even by hunger. Yet he lived. The enduring splendor of his fair faultless body was made utterly frightening by the empty eyes.

Louis was past wondering. Every night he sat there, legs crossed on the cold stone at his side, and he read to him. He had come to shut out from his mind every other thought. He could not stand the awareness of that blank or the memory of the vivid life which that blank had replaced, so he shut both out.

He read. His quiet voice became the background upon which the lives of all the others rolled on, night after night, hearing it in their minds like a continuous bass of pain. Every few hours he would stand up, stretch his limbs, easing the knots forming in his muscles, then sit back and read further.

He didn't care what anymore.

Then it happened.

He was well into *Bhagavadgita*, and he had read already how Yudhitshira the wise, Yudhitshira the great, had gambled his own beloved ones at dice, together with himself, and lost them all to slavery. He had read how Yudhitshira had come to the lake, and had been questioned, and had answered wisely and well. He had now come to the point when Yudhitshira, and his companions, and a dog, at last went on the long voyage.

*They left their ornaments, they celebrated the last rites, they threw the domestic fires into the water, and they went, those great souls. Already they were out in the desert, in front of the Himalaya.*

*The first to fall, extenuated by hunger and rotten by sin, was Draupadi the beautiful: all her brothers were crying, but Yudhitshira the wise did not even turn. Then fell Sahadeva the scholar.*

*Belly-of-a-Wolf cried out to the King: "He was the most learned of us all, why then has he fallen?"*

*"Too proud was he in his wisdom" answered the King, and he walked on with the dog.*

*Then it was the turn of Nakula, the most handsome of the brothers, and again the King did not even turn to look at him.*

*And also Arjuna fell, that hero, and Belly-of-a-Wolf prayed that they would stop and bury him, but the King thought Arjuna had been too proud and he had no pity of him.*

*At last Belly-of-a-Wolf himself fell to the ground, and he cried: "I have fallen also and I believe myself to be innocent. Tell me why I am dying, if you know, brother".*

*And Yudhitshira said "Too greedy you were, brother", and he walked on without looking back. Only the dog followed. Then he came on top of the great mountain, in front of the gates of Heaven, and the God of Victories appeared to him.*

*"Come in!" He said.*

*And Yudhitshira threw himself at His feet.*

*"My siblings are dead, let them come in also".*

*Then God answered, "They will join you presently. Now leave that dog and come to your heavenly throne".*

*Yudhitshira looked straight in His eyes.*

*"Let the dog come in too", he said.*

*God was angry. "Leave that dog, I command!" He cried.*

*Yudhitshira did not answer Him. He stayed out there, alone with the dog.<sup>1</sup>*

Louis paused, his eyes lost. He was startled when he heard the sound of clothes brushing imperceptibly on the floor.

He looked down. Lestat was moving.

His back stretched uneasily. Louis could see his fingers slowly shifting, one at a time, a symmetrical, mesmerizing movement, fifth, fourth, third, second, thumb, and then again thumb, second, third, fourth, fifth. The fingers seemed to have a life of their own, separate from a body that still could not shake itself free. It was frightening. He crouched over him, held those hands in his own, just to stop them.

—Lestat,— he said, —Lestat, Lestat,— like a sounding line, trying to catch his mind. He saw his lips open, try to form words. He heard them at last.

—It is my choice,— whispered Lestat —but how to trust either...—. His voice died away in a mutter. He was not talking to Louis. He still seemed oblivious to anything, except that burning question. Louis thought he could just make up some more words.

—Mani, Arimane. What has Job learned for his troubles? To shut up and not ask questions... Evil within, evil without. Choice-choice-choice...— he went on —Like inside, like outside. Like above, like below...—

He stopped suddenly.

—Then it doesn't matter which!— he cried out, and his eyes flashed open. Clear and shining they were, and they locked on Louis', wide in astonishment.

Louis was breathless. He fought to speak.

—Lestat,— he managed to whisper, —So won't you stay out here with Mojo? ...and me,— he added softly.

Lestat struggled to sit, grabbing with shaking hands the arm he stretched at once to help him.

—Louis,— he said, —My brother, I will—.

His words were cut short by a small sob. But a moment later he shot him a glance, and the ice in his eyes was lit suddenly by a well-known fire as he said under his breath:

—Heaven was a wonderful place, and this may be Hell's waiting room, but as I'm left with nobody else than myself to trust in these matters, and if I may borrow the concept from our late mutual friend... then I think the best company is right here.

::

—Won't you tell me about it?

Louis spoke quietly, but his eyes sparkled with interest. It was early evening, on the next night. Lestat was sitting very straight, his back to the wall, his legs comfortably crossed, arms resting on his knees. He was still shackled to the ring in the wall. Maharet was being very prudent.

—I don't know how to begin.— A crease of worry ran across Lestat's brow. —Philosophy... or should I say theology? is more your province than mine. I feel I have really grasped something, but when I try to put words to it...— His voice trailed off.

—It's rather frightening— he sighed.

He glanced sideways to Louis. He was sitting beside him in the very same position, composed and silent. He was waiting. Lestat felt peace coming from him, cool, unhurried, ready to wait forever for an answer even if it would not explain anything... not anymore. The comfort of his presence. The safety of his unbelief. Louis was the one and only person he could confide into, without fear that he would go mad, or kill himself, or start a religion. Lestat closed his eyes, then opened them again, startled at the renewed miracle of sight. When he spoke, it was in a low, hesitant voice.

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<sup>1</sup> The quote is my translation from FABIO TOMBARI, *Il libro degli animali* (1935), ch. 2, *I cani*.

—It was something I saw while you were reading. I didn't really listen, or even make out the words. I saw something black and white, and it took over the whole of the universe. But then black and white together suddenly were raised away, and there was another universe under them, or rather behind them, colourful and brilliant. Like, opposites are such only within a shared frame of reference. The frame was taken away, and still the world was there, and I was there too, within this other universe. Sticking to the universe behind, instead than to the black-and-white whole.

He was silent for a while, musing.

—It goes all back to that vision of God and the Devil talking at the coffee-shop— he went on.

—The duality. The inescapable duality. I was torn between them. I loved both, how could I not love them? And yet there was something I loathed in each one of them. I felt they were sharing the world between them like the spoils of a battle, not minding the massacre. Then Memnoch tried to convince me that the strife was temporary. That all could still come out fine in the end. That the massacre was not really taking place. But it did! It does!.

There was anger now in his voice, and fear.

—He tried to convince me that it just seemed so, that if I just tried harder to understand, I would see the beauty and rightness of it all. And Christ... He didn't even try to convince me. He only questioned me, how could I do this to Him. They were fighting between them for my soul, one with the weapon of reasoning, the other through emotions, like I was the last scrap of universe they had yet to conquer. They wanted me to have faith in one of them, or in both, and in the frame of reference they share, and the fight would end. But I can't!— he cried.

Louis put his hand on his shoulder, lightly. Lestat felt his worry that Maharet would hear him, and he strived to regain composure. When he spoke again, it was with full self-possession.

—I can't have faith in either. I don't trust either of them with my soul. They won't have it, however they may own the rest of the world.

—The *privatio boni* theory,— Louis said, so softly that only Lestat would hear him. —It is medieval formal logic: the opposite of good is not-good, lack of good, no third item allowed. There may be gradations, of course, but they are only gradations in quantity. Shades of grey between black and white. And maybe good can grow in time. 'God only allows evil to bring out a greater good'— he quoted. There was bitterness in his voice when he added, —Maybe hell itself is not eternal, some ventured to say. Most of them were burned at the stake for their efforts, however. It seems those who believe ethics depends entirely on the fear of punishment always get to have the upper hand. The everlasting, slaughtering myths of general prevention and social defence!.

—“To bring out a greater good”,— Lestat repeated. —But no heaven can atone later for such suffering! I saw terrible suffering, Louis. To know about it, as we all do, is not the same as being there. And the injustice of it! Such unequal, unjustifiable shares of pain! How can heaven itself erase all this? It is real, and it is evil, and it is unjust, and nothing can ever convince me it is not!

Louis sighed deeply. A dejected look was on his face. His voice was unusually hard.

—It has gone on since,— he said. —The idea that heaven is infinite goodness, and any share of suffering is nothing in comparison with it, once you get there. Then there was Pascal. Risky business, this one. God can't be grasped by reason; He's completely irrational. You can only gamble on Him, bet that He does exist, and that He is good, and that He's going to be the winner in the end. Like Yudhitshira... but Yudhitshira lost the gamble. “The highest usefulness for the highest number”, that's utilitarianism in our own XVIII century, when monarchs were trying to become gods to their people. “The prey offers itself to the hunter” say now the advocates of the Noble Savage. It does not matter that the prey tries to escape, that it fights for its life, that its death is painful and frightening. “We got it, it had to be. Its soul goes beyond to higher awareness” they say. Anything to avoid facing the reality, the terrible finality of pain. The fact that, however we may try to avoid increasing the pain, or even strive to diminish it, we are ultimately powerless to erase it. Even the best human faculties, reason, conscience, whatever, are ultimately useless. God said he made us His equals, but won't allow us the most precious knowledge. We can't ever attain truth, but only trace, by degrees of approximation, laborious maps of untruth. Without access to a whole, clear knowledge of good and evil, —free choice— is but a tragic mockery. And the worst realization is, that God does not love or protect us any more than that wretched fig tree in the gospels.

—You know better than most how real is the pain of God's creatures.



Lestat felt a wave of awed respect for his fledgling surge within him/How could I not see it in him... or see it and not care/ he thought. /He knew already. I had to be swept through the whole of creation to see it, and he knew it all along/.

—That’s what I saw,— he went on. —While you read to me. Two opposites made persons, pillaging the world, taking the whole of it into their plans, boasting that those plans be the ultimate good for everyone involved. But who exactly is “everyone”? Who gets left out of “the highest number”? Who even \*are\* “the highest number”? I don’t want to be among them. Not anymore, not at the cost of the suffering of those who are left out, whoever they may be. I won’t, in the name of whatever is nearest to goodness in me. I want to stay out. I want to be the Third, even if it comes to be the Excluded. I am out, we are out, you and me. Out of black and white, out where the colors are. It took me so very long to understand. I’ve been such a judgmental, self-righteous hypocrite. You called yourself out such a long time ago.

Louis looked at him, affection glowing in his eyes. It shone so warm, so tender, Lestat wished to cry.

—We just treaded different ways— Louis said. —I tried so hard to abide by all the rules, and to ask all the right questions so as to find all the right answers, but neither you nor God were forwarding me any. So I had to do without them. You have broken each rule and all, and you always seemed to find more answers than your questions were. In the end, we have both learned that rules are useless and that, how many the questions may be, there are no answers. Not in this world nor in the next, as it seems.

He sighed.

They were silent for a while, sitting together on the cold stone floor, their backs to the wall. The position of their physical bodies seemed to mirror the finality of the choice their conscience shared. Then Louis threaded his fingers among Lestat’s.

—It remains to be seen,— he said again —whether we’re worse put if Those Two do exist, and they are such a couple of moral irresponsibles, or they don’t, and pain just marks the boundaries of what is possible for the living protoplasm.

He turned his head to look at Lestat.

—Which do you like better?

—I really don’t know. I don’t like either. But I remember you quoting once to me that medieval king of Castile... Who was he?

—Alfonso el Sabio. He said “If only God had asked for my advice when He made the world, I may have suggested some useful improvement”.

—I guess he was right. He wasn’t struck by lightning, or was he?.

Lestat began to laugh, and his laughter rang through the halls and the corridors, startling the ghosts of the children in the dormitories, setting the spiders on their webs a-quiver, and swerving the bats who were flying back to the attic before dawn. Louis smiled at himself, realizing he’d missed this one sound more than anything else, and clasped his hand tighter in his maker’s.

Maharet heard it also, and at once she stood up.

/Time to let him loose,/ she thought. /At last/.

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## **Louis & Lestat: Sciolgo i giuramenti**

by mazaher, 2000

*What happened after Choice.*

*The music quoted is from the album Dispetto (1995)*

*English version follows Italian text.*

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*Bello sarò per te quando fa sera  
luciderò la spada e l'armatura  
furia dei mari splendida chimera  
ti spaccherò di baci a luna piena...*

Gianna Nannini, *Bellatrix*

a 0'25" il violino respira nel risveglio  
a 0'49" l'onda alta che si slancia  
ad abbracciare lo scoglio, lucente di sole  
a 1'12" si scioglie, si quieta

*Sciolgo le catene  
Sciolgo i giuramenti  
Sciolgo le promesse vane  
Ora come ora  
Tutto torna niente  
Niente accade ancora uguale...*

Gianna Nannini, *Piangerò*

a 2'55" la musica cessa e resta il battito di  
un cuore  
a 3'22" il primo violino solitario, un filo  
d'anima  
a 3'41" il secondo, più basso e denso  
a 4'00" l'incantesimo,  
e i due violini si avvicinano e si intrecciano,  
uno diretto e sottile, l'altro danzante

::

*Lestat*

Ti sei fermato sulla riva del fiume  
antico più di noi.  
Hai alzato le braccia a sciogliere  
il nastro che ti legava i capelli.  
Li hai scossi all'indietro,  
scuri come acqua fonda.  
Hai chiuso gli occhi.  
La tua mano levata esitava,  
stringendo tra le dita il nastro stinto.  
Ti ho sentito mormorare qualcosa...  
un incantesimo, una preghiera?  
Hai riaperto gli occhi, hai aperto le dita.  
Il nastro è scivolato fluttuando nell'acqua  
e la corrente l'ha portato via.  
Ti sei girato verso di me.  
"Eccomi" hai detto.  
Il tuo odore mi ubriacava.

*Louis*

Il tuo odore mi ubriacava.  
Il tuo odore di fuoco  
presso l'acqua notturna.  
Risplendevi,  
guardandomi, e per la prima volta mi  
vedevi.  
Non cercavi di vincere.  
Non più difeso, eppure vittorioso  
come non eri stato fino ad ora.  
Te io amo.  
E' il tuo sguardo stanotte,  
luminoso guerriero, che mi scioglie  
il nodo antico che ci separava.  
Mi protegge il tuo sguardo come scudo.  
Il desiderio  
(*de-sidere*, giù al buio senza stelle)  
fu non scaldarmi alla tua fiera luce.  
Soltanto ora hai saputo  
che cosa vuole dire essere pari.  
Ora sì, chiedo e voglio esserti uguale.  
Ora in te io mi amo.

::

Lestat è seduto, a prima sera, solo, sul bordo di un breve molo di legno proteso sulle acque scure e torbide del Mississippi. Getta ciottoli nell'acqua, uno alla volta, aspettando che i cerchi

si allarghino e si spengano prima di gettare il successivo e sentirne il tonfo molle. Il cielo è pesante, ingorgato di nubi disfatte, ma non piove. Non piove da settimane.

La vibrazione lievissima del terreno, che come un'onda ancora più impercettibile di quelle mosse dai ciottoli si propaga all'assito scheggioso del molo, avverte Lestat di chi sta arrivando. Non si volta. Riconosce quel corpo quasi come la propria faccia nello specchio, senza bisogno di guardare. Louis.

Lo cercava, l'ha visto. Si ferma in capo al molo. Ha notato il gesto involontario di Lestat quando si è accorto della sua presenza. Aspetta invano che lo chiami. Se ne andrà? si chiede. Una domanda nera. No, si avvicina. Gli si siede accanto, due palmi alla sua sinistra, e tace. Dopo un attimo gli posa la mano sulla spalla e la lascia lì.

Lestat sospira piano, solo per sé. E' così strano e solo il suo silenzio, che Louis si volta a guardarlo, e un filo sottile di ansia gli si annoda attorno al cuore.

—Cosa c'è?— domanda.

Invece di rispondere, Lestat gli posa a sua volta una mano sul ginocchio e la strofina piano sul denim sbiadito. Quella mano dice Aspetta, dice Non chiedere. Louis tace, ma il desiderio di lasciarsi scoprire cresce, finché Lestat si sente annegare. Si ascolta parlare, con una voce spenta che non sembra sua.

—Sono stanco... e ho paura. Davanti a me non vedo più nessuno. Non so chi sono. Non so più dove trovare qualcuno con cui confrontarmi per sapere i contorni di me. Ho spavento di cercarlo, e ODIO avere paura!.

Le dita di Louis si stringono un poco sulla sua spalla. E ode la sua risposta limpida, immune dall'emozione che filtra dal suo tocco. Dice:

—Hai lottato con l'Altro, come Giacobbe, per tutta la notte. Sei ancora vivo. E il tuo mondo è una distesa di umanità senza nome, sulle cui teste cammini regale, cercando chi possa batterti, contenerti, costringerti a un divieto che ti definisca. Nemmeno dio e il diavolo ci sono riusciti. Ma non credi che possa definirti l'eguaglianza?

Lestat lo guarda, stupito. Non capisce.

—Patti, Lestat. Accordi, tra amici. La parola data tra gentiluomini, anziché gli ordini dati ai sudditi da un legislatore giustiziere. Ci hai mai pensato? Uno solo è il sovrano, come unica è la morte: gli altri sono sudditi, o servi. Ma il due, è l'eguaglianza. Un patto si stringe tra eguali, vincola entrambi allo stesso modo a una volontà che è di ciascuno perché è di tutti e due. Definisce senza sottomettere. Ci hai mai provato davvero?

Lestat non risponde e guarda lontano. E' una prospettiva tanto nuova su se stesso che non sa neppure se gli piace. Sente su di sé gli occhi calmi del suo compagno e si sente a disagio nel proprio silenzio. Sa quello che sta per accadere. Louis non si fermerà a questo. Non avrà pietà di lui, come lui non ne ha mai avuta in passato. E infatti riprende:

—Lo sapresti se ti permettessi di saperlo. Per smettere di correre alla morte ogni notte della tua esistenza, devi rinunciare a cercare di convincerti di essere onnipotente e invulnerabile. Altrimenti non riconoscerai mai i tuoi eguali nel folle miracolo di essere nato, e resterai solo. Tu hai sempre avuto il coraggio di sporgerti dal bordo e acciuffare quello che vuoi, ma hai anche il terribile coraggio di lasciare andare quello che ti è costato lacrime e sangue, e pezzi strappati alla tua anima? Non hai mai avuto altra sicurezza che il tuo potere soverchiante. Chissà se l'affronterai mai, l'avventura dell'eguaglianza... se potremo mai affrontarla insieme.

Lestat sente brillare nelle sue parole un sorriso che non vuole guardare. Ma non c'è ironia, non sorride della sua debolezza di stasera. E' puro affetto, che cade e affonda nella sua anima e vi scompare come i sassi nell'acqua. Piano, gli risponde:

—Tu ce l'hai quel coraggio. Tu non rompi le regole per vedere che succede. Non ti si applicano, le regole. Tu non le vedi. Vedi la realtà, e la realtà è fatta di limiti, non di regole. E' la tua forza... e vorrei averla anch'io.

Ha il tono vinto di uno che ha rinunciato.

—Non ci riesco,— conclude.

—Lestat.— Lo prende per le spalle. —Guardami.— Lo volta verso di lui.

Lestat non gli resiste, Lentamente alza gli occhi ad incontrare i suoi.

—Cominciamo ora. Cominciamo qui, tu e io. Facciamo un patto, e vediamo che succede. Tu, che cosa vuoi da me?

Sorride, incoraggiante. Semplice. Senza secondi fini. Non c'è nulla di cui abbia bisogno. Anche i suoi desideri sono gratis. Senza attaccamento, pura libertà. Una volta dopo l'altra, la presenza di Louis gli fa sentire che ha un'altra possibilità, e non si sente più così solo.

D'impulso gli domanda:

—Perché rifiuti ancora il mio sangue? Io sono diverso da quando ti ho fatto. Anche tu sei cambiato. Sei più forte, eppure sei ancora più diverso da me di quanto fossi il primo giorno. Non ti conosco. Forse anche tu non mi conosci. Mi fa impazzire vedere accanto a me la meraviglia continua della tua esistenza e sentirla estranea, non poter entrare. Perché? Gli occhi di Louis si fanno fondi di emozione.

—Anch'io ho paura. Del tuo sangue, di me stesso. Che accadrebbe se non sapessi controllare un potere come il tuo? Faccio già abbastanza male nel mondo, abbastanza errori, da allievo come sono. Non voglio altre armi.

Le sue mani tremano leggermente. Le lascia cadere lungo i fianchi. L'incertezza gli annerchia i lineamenti, eppure Lestat intravede qualcosa di inaspettato - il desiderio.

—Fammi di nuovo, Louis. Fammi diverso da come mi fece Magnus. Fammi come te, come non potrei mai essere altrimenti. Dammi il tuo potere di pazienza. Dammi la tua compassione, e lascia che ora sia io il tuo allievo. Lascia che anch'io ti faccia di nuovo, che ti dia i talenti e la forza che ho raccolto attraverso gli altri. Non sarai mai un male per il mondo. Non lo sei mai stato. Ti prego.

Louis lo guarda, e non vede solo amore. Vede fiducia, e rispetto. Vede Lestat come non l'ha mai visto prima: arreso, e felice con le spalle al muro, splendente senza più ombre, ora che si è detto finalmente a se stesso ancor prima che a lui. A lungo lo guarda.

Si volta, si avvicina all'acqua, alza le braccia a sciogliere il nastro che gli lega i capelli. Getta indietro il capo, li scuote liberi. Chiude gli occhi, solleva la mano che tiene il nastro. Lestat lo sente mormorare qualcosa, un incantesimo, una preghiera? Riapre gli occhi, schiude le dita. Il nastro cade fluttuando nell'acqua scura, e la corrente lenta lo porta via galleggiando.

—Eccomi,— dice. Lavato dal vento, lavato dal passato, lavato dalla pioggia che ora comincia a cadere. —Fratello, amante, figlio. Quanto ho desiderato di sciogliere quel nodo. Quanto desidero il tuo sapore, che ricordo e che non è più quello.

—Figlio, fratello, amante.— Com'è strano non essere al comando. Non avere niente da dimostrare. —Fai di me il tuo allievo. Amami, come non sono stato mai amato. Non lasciamo che altro tempo si perda dietro di noi.

—Non è stato tempo perso.

—Non torneresti indietro?

—No.

E sotto la pioggia tiepida, in riva al fiume ancor più antico di loro, si regalano l'un l'altro il dono impensabile di una felicità appena nata.

::

*Shining I'll be for you when evening's  
coming  
I'll polish up my sword and suit of armour  
rage of the seas, magnificent chimaera,  
I'll break you up with kisses in the  
moonlight*

Gianna Nannini, *Bellatrix*

at 0'25" the violin is breathing its waking  
at 0'49" a high wave is tiding over  
and embracing the rock, bright in the  
sunlight  
at 1'12" it's loosening into quiet

*I'm unlocking chains  
I'm untying oaths  
I'm taking back void promises  
As it is just now  
All gets back to nothing  
Nothing happens twice all over*

Gianna Nannini, *Piangerò*

at 2'55" the music ceases and  
the beating of a heart remains  
at 3'22" the first solitary violin, a thread of  
soul  
at 3'41" the second, lower, thicker  
at 4'00" the spell,  
and the two violins get close and  
intertwine,  
one straight and fine, the other dancing

::

*Lestat*

You stood on the bank of the river  
more ancient than us both.  
You raised your arms to loosen  
the ribbon tying your hair. You shook it  
back,  
dark as the darkest water; and closed your  
eyes.  
Your raised hand was poised,  
the faded ribbon held between your  
fingers.  
I heard you murmur something...  
An enchantment, a prayer?  
You opened your eyes again, opened your  
hand.  
The ribbon floated slowly down on water  
and the current then floated it away.  
You turned to me, "I'm here" you said.  
Your scent intoxicated me.

*Louis*

Your scent intoxicated me.  
Your burning scent  
near the water of night.  
Shining you were,  
looking at me, and for the first time saw  
me.  
You were not trying to conquer.  
No more defended, yet you were victorious  
as you had never been until this night.  
You I do love.  
Your look tonight,  
bright warrior, unties for me  
the ancient knot which held us distant.  
Your look protects me like a shield.  
Desire  
(*de-sidere*, dark abyss without stars)  
was not being warmed at your fierce light.  
Only now you have learned  
what it is being equal.  
Now, I do ask and wish to be your equal.  
Now in you I can love me.

::

Lestat is sitting alone, at nightfall, on the edge of a short pier outstretched over the dark muddy Mississippi waters. He's throwing pebbles into the water, one by one, just watching to see the circles enlarge and vanish before dropping the next one and hearing its muffled splash. Although the sky looks heavy, choked up with worn-out clouds, it is not raining. It hasn't been raining for weeks.

Lestat is warned of somebody coming by a slight vibration of the ground which propagates to the splintered pier floor like an imperceptible wave, even more imperceptible than those produced by the pebbles. He doesn't turn. He can recognize that body without looking, almost like his own face in the mirror.

Louis.

He was looking for him, he has seen him. He stops just at the pier's edge. He's aware of the unintentional acknowledging movement at his presence. He keeps uselessly waiting for a call. Will he go away? Lestat wonders. A black question.

No, he's approaching. He sits down beside him, two palms on his left, and keeps silent. In a moment he puts his hand upon Lestat's shoulder and rests it there.

Lestat sighs.

His silence is so strange and lonely, that Louis turns to look at him, a tenuous thread of anxiety tying itself around his heart.

—What's the matter?— he asks.

Instead of answering, Lestat on his turn puts his hand upon Louis' knee and gently rubs the faded denim. "Wait," that hand is saying; it says "Don't ask".

Louis keeps silent, but Lestat's desire of opening himself up is growing, until he feels he's choking. He listens to himself speaking in a voice that doesn't sound like his own.

—I am tired... and I am afraid. I see no one in front of me. I don't know who I am. I don't know where I could find anyone to compare with and fix my own outlines. I fear to search, and I HATE being afraid!

Louis' fingers lightly press his shoulders. And he can hear his limpid answer, free from the emotion that reveals itself in his touch.

—You have struggled against the Other all night long, like Jacob. You are still alive. And your own world is a crowd of nameless mankind, on whose heads you kingly walk, searching one

who can defeat, contain, compel you into a prohibition capable to define you. Neither God nor the Devil made it with you. Can't you believe equality could do it?

Lestat stares at him in puzzlement. He can't understand.

—Agreements, Lestat. Pacts between friends. The word of honour between gentlemen, instead of orders given to subjects by a legislator and executioner. Did you ever consider this? Only one is the king, so as one is death: all the others are subjects or servants. But two, that's equality. An agreement can be made between equals, binding on both to a will which is each one's own because it belongs to both of them. Terms without subjection. Did you ever even try?

Lestat doesn't answer and looks away. This point of view is so new for him that he can't make his mind whether he likes it. He feels his lover's calm look on himself and he feels uneasy in his own silence. He knows what is going to happen. Louis won't stop here. He won't be merciful on him, just as he himself hasn't been on Louis in the past. Indeed, he is going on:

—You would know, if you only would allow yourself to. If you want to stop pursuing death every night of your life, you must convince yourself you are neither invulnerable nor omnipotent. Otherwise you will never recognize any equals in the crazy miracle of being alive, and you will remain alone. You have always been bold enough to lean out of the border and catch all you want, but have you also got the terrible courage to release what has cost you tears and blood, and pieces torn out of your soul? You have had no other safety than your own overwhelming power. I wonder whether you will ever undergo the trial of equality... whether we will ever face it together.

Lestat guesses in his words a smile he will not look at. But there is no irony, he is not smiling at his weakness this evening. It is pure love, falling down and sinking into his soul and disappearing like the stones do into the water.

He slowly answers:

—You have got that kind of courage. You don't break the rules just to see what will happen. You are not subject to rules. You don't even see them. You see reality, and reality has its own limits. That's your strength. I wish it were mine also.

His beaten tone sounds like he's given up.

—I can't do it— he concludes.

—Lestat— he circles his shoulders —Look at me.

He turns him. Lestat doesn't resist. He slowly looks up at him.

—Let's begin now. Let's begin here, you and me. Let's make a pact, and watch what's going to happen. What do you expect from me?

He smiles encouragingly. Simple. No hidden purpose. He needs nothing. Even his wishes are quite free. No attachment, pure freedom. Time after time, Louis' presence makes him feel he has got another opportunity, and he no longer feels so lonely.

He asks abruptly:

—Why do you still refuse my blood? I am no longer the same now as I was when I made you. You too have changed. You are stronger, and yet you are even more different from me than you were at first. I don't know you. Maybe you too don't know me. It makes me crazy when I get aware of the everlasting wonder of your existence by my side, and yet realize it's alien to me and I can't get in. Why?

Louis' eyes get deep with emotion.

—I am afraid too. Of your blood, of myself. What would happen if I couldn't be able to control a power like yours? I am already making enough evil in the world. I commit mistakes, fledgling as I am. I don't need other weapons.

His hands are slightly trembling. He lets them drop. Uncertainty darkens his features, and yet Lestat catches an unexpected glimpse of desire.

—Make me anew, Louis. Make me different from what Magnus made me. Make me like you, as I could never be otherwise. Give me your patience. Give me your compassion, and let me become your fledgling. Let me too make you anew, let me give you the talents and the strength I have reaped from others. You will never be an evil for the world. You have never been. I beg you.

Louis looks at him and he doesn't see love alone. He can see trust and respect. He can see Lestat as he never saw him before: surrendered, and happy with his back to the wall, shining and shadowless; now that he has revealed to himself even sooner than to Louis. He watches him with long eyes.

Louis turns, approaches the water, lifts his arms and unties the ribbon on his hair. He tosses his hair free. He closes his eyes, raises the hand holding the ribbon. Lestat hears him murmur something, an enchantment, a prayer? He opens his eyes, opens his fingers. The ribbon falls wavering into the dark water, and the indolent current takes it floating away.

—Here I am,— he says. Washed by the wind, washed by the past, washed by the finally falling rain.

—Brother, lover, son. How long have I yearned to untie that knot! How much I am longing for your taste, which I remember but is no longer the same.

—Son, brother and lover.— How strange it is not to be the leader. Having nothing to prove.

—Make me your fledgling. Love me the way I have never been loved. Let time never be allowed to waste between us.

—It wasn't wasted.

—You wouldn't go back again, then?

—No.

And under a tepid rain on the bank of the ancient river, more ancient than them both, they give each other the gift of a newborn happiness.

::

## **Louis & Lestat: Knots**

by mazaher, 2001

*Italian translation follows English text.*

::

*Lestat*

I have never told him why it happens sometimes that I tie him -to the bedstead, to the railing of the stairs, to the master-beam in the attic, to the piping in the shower- when we make love. I can see it rather upsets him, sometimes. But I can't help it, sometimes. And I don't believe I will ever be able to tell him that it is fear.

Not fear of his willingly leaving me: he has done that already, and we both, somehow, survived. Anger is strong fuel for survival. But fear that something can take him away from me, unwilling. I dread chance, I dread fate, I am scared that he may just disappear, and I won't know why and what happened to him.

And I'm sure I'm never going to tell him my darkest layer of fear, that his disappearance will be caused by something I have done, and I will never know what it was. So every time he's out alone, I'm one step ahead of panic, and every time he stays in for the evening, I hold my breath until I unlatch the door and hear his voice greeting me back.

I have never told him why it happens sometimes that I tie him when we make love. I think he understands.

::

*Louis*

I think I understand now why he ties me, sometimes, when we make love... when his love for me is so intense that it hurts.

No, it's not quite so. It's not the love that hurts, it's panic. It hurts us both.

At times he loves me so much that the simple possibility of a distance, a physical distance between us, scares him out. It is not because he wants to exert his power on me, or to hurt me - although sometimes he does, unaware. He only needs to feel that I'm going to stay. That he's allowed to keep me. That we won't be separated again, not by fire or high water, not by God or the Devil. Not even by ourselves, for that little while.

And I take willingly the pain, when pain is there, and I willingly face my own piercing fear of being so bound and confined, because with them also comes the feeling, tactile and hot and licking me like a flame, that he loves me enough to do even this thing to me. To even risk my wanting to leave. He would not stop me. He never did.

He has never told me why he ties me, sometimes, when we make love. I think I understand.

::

**Nodi**

::

*Lestat*

Non gli ho mai detto perché qualche volta capita che lo legghi -alla testiera del letto, alla ringhiera delle scale, al trave maestro della soffitta, alle tubature della doccia- quando facciamo l'amore. Lo vedo che ne è turbato, qualche volta. Ma non posso farne a meno, qualche volta. E non credo che sarò mai capace di dirgli che è per paura.

Non la paura che possa lasciarmi di sua volontà: l'ha già fatto, e siamo entrambi sopravvissuti, in qualche modo. La rabbia è un buon carburante per sopravvivere. Ma la paura che qualcosa possa portarmelo via, contro la sua volontà. Temo il caso, temo il destino, ho terrore che possa semplicemente scomparire, e non saprò perché, e che cosa gli è accaduto.



E sicuramente non gli dirò mai lo strato più oscuro di ciò che temo: che la sua scomparsa sarà causata da qualcosa che ho fatto, e non saprò mai che cosa. Così, ogni volta che è fuori da solo sono a un passo dal panico, e ogni volta che passa la sera in casa, trattengo il respiro finché non giro la chiave nella toppa e sento la sua voce che mi dà il bentornato.

Non gli ho mai detto perché capita qualche volta che lo lego quando facciamo l'amore. Credo che capisca.

*Louis*

Credo di capire ora perché mi lega, qualche volta, quando facciamo l'amore... quando il suo amore per me è così intenso che fa male.

No, non è esattamente così. Non è l'amore che fa male, è il panico. Fa male a entrambi.

A volte mi ama così tanto che la semplice possibilità di una distanza, una distanza fisica tra noi, lo terrorizza. Non è che voglia esercitare il suo potere su di me, o darmi dolore -anche se qualche volta accade, senza che lo voglia. Ha solo bisogno di sapere che starò lì. Che ha il permesso di tenermi. Che non saremo più separati, né dal fuoco né dall'acqua, né da Dio né dal demonio. Nemmeno da noi stessi, per questo breve tempo.

E accetto volentieri il dolore, quando c'è dolore, e affronto volentieri la mia propria penetrante paura di essere legato e costretto in questo modo, perché con essi viene anche la sensazione, tattile e calda e che mi lambisce come una fiamma, che mi ama abbastanza da farmi anche questo. Da rischiare anche che io voglia lasciarlo. Non me lo impedirebbe. Non l'ha mai fatto. Non mi ha mai detto perché mi lega, a volte, quando facciamo l'amore. Credo di capire.

::

## **Louis & Lestat: Tapping**

by mazaher, 2001

::

Louis is out tonight.

I hear Lestat tapping his nails on the polished top of the desk in the library. He looked for him there in the early hours of the evening, but he'd gone already. I realize it's unusual for Lestat to wait for him in that room.

It's unusual for him to wait at all.

The tapping goes on, nibbling at the edge of my consciousness. Disquieting. It sounds like something I should remember. I know this sound, this vibration of a subtle nervousness beyond help. Nails tapping, rasping on a hard surface. A subdued desperation which is not human in its persistence...

I remember.

A horse, a golden anglo-arabian just arrived by sea from Tarbes. I remember the gleam of his hair in the dusky shadows of the stall, the white of his eyes as he tried to understand his destiny and take part in it. And the rasping, the tapping. His left forefoot raised so gracefully. Then his neck arched, his lips tightened, and the unshod foot would crash down, digging a hole in the straw, hitting the stone floor in endless, compulsive repetition. /Somewhere else. Somewhere else. Not here/. They had given him a goat as a companion. In time he had calmed down, in part.

Suddenly the memory links itself to the present. Not quite so different after all. Not species nor blood can make any of us so very different. The unspoken restlessness of the horse, hot-blooded, generous. The wisdom of the goat.

The austere goat, who can digest almost anything and survive on almost nothing. Patient, low-maintenance goat, capable of incredible leaps if needed; born cliff-hanger, fearless horn-fighter, sturdy long-lived goat.

I sit down here, on the floor, my back to the wall of the corridor. I don't want him to remain alone. I hope for my presence, which I know a fringe of his senses is aware of, can help him to keep in check an anxiety he dares not name.

And I hear the key in the latch at last, and I know at once he has heard it also. The tapping stops. I alone can perceive his deep, relieved sigh. I feel the muscles in my shoulders untying, like I know his own are untying this very moment.

—Lestat?

I hear Louis' voice, low and quiet, and the sound of the bunch of keys thrown on the console in the entrance.

Lestat doesn't answer.

I can see him now in my mind, leaning back in the chair, those nervous fingers stilled at last, while with his eyes closed he tastes this joy. And he won't answer, and I know that he'll erase that comforted smile from his lips before Louis can see it.

—Buonasera, Marius— says Louis. —Lestat, where is he? —. He speaks softly, as usual, but I feel an undercurrent of uneasiness I had never been aware of before now.

—In the library, — I answer. And I add, —He was waiting for you.

Before I raise my eyes, he's gone. I think I hear a soft purring sound coming from behind the closed library door. No more tapping.

I wonder if I can find Amadeo.

::

**Armand & Lestat: *Ludus puerorum***

by mazaher, 2001

*Armand to Lestat*

::

It's not for power that I crave your blood.  
Your kind of power is not mine to wield:  
I have my own, my secret, darker ways.  
Nor am I trying to spite you for refusing  
to listen to my plea to love me, when  
you came on like a tidal wave, to sweep me  
and leave me again, detritus on a shore.

My friend, you've never known why I so hunger  
for the sweet taste of sunlight in your veins  
so much I'll even steal it if I can.  
Yet it would not be stealing, for it's mine,  
something stolen from me lifetimes ago,  
and now you own it, and I want it back.  
Do you wish me to name it? It is childhood.

Joy when you wake up to a brand-new day  
full of wonders and promises. The world  
stretching before you in time and space as though  
it were a gift to savour drop by drop  
in neverending happiness. It's enthusiasm,  
a god within your soul, the god of life,  
the laughing, lovely, brighter face of Pan.

But I own darkness, his frown has been my share,  
panic and not delight, pain and not bliss,  
the power to endure, not to enjoy.  
Do you still wonder now why I'm forever  
trying to drink back my own from your hot flame?  
You fount of fire, lighting ten thousand things.  
My friend, allow me at last to feel alive.

::

**Armand & Lestat: I tuoi begli occhi di arciere**

by mazaher, 2001

music: *Crucify*, by Tori Amos, in *Little Earthquakes* (1992)

*Lestat's answer to Armand*

*Italian version follows English text*

::

You will not share.  
You flow like nightblack water  
in an unseen direction.  
Only the streetlights  
reflect their row of brightness  
on that polished surface,  
but under that  
the void of darkness  
swallows every sight.  
Whatever touches you  
either rebounds off your shiny shield  
or disappears down under.  
Nothing will make you glow.  
I cannot give you life,  
my brother more than friend.  
It never could be yours.  
Each has his story  
stretching behind our backs,  
and that is life.  
You are alive. So live,  
let your story sing for you at every step,  
and maybe sometimes we will share the song.

::

Tu non fai parte.  
Scorri come acque notturne,  
non si vede per dove.  
Solo i lampioni  
riflettono le loro luci in fila  
sulla polita superficie,  
ma sotto quella  
il vuoto oscuro  
inghiottisce ogni sguardo.  
Ciò che ti tocca  
o rimbalza dal tuo lucido scudo  
o scompare nel fondo.  
Nulla ti fa splendente.  
Non posso darti vita,  
fratello più che amico.  
Mai potrebbe esser tua.  
Ciascuno ha la sua storia  
che si stende alle spalle,  
ed è la vita.  
Sei vivo. E allora vivi,  
che la tua storia ti canti ad ogni passo,  
e forse a volte divideremo il canto.

::

## **Plague of dreams**

by mazaher, 2000-01

::

*What follows is based on posts 263 and following of the RPG-Spec Hollywood Vampires. As the sequel, Dagger of the Mind, remained for so long tantalizingly absent from its site, hiding somewhere among discarded backups and misplaced files, I was inevitably led to figure out a version of my own...*

::

::

::

### **0. Double preface: three poems and two images in words**

::

Silent stillness  
The weight of questions  
And of pain for the pain of the world  
(Feel it)  
Without faith without release  
Softly whistling in the dark  
No tightrope walking on karma anymore.

And so breath you again,  
Again raise up your head, straighten your back to steps  
Remeasuring earth with the soles of your feet  
And touch again water and fur and blood,  
Turn around at the turn of light and darkness  
With the useless vain pride of the living  
To die again your fragmentary deaths.

LPdL

::

Each spring, the calycanthus flowering  
awakens in me the worst passions.

LdL

::

Now it is echoing,  
the frightening laugh of gods, powerful and raw,  
exempted from both conscience and discourse.  
His demise we've imagined, yet  
the despot lives anew and still he lives,  
only intent on His arcane designs  
always requiring multifarious death  
and births, and the renewal of the pain.  
Terrible spring is upon us again  
and there's no strenght left for tyrannicide.

But it is I the tyrant, I'm that face,  
impassive, drinking still the hearts of men  
refusing still to learn what I won't know.  
At dawn the tyrant may be killed at last  
and from the pain the world may yet be free,  
or this pain freed from its bond to the world.  
The thick writing of things, deeply engraved  
on the surface of soul by the sharp claw  
of doubtful thought, does leave  
no room to alternatives. I'm going.

On the threshold of sunlight calls me back,  
cool, unexpected, a calycanthus scent.

::

This series of stories begins with a series of images, flowing in front of the mind's eyes like neat, clean-cut photographs of a movie. Imagine, then. Imagine a classic titles' shot. The main character is getting dressed. All in close-up. You don't get to see his face. Like in *Dangerous Liaisons*, *The Big Chill*, or *Blue Steel*...<sup>2</sup> But. But instead of a formal attire (whatever time the story is set in) you see casual, frayed, unironed clothes, although they look like being just taken in after having been dried in the sun. You almost smell the fresh scent of the breeze clinging to the thread. The man is clothing himself from scratch. You can see the texture of each garment shifting up or down on his skin, unaffectedly, unselfconsciously covering in turn shoulders, arms, loins... Some unusual particulars can be seen. A key-hanger made with a leather browband from a bridle. A silver rat-tail bracelet slipping down along the back of the hand. The movement of the wrist as the watch disappears into a pocket. Fingers raking through hair, tying it up in a ponytail with a leather string. Private gestures made out of habit. Last, he wears a three-quarter jacket of dull black leather, which he leaves unbuttoned. And when he is ready and you would expect the camera to widen out and let us see him whole... Cut to a medium shot on an empty room, and, Turn three-quarters of a circle and, Cut to, Ext. Night. Wet avenue, streetlamps. Spring. Brisk breeze. A man -he, Louis- standing against the light. We see his back. Close up a bit. He rubs the root of his nose between thumb and forefinger, head slightly bent, as though he tries to erase a painful memory. A step on the cobblestones, from a dark alley behind him. He raises his head at once, he turns around, fast as thought, but with a quietness devoid of alarm. "Oh, it's you!" he says softly, surprised and happy. "Who else?" answers the newcomer. "Quite. Who else?" he echoes back. Their profiles while their eyes lock silently, both wrapped in a secret half smile of their own. Then Lestat throws an arm across his shoulder and they go together along the road.

::

Face downwards he slept, near me, above me: large and solid his lithe warm body. One arm abandoned across my stomach, the other gathered between shoulder and chest, his long legs

---

<sup>2</sup> *Dangerous Liaisons*, directed by Stephen Frears (1988); *The Big Chill*, directed by Lawrence Kasdan (1983); *Blue Steel*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow (1990).

close and stretched on the mattress, his features completely absorbed in sleep like a child or a napping cat. I pushed back a strand of his silky hair, brushing my finger lightly along his smooth temple. And I felt I would never, ever wish to hurt him, and I knew I would hurt him, inevitably, when I would wake him - as I was going to do - to ask and demand from him the gesture which for one of us is the most intimate, because it is pleonastic: that of undressing. And I knew he would love me all the same.

::

### **1. Lestat: What dreams may come**

*The third section is in resonance with Journeys of the Heart, part 3, Foxfire, chapter 9, by AprilMist. What if this particular dream had caught up with Lestat before the next evening...? The quotation is from Finish Line by Lou Reed, in the album Set the Twilight Reeling, 1996. Grazie alla Lupa Grigia per aver illuminato il senso di rovesciare il vecchio motto latino.*

::

Lestat felt cold in his sleep. He turned around uneasily on the soiled mattress of the stuffy motel room, unconsciously feeling for the familiar form of Louis at his side, but he found nothing.

Through his hand, stretched on the cover, a spike of anger spread along his arm and quivered at last like an arrow in the very core of his heart. Sleeping, he heard a voice reading Mercutio's curse from his beloved *Romeo and Juliet*. The voice, he realized, was his own, modulated, mellow, but the words were somewhat different:

"A curse of dreams on all your houses...".

The voice was drowned by a rumble from above, faint at the beginning, rapidly growing to a cosmic cry:

"The eleventh plague, a plague of dreams!".

A rush of adrenaline chilled his spine as he relived in this dream -this nightmare- the happenings of the night.

::

Fiercely he had stood in the middle of the crowded room, looking straight in Louis' eyes, trembling with an anger that barely covered his desperation. He heard himself say those cruel words, those lies...

"I don't love you. I don't care about you. I caused your nightmare and I'd do it again in a second. And my feelings about you will never, ever change".

Here, he'd done it, surely now that look of unbearable hurt on Louis' face would disappear from his sight as he would turn away and leave without a word. Now shoving away the rest of the coven as well would be easy, now the worst was over, he would soon be left alone to grieve, maybe condemned to relive this self-inflicted agony day after day in the dreams he conjured upon himself as well as upon the others.

But this one dream was taking quite another turn. Louis did not go. He stood silently, eyes locked on his, until Lestat felt he could not bear it a single moment longer. And just when he was going to look away, not even his mad resolve strong enough to keep him from crying, Louis began to speak.

"Very well. Fine" he said, his voice now in the grip of an icy self-control and as cold as a swordblade. "But, sir, you are forgetting something. You are taking no count of *\*my\** feelings for you. You weave and unweave history as it pleases you, and you are the best judge surely of your own soul, but you have not and never will have jurisdiction over mine. And I happen to love you, sir, so I am going to stay right here".

"WHY? Why do you love me?" roared Lestat.

"My reasons are no concern of yours, sir. You may have the power to kill me, but you haven't the power to cut me off from your life. Dead, undead or alive, I will always be with you. And *\*that\** you can't do anything about".

::

Lestat startled awake, breathing heavily, heart racing. What the hell?!...

He had tried to make everybody hate him, beginning with the man who had always been the closest to his soul, the only one to withstand every crazy leap of his heart; he thought he had crushed him down with just a few choice words, and what had he found instead? A love like a weapon, stainless, unbreakable, pliant and resilient like tempered steel, challenging even his own preternatural powers, a love he had never known or recognized until now, when it slipped glistening out of its velvet sheath and dazzled him with its light.

—Louis... — he gasped under his breath.

—Yes, Lestat?...—. How soft, how cool the voice coming from the shadow. Lestat tried to sit up, wake out, penetrate the early evening dusk thickening in the room. A familiar silhouette was sitting on an armchair in the darkest corner, composed, still. Lestat's heart skipped a beat.

—Louis!— he cried again —I didn't...

—Be quiet now. Don't talk— the reply came in the same even tone.

—But...— tried once more Lestat.

—The plague of dreams won't cease until the chosen people will be released from captivity. The vaults are open, Lestat. You have taken off the lid. The dead are rising. All forgotten gestures, all unconfessed thoughts, all will be revealed, every secret will be proclaimed from every roof and tower. Be quiet now. It will pass. All will come out, and then it will pass. The world itself will pass, and this plague will be over.

—I'm sorry— Lestat heard himself say, his voice small with pain.

—I know— answered Louis —but you and I are here. He rose slowly, came toward the bed, offered his hand to help Lestat stand up. —Icarus, Phaeton, Epimeteos, my shining Achilles, come, and walk through this plague with me.

::

Louis had fed early that summer evening. The nightly sky was still translucent with the last glimmer of a glorious sunset when he turned toward home.

Lestat had already gone out when Louis had woken. He tried to fight off the demons of fear and horror that haunted him every time Lestat was not with him. Every time it got more difficult, or he was just cracking up.

He walked along the avenue under the great trees he had seen being planted such a long time ago. Many had died, some had been replaced, but some were still growing. He seemed to feel the cool pale sap coursing through their limbs, fresh, soothing. Passing along, he brushed his fingers against the piebald bark of the plane trees. It was not enough to calm him. He stopped, pressed his brow on the trunk of the last one in the row, and he murmured:

—Bless me, plane tree, because I am so tired.

Lights were out in the windows of the apartment. Louis had not the heart to go inside alone. He found himself walking to the stable. It was dark there also, but the darkness was alive with the quiet sound of horses munching hay or sniffing their bedding, preparing to lie down for the night.

On impulse, Louis went to the saddlery, tucked his Kieffer dressage saddle and gel pad under his arm, picked the Sprenger double bridle from its hook, and went to the box where his black Trakhener mare was waiting for him, nickering softly as he came near.

Without speaking, he slid the door open and greeted her with some feathery breaths on her nose. She sniffed his hair, tenderly, then she lowered her head to lick his fingers. She was shining in the faint light of the moon coming in through the dormer window.

Quickly he brushed her, combed out her mane and rich flowing tail and picked out her feet.

Then without thinking, almost like a sort of lucky charm, he also lightly groomed the Friesian stallion Lestat used to ride and saddled both.

He was checking the fit of the leather-covered curb chain on the mare when he heard the faintest noise in the corridor. He held his breath in happiness: the charm had worked, Lestat had come. Louis realized he was making himself heard on purpose, both to avoid startling him or the horses and to ascertain whether he was welcome just then.

—Lestat,— he said softly. —I hoped you would come. Will you join me for a ride in the moonlight?



White light shone on the grassy hills and through the lace of leaves. They had walked in silence their horses along suburban roads, shod feet ringing sharply, rhythmically, on the pavement. Now they had reached open ground. They left the road and took a light canter on the soft springy turf. Lestat's Friesian was snorting a little against the single-rein Centaur bit he used to ride him in. Louis whistled under his breath, and his mare rounded her back and neck and slowed to a collected trot.

Lestat reined in his horse, and to Louis' untold relief he lightened his hands as soon as the big black stallion paired himself with the mare. Louis straightened his shoulders, tucked his seat forward on the saddle, took up just a sigh more of the curb reins, leaving the bradoon's hang down, and the lithe body of his Trakehner began dancing in a lively passage.

Lestat looked at them out of the corner of his eye. So beautiful! Two bodies and one fluid, easy movement. It had ever been that way, since the beginning. Louis on horseback was a thing of absolute beauty, a joy forever. His horses loved him, loved his body upon them. He never seemed to have to think about what to do, it all came natural, both for him and any horse he rode, on his face the abstract look of a buddhist monk in meditation. It was an eerie feeling. Lestat felt excluded from something deep and subtle he could not understand. He gave rein, and his horse thrust himself powerfully forward, stretching low through the long grass. It was only a moment before Louis followed him, the mare's feet swift and silent on his tracks. They galloped together to the end of the meadow, then Louis circled right, slowing down. Lestat saw he was smiling.

—What about some cross-country jumping?— he said. Lestat threw him a concerned look.

—But you're on a dressage saddle. Would it be safe?.

—Surely not,— Louis answered. He took his feet out of the stirrups, reached down, undid the elastic girth, shifted out of the saddle and let it slip to the ground on the right side. —I'll take it up later. Aren't you coming?.

The Trakehner mare had picked up on what was going to happen and pranced impatiently, eager to go. Louis just had to lean a little on his left for her to turn and take a brisk canter. Lestat chirruped to his horse: it was his turn to follow.

He saw the mare in front of him, her stride regular, determined, her tail flowing. He saw her approach the open ditch closing the meadow on the farthest end without changing her rhythm, take off and land lightly on the far side. His horse was getting excited and he hurried a little, ending up by putting in an extra stride before jumping. Lestat glimpsed Louis smile to them over his shoulder.

—Just let him choose when— Lestat heard him say. —Or have you really to be in charge every single time?!.

Then they forgot everything in the surge of motion, wind, moonshine.

It was well past midnight when they approached home at last. The horses chomped contentedly their bits, walking on loose reins to their rest, necks stretched, sweat almost dry on them.

—Wouldn't you stay with me a little longer? — Louis asked in a low voice, without looking up. Lestat felt the unspoken urgency of the request, and his own desire mingled with it so hot it hurt. He could not answer with words, but slipped down to sit on a bale of straw in the courtyard, his back to the wall.

There he remained without moving, without talking, while Louis washed down both horses in the warm night and walked them dry, one on each hand, the sound of their feet resounding in the quiet of the night.

Lestat's eyes and heart filled with the simple grace he was beholding, the calm efficiency of each gesture, the tenderness of those beloved hands on the black glistening necks. He remembered something Louis had told him once about being around horses.

—It's not *citius altius fortius*,— he had said, —rather it's *lentius altius dulcius*.

—Like good lovemaking, — Lestat had commented then, and Louis had blushed.

At last Louis put them in their boxes, gave them a slice of hay, rinsed the caked foam from the bits and girths, and finally came to stand in front of him. Lestat closed his eyes and leaned his head on the wall.

—Come,— he heard Louis murmuring, —Come and sit with me.

He took Lestat by the hand and gently made him rise. Lestat followed him in the mare's box. They sat on the clean straw, their back to the door, and again there was silence. The mare smelled sweet and salty as she moved quietly around, turning sometimes to take a sip of

water from the bucket in the corner. Then Louis spoke, so softly Lestat could hardly make out his words.

—This is a good place for fending off nightmares. She knows what it's all about. Horses are wise. They can manage terror, and be happy all the same. They can absorb ours, too. Do you feel it? Feel the peace here.

Lestat was feeling it. He was afraid to break it, so instead of answering he just put his hand on Louis' knee at his side. Louis covered it with his own.

—Remember this. I try to. Remember this when the horror seems so real. This is real as well. This is a place to return to. I wanted so much to have you here, feeling this with me, and now you are here. I'm happy.

It was almost dawn when they quietly slid out of the box and made their way home. The black mare was sleeping, curled down, and did not wake.

::

It had happened, then. Lestat felt a chill remembering. They had made love. Tenderly, passionately, with all the gentleness and the roughness their knowledge of each other infused in every gesture. Completely surrendering to the unity they became, in the time without time when they were locked in blood. Surrendering together to sleep, when it came upon them, one in the arms of the other.

Yet, they had both known it was the last time. Lestat knew his heartbeat declared it, stronger than the shroud of silence between their minds: /I am leaving you/.

He had heard in Louis' heartbeat the answer: /It is time to leave me/.

Lestat had slipped out of the bed at the first dusk, and he had not looked behind. Without a sound he had closed the door and gone out in the cool scentless night, to his new mortal lover.

Then... What had happened? He walked in darkness, and the darkness was empty of promises. He was alone. A long time seemed to have passed. It was a different season, a different place, a different epoch. Strange clothes on his limbs.

He found himself in unfamiliar surroundings. The barren outskirts of a city he didn't recognize. The crumbling brick wall of an abandoned factory. A faint rustling on the other side. Lestat quickly climbed on top of the wall and looked below.

The moonlit yard was filled with garbage. Wooden, painted models for huge pieces of machinery, broken parts of cast-iron components, every sort of rubble, weeds and bushes growing among it. The hot, dry smell of coal, no, of carbon and machine oil, and the fine, black, abrasive dust settled everywhere told him this place had once been a foundry. A long black snake, a *miroldo*, slipped quickly along the foot of the wall. Lestat sat there on top of the wall, waiting.

Waiting for what?

A silhouette came against the light from the far end of the yard. Lestat recognized it at once.

That walk, those shoulders, the way he turned his head. In his hands something very white, gleaming in the darkness. A bottle of milk. Something eerie in the silence. He moved soundlessly. Louis had never been so soundless, had never cared to be.

He walked toward the wall. Lestat half feared, half hoped that he would see him, crouching there above his head, but he seemed blind to anything beyond his immediate goal. He poured some milk in a flat bowl at the foot of the wall, and Lestat was startled when he saw the snake coming out of the shadows and slowly coiling in the moonlight.

Now the light caught Louis also, and Lestat could see him at last.

He looked starved. His hair was dirty and tangled. His hands were dirty too, and his face was streaked with old crusts of blood-tears left to dry, oxidized brown by time. His clothes were tatters. He looked like washing or clothing didn't matter anymore if it wasn't for Lestat to see. Like he forgot to feed since it wasn't to be warm and full for Lestat. Like he didn't read anymore since Lestat was not there to read to, or to talk to about the books. Like he didn't even think anymore, so that no thought of Lestat could come to trouble him. Like being a person, rather than a mere walking body, was not important now that his time with Lestat had come to an end. And it seemed that even living or dying didn't make a difference anymore, unless to keep witness to memories which would otherwise be lost forever.

Lestat was appalled. There was no vibration of life coming from that once beloved figure, only silence, void, dirt. Nothing human, nothing vampiric even. A revenant. A mindless creature, who had let itself get utterly lost, like the discarded envelope of a once cherished, and now burned love-letter. He tried to cry out to him, and no voice came. He tried to jump down and run to him, but he couldn't.

Then the haggard, filthy figure raised his face at last and looked him straight in the eyes. Lestat felt a cold shiver.

It was his own face, staring at him, blank of all expression. He felt himself falling backwards from the wall, and the fall never ended.

He woke with a start, trembling, and for a while he couldn't manage to open his eyes. He couldn't even feel the outline of his own body. Then gravity finally gave him the sense of boundaries and position.

He was curled tight around Louis' back. He was holding him. They were in bed, naked under the featherlight cashmere throw. They had made love before dawn. Louis still slept, a frown of pain on his beautiful face. He moved weakly in his arms, as though he was trying in vain to wake up.

Lestat's heart was racing. What was real, what was a dream? What had they shared in the circle of blood before falling asleep? Was it real, had it been real... their parting? He didn't know anymore. He was scared to know. He held Louis in his arms and he couldn't remember anything beyond this. No other love.

He began shaking him, trying to break the lingering slumber. A moan escaped Louis' lips when at last he opened his eyes, and they were dark with sorrow and fear.

—No, no, no, no, not anymore, go now please, leave me— he whispered hoarsely. —Not real, not real, not real, you're not real... Quit making it up! — he ordered himself harshly.

Lestat took Louis' face in his hands. So cold it was. He tried to look into those eyes who refused to meet his.

—Louis, listen to me. Louis, you were dreaming. I have been dreaming too. Louis, wake up!

He grabbed Louis' hand and he passed it among his own hair, forcing him to repeat the familiar gesture. A moment later the limp fingers were clutching a strand of golden hair, tugging at it near the root, near the nape of the neck, hurting him. Startled, unbelieving, Louis' eyes finally raised to meet Lestat's.

—Don't let me wake. Oh God don't let me wake— he gasped.

—You are awake. We both are. We have been dreaming. I fear to think it may have been the same dream.

—It was no dream. You are leaving— Louis' voice stopped just before breaking. —I thought you would be gone before I woke.

—Never. Never. My love, never. It is not what I want. I don't want this. I love you forever.

—*Nothing's forever not even five minutes when you're heading for the finish line*— Louis' words were a whisper. —But love me now, this moment, one moment more, and I don't want to see further, nor dreams nor reality.

Then no more words were said.

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## **2. Armand: *Domine, quis sustinebit?***

*In loving memory of La Rossa, the cat with the wolf-eyes, who chose to face death alone, 1990-2000*

::

Armand woke with a start.

Breathless, eyes wide open and unseeing, he hugged himself under the heavy embroidered cover. He tried to look at the familiar room around him, at Daniel still deeply asleep at his side, but the images of his dream kept superimposing themselves to the physical reality in which he suddenly felt drowning.

This was a new dream. This was not a memory, cruelly reenacted during the day's deathly slumber, nor a nightmare actually, no, not a nightmare at all; rather, an imperative communication from his deepest self.

Armand forced himself to breath slowly and regularly, and it didn't take long before his heart slowed down. Heavy, heavy: how long since he had last recurred to this! Heavy arms, heavy legs. He willed himself down, following his dream. Warm, warm all over, and heavy, like the coming of sleep after a late hunt just before dawn. Heavy, warm, down... What was it then? The figures in his dream floated again in front of him.

He was in an ancient garden he had never been in before, lush with groves of fruit trees and great oaks scattered on vaste lawns. Deers and peacocks roamed quietly around under an almost full moon, bathed in the fresh green scent of growing grass. He felt in peace like he had not since the days when his immortal life had just begun. He felt at home among the ancient trees, the contented deers and birds.

Then he heard an owl calling, piercing the night with its cry. He raised his eyes, and at a distance, in the shadow of an elm, he saw a silhouette he knew only too well.

"Maestro!" he gasped, and without thinking he moved at once towards the dark figure standing. He was running, with the airborne run even vampires know only in dreams, towards those hands, that embrace, aching to feel them again.

But the figure did not move.

Armand could only glimpse his face among the shadows, and no recognition lighted those eyes. Only a curious, distant look, like a stranger who finds himself mistaken for someone else. That unrecognizing stare transfixed him, stopped him in his tracks. And already the vision vanished, the garden melted away, and only those distant eyes remained.

Marius did not know him anymore.

::

Louis and Daniel were sitting, silent, on top on the Chrysler Building in New York, waiting for darkness to thread deeper. The lights of the city were beginning to blink and glitter under them, and the stars would soon be obliterated. Only Orion was still clearly visible, halfway up from the eastern horizon.

Daniel sighed. Once again he wondered where Armand may be now.

One more time he had slipped off on his own just after sunset. Daniel was torn between his eagerness to help and the feeling of being a complete goof about it, every time he tried.

Usually he would end up angry with Armand and with himself, but tonight he was only sad, for both.

Louis looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

—It's difficult, isn't it?— he said. —He's keeping everything inside like it was a plague waiting to strike all those around him. He can't see his own light, or can't believe it.

Daniel turned to him, wide-eyed.

—That's it... He can't believe he is the fine person I love. He makes me feel like, because I love him, and he believes he's worth nothing, I'm worth nothing also.

Louis smiled quietly.

—It took me a long time to get to his pain. He is so very good at hiding it. It took me...

Daniel saw him shudder a little, although the night was not cold.

—It took me Memnoch to get near it<sup>3</sup>, only to understand how much worse his pain is than mine. He is more than just hurt and frightened, he's ashamed of himself also.

Louis averted his eyes, looking at the blue-black sky. In a low voice, almost speaking to himself, he added:

—No seventeen-year-old boy can be expected to fight for his convictions against a moral authority, however self-appointed. How could he trust himself to do that? How could he hold fast alone, against what looked like a whole world condemning him for daring to be happy?.

Daniel shifted his weight, uneasy.

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<sup>3</sup> Reference is made here to the speculative writing *Memnoch*, at one time published online, in which Louis was on the point of being offered as a bloody sacrifice to a dubious godhead, and has nothing at all to do with the novel *Memnoch the Devil* by Anne Rice (1995). The spec was accompanied by a number of stories (*Tweeners* and *Afters*) about how Louis coped with the trauma.

—I just wish he'd let me love him. He lets me, for a while, but whenever he seems he could use my help, he just disappears. I'm not saying I can erase his pain, but I'd try to make him happy now.

Louis took some time before answering. His voice was sad.

—I don't think you can help. Not now. He won't let your love help him.

He paused again.

—He needs someone much easier.

—What do you mean?— Daniel felt a prick of jealousy. He may not be the easiest guy on earth to live with, but...

Louis blinked at the cold rush of emotion coming from those violet eyes.

—Oh, I don't mean another of us, or a human for that matter. I mean someone *\*really\** easier. Don't you know where he is now? He goes there almost every night, before you get up. Come— he said, and he rose to his feet. —Won't you?.

He tended his hand to Daniel, who frowned, hesitated, and then took it. Without another word, without a sound, they were gone.

A single seagull, resting for the night on top of that craggy, artificial cliff, put his head under his wing and at last drifted to sleep.

The alley was darkly lit by a single streetlamp. Lurid rays glittered on broken glass, discarded tins and all the bits and pieces a crazily affluent society leaves in its wake.

Louis put his hand, lightly, on Daniel's arm, signalling to him to be quiet and careful.

Something moved behind the last bin at the dead end of the alley. Daniel could just make out a faint sound he didn't recognize. He looked better... and there he was.

Daniel guessed, more than he saw, what was happening. Armand's white sweater, Armand's grey jeans, Armand's slender shoulders as he crouched among rubbish, and in front of him a small furry form stroking itself on his legs. A cat! a small alley cat, a brown tabby mottled with orange brindles, and it was purring softly, like cats do when they know they don't have to beg. Armand was stroking it tenderly. The cat rose its golden eyes, wild and serious like a wolf's, to meet his, then squeezed them a little.

—I love you too— they barely heard Armand whisper, as he answered the cat by blinking in his turn. The cat reared a little against his knee, then meowed almost silently.

—Ready for supper, Red One?— Armand took out of the front of his sweater a can of food. He had fed already, and he had carried the can next his own skin to warm it for the cat. Still crouching, resting his chin on his arms crossed upon his knees, he watched with rapt attention as the animal enjoyed its food.

Daniel could not turn off his eyes. He had never seen such transparent purity in Armand's demeanor. He had never seen him so powerful, yet so considerate and respectful, as he was now in the company of a stray cat at the bottom of a dirty alley. He could not see the expression in his eyes, but he suddenly realized how similar Armand's gestures just now were to those he so much loved in Marius.

—Let's get away now— Louis breathed —before he's finished.

Daniel felt his legs still shaking when they sat on the grass in a park some blocks away. He could not find any words for what he had seen. Louis looked at him in silence while Daniel thoughtfully passed a hand in his hair.

—Is that what you mean by *\*easy\**?— he said in the end.

—Yes, that's it— Louis answered slowly. —You can't lie to a cat. A cat won't lie to you. No words, no seduction, no treason, not even the multiple, ever-conflicting layers of a human soul: only truth, seeping out of the body and its movements, echoing in the tone of the voice. No obligation to love, either. A cat won't feel bound to love you every day, every moment, or in every situation. One's relationship with a cat moves on from the basis of its past, but is not bound by it. You get back what you put into it. It's freedom.

Daniel felt the warmth of Louis' voice filling him with something more akin to hope than he would have thought possible. He heard him say again:

—He feels worthy of that cat now, if not of you... yet.

Daniel stared at Louis, realization dawning on him. He blinked in surprise. Louis blinked in return, like Armand had answered the cat. Daniel was flooded with relief.

—The cat loves him... it's this, is it? It has no reason to, other than his being....

—Impeccable to her?— Louis interrupted softly. —\*It\* is a \*she\*, you know. Yes, he is impeccable, and he also has no reason for that, other than love. He may not have a great opinion of himself, but that cat has, and I think he's beginning to believe her... At last.

—I wish he would believe me also. Whenever I try to tell him that I love him, he smiles that icy smile of his and then he looks away. I can never relax and just enjoy myself with him, he's always ready to throw in a prickly line. Yet he spies me when I'm asleep. I wake up and he's there, staring at me, unreadable. He frightens me sometimes.

—I know— Louis said under his breath, and he meant "I remember". He searched for words, found them, and went on.

—His happiness is like a small child. It has never grown up. His pain has matured to adulthood, strong and wary, but not his happiness. He doesn't want to help it grow, he doesn't even want to have anything to do with a thing so young and tender. Twice already being young and happy and trustful has spelled tragedy to him and his loved ones. So now he always keeps himself and you on your toes, defenses up, ready to fight, never relaxed. Happiness is dangerous. Relaxing is losing control. His joy must stay within and not be seen, because there is no safe place out there. Danger begins immediately outside his skin. He is so accomplished in defending himself from happiness! He wears so many different masks that you never know which is his true face. When he keeps you at a distance, it is so that you can't see how very happy you make him. He won't go to his maker because Marius knows him so thoroughly that he could never hide his joy from him, and this frightens him to death.

Daniel sighed deeply, overwhelmed by all this.

—What can I do?— he asked finally, his voice small and almost childlike.

—Be patient. Wait. It can take a long time to heal five hundred years of shame and fear. But our kind have time, if nothing else.— Louis sighed in his turn. —He may have to go back to the beginning, somehow face again all the people in his life. The dead will be the hardest.

Saddened, Louis stroked a finger on his brow between the eyes.

—He will go to Marius. Oh, I know they have met a number of times, but neither has dared to tread again into their true intimacy. You are the latest in his life.

He looked at Daniel at his side. The boy was trembling slightly. Louis sat nearer and put an arm around his shoulders.

—He'll come to you in the end.— His voice was low and thick as velvet. —Just as he will first have to go back there alone. He never, ever chose, until he chose you.

Daniel looked up at the sky. His vampiric sight could just make out the glimmer of Aldebaran, the Bull's eye, shining bright yellow over New York in the late winter sky.

—I'll wait for him— he said.

::

Armand was dreaming again. An earlier, heavier sleep than usual had taken him, and he now lay curled up on the satin couch. A light frown passed on his face. A strange dream...

He was in the alley again, sitting with legs crossed, arms resting on his knees, his back to the dirty concrete wall, staring at nothing. Next to him the cat was also sitting quietly, her dapper little feet circled by her neatly curled tail, light shining on her mottled brown and orange hair. She was purring softly to herself, almost inaudibly. Armand felt her purring in his stomach. He felt her trust in him, her pleasure in his silent company. He knew then that she didn't love him because of the food he gave her or the care he took of her, but, quite simply, for himself. He realized she considered him as an equal and a partner in the enterprise of being. He felt so moved by this sudden certainty that he closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, his vision was changing. The wall opposite them was disappearing, and the view was opening in a shimmer of nightly darkness. They now looked over a desolate expanse of dried-up grass and stones, coursed by shallow, gravelly ditches. A light haze covered the scene, closing off the horizon. But a cool breeze rose, faint and pleasant, and the haze was slowly dispersed. In the distance, across the wasteland, could now be seen the ancient Garden, with its tall majestic trees in their full glory of budding leaves. And it seemed like the garden was flowing towards them: a

wave of grass expanded in their direction, covering the bare wasteland with a carpet of glistening, translucent blades vibrant with the drone of crickets.

Armand rose his eyes to the peacock-blue sky and saw the brightest stars he could ever imagine. They were pouring out coloured light, white and blue and red and yellow and orange, and among them he saw Saturn moving through space and coming down toward them, shining pearly within its iridescent ring. Astonished, he understood it was a celebration in honor of them both, the cat and himself, companions and warriors, both shining themselves in the newly-born splendor of things.

Again he closed his eyes in disbelief, and again the vision changed. It was lighter now, like just before dawn on an April morning after a night of rain, when the earth sends out its young damp perfume. A blackbird chuckled briefly near them, then took wing.

And someone was coming.

Armand rose to his feet, but could not move.

Marius was coming across the meadow, treading lightly on the grass, once again cloaked so that Armand could not see his face. Silent, he came nearer. Without stopping he pushed back his cape, discovering the dear features Armand had not dared to think about since so long.

"Vien qua fio, zogia mia, anima mia. Andemo casa", *Come, son, my joy, my soul. Let's go home*, he heard him say in that mellow, ancient Venetian of his, that elder brother of Italian, which Alighieri in *De vulgari eloquentia* had called fuzzy, *hirsutus*.

Armand was breathless with happiness at the touch of that voice, so deep, so tender. Marius was here, Marius had come for him, and now he had circled his shoulders with that strong, agile arm of his, and was leading him back, to the garden, home.

"No ti vien?", *Aren't you coming?* his Master asked the cat over his shoulder.

She yawned, rose up, lifted her tail straight in the air, tilted the tip forward, and followed them.

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### **3. Marius: Of mirrors, and fear**

*This is set after the events in The Vampire Armand by Anne Rice (1998).*

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Stifling. Stifling. Walls closing over him, again.

Marius recognized the nightmare at once. He knew what was coming. The passages between damp moldy bricks getting narrower, the sky above unreachable. The urgency to go home, yet his limbs heavier at every step. The desperate stubborn fight to keep moving. Feet slipping on slimy stones, limbs scratched while he forced his way through, and everywhere the stifling smoke.

There it was, the palace, wrapped in flames and screams, black figures writhing at the windows, and he strained his body in a last wrenching effort as he tried to cry out, but he was sinking down below the pavement level, unable to move, unable to speak, unable even to close his eyes and shut the horror out, unable to fling himself in the bonfire and die with his beloved. Then the breathless darkness.

But this time the dream did not end there.

A gray light came upon him in the formless place he was. Fighting to regain control of his body, he thrust himself headlong into it, deep into his own terror, as he always did into anything which frightened him, to see it through and beyond. Fog drowning the landscape. He could barely see his way. Sleep pulling at him. So easy to lie down and close his eyes in this cold gray place. But he knew somehow that the road he was treading led to his home. He commanded himself to walk on.

The fog cleared slowly, and with a gasp of recognition he found himself in front of the arched doorway of the palace. Music came from the lighted windows. The door was ajar. He stepped inside.

The wide, low, beamed hall, spreading all the way to the water entrance at the other side, looked different. Different furniture, different paintings on the walls. People he did not remember, mixed with his own apprentices and servants, went about their business, all chatting merrily, passing him by, glancing at him with mild interest in their forgetful eyes. He followed the music up the marble staircase. He crossed the landing to the hall of the feasts. He stopped short in his tracks, and suddenly the changes in his own house and the opulence of the masked ball unfolding in front of him did not matter anymore.

Amadeo was on the far side of the hall, composedly sitting on a Savonarola chair, presiding the feast, beautiful as a young god in white velvet and gold filigree.

Marius' heart skipped a beat. He had eyes for him only, his boy, his lover, alive and safe and radiant and masterful. Marius had hoped and waited just for this to happen, that his beloved would flourish in happiness and powerful grace.

He came nearer, trembling inside. Amadeo was whispering something to an elderly man standing on his right, his shining curls flowing along his left cheek. Then he raised his right hand to gather them back from behind, a gesture so much his own, so very young and intimate, that Marius could not but cry his name.

Amadeo looked up at him for a moment, then smiled a cold, ironic smile, the smile of a monarch bothered by a beggar.

Marius felt himself dying in that instant, reeling in dizziness.

He woke up in a muck sweat. It took some time before he managed to open his eyes, blindness clinging to him like a sticky tar of discomfort. Powerless, useless. He had been powerless to protect those he loved most, to defend their lives, their happiness. Now he saw he was useless also. They were happy. They were strong. They didn't need him, or even recognize him.

But there was something worse.

Night after night he had lived again the horror of his innocent Amadeo dying among the flames together with everyone and everything he had ever loved. Now he was chilled by a deeper horror, the mortal fear that he had survived, beautiful and full of grace and power and all the gifts he had bestowed upon him in love, but scornful and evil and cold like that cruel, princely smile.

He knew he had not gone wrong when he had seen the purity of soul at the bottom of the frightened eyes of the abused child. He clung now to the memory like a lifeline. It had been a single flashing moment, the hit of the beak of the Paramahansa bird, a single perfect moment of definition and awareness.

But then, how could that soul have soured? What had Marius done wrong, if everything had been done and given in love?

Yet it had to be his fault.

He had often wondered why Amadeo had not come to him after knowing he was alive. Now this dream showed him why he himself had not tried to reach him.

It had been fear, pure and simple. Fear to find him changed, together with the deeper fear to find himself failing the standard he had always tried so hard to conform to.

He had hoped to be able to avoid this confrontation, letting the past slip behind him forever. But now the past had caught up with him, and he found that time had compounded his fear with the added guilt of cowardice.

Marius saw the sun had just set under the horizon, the light still vivid enough to hurt, but he could not wait. He needed to go out, at once. Silently, he opened the heavy larchwood door and for a second he thought he was still dreaming.

Sitting on the ground between the wooden jambs of the arch at the far side of the small antechamber, one knee raised, arms resting on it, was Amadeo.

He was looking the other way, and Marius could see the cascade of his hair catching the last of the sunset like they were on fire. Almost as a mirror image of the dream, he rose his left hand and from behind pulled back a strand of hair, his face turning toward him in the movement.

His dark eyes widened, sparkling joy as he jumped up and stood in front of him, his right hand on his left shoulder like he used to do when emotion threatened to overcome him.



Marius could not believe he was not envisioning the fond memory of the times when his beloved, still in his mortal days, waited out the night sitting like that on the doorstep, just to be the first to greet him at his return and take off his boots before the servants came. He leaned on the door and closed his eyes for a moment, asking, praying to be able to stand it. A chill went through him when he felt those small, strong hands circling his thighs. Amadeo was kneeling in front of him, head bowed under that fiery hair, hugging his legs.

—Paron, de grazia, lassème star qua. Paron, ve prego, guardème, *Master, I beg, let me stay here. Master, I pray you, look at me.*

Marius leaned toward him, took him by his shoulders, helped him stand, pushed back the auburn curls and looked at that dear face staring at him, tight with emotion verging on fear. With a sudden pang of anguish, he realized how dangerous and surely painful coming there so early had been for the boy, the fierce rays of the sun still vibrating and burning in the sky and on his skin. Yet here he was.

Marius felt a slow smile warming him, and his heart beat faster when he saw the same smile reflect itself on Amadeo's lips. Then his nightmare caught up with him.

—Don't lose your time with me, my son. Don't waste your life. I could not take care of you, or anyone else. I tried, I failed. I have no power to give you happiness, and I have been a coward. I am unworthy of you.

—Master,— came the answer in a whisper. —I beg you to forgive me for staying away so long. I was afraid. I was ashamed of what I had chosen to endure, and to do, rather than die. I am afraid still, but if I would not come back to you, in the end I would lose even the memory of the happiness you gave me. I would not let it happen, because it is the core of my whole life, and I cannot live without it, or without you, anymore.

Amadeo reached up and timidly brushed a kiss on his master's cheek, light as a feather.

Marius in his turn took his hand, put it to his lips and kissed the smooth palm near the wrist.

—I cannot either, my love. I was dying without you. I thank you for coming— he sighed.

Out they went together, silent under the clear night sky, Amadeo at his left as they were wont to do.

He searched Marius' hand with his, and he threaded his slender fingers with his maker's like the wind threads itself among the leaves of a willow.

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The night embraced the sea. The empty sand glimmered faintly under the light of the stars, and the moon was but a thin letter traced in deep gold on the deeper blue of the sky.

They were sitting side by side on the beach, looking at the innumerable waves coming and going like the years of their immortal lives. Armand slipped his arm under his maker's and began to speak, barely audible over the quiet sound of the sea.

—I dreamt of you. With all my powers I tried not to think of you and not to remember, but every morning sleep takes me, and every day I dreamt of you. I was in a garden as perfect and joyful as paradise, and you were lord and master there, and you didn't know me anymore. His voice broke suddenly, but he went on, as though waiting to regain composure would rob him of a last chance to save his own life.

—Then yesterday I dreamt again. Look at me.

Marius turned to meet his eyes. He gazed at them a long time, glistening, shimmering, and he slowly lost focus on the beach and the sea and the features of the face dearest to him.

A vision emerged in those eyes as he stared in rapture.

He saw Armand shining like a light beyond the wasteland, and beside him the smaller light of another being, a cat. He knew the light was love. He felt drawn by that double light like a moth to a taper. He felt himself moving toward them in a wave of pure happiness, so strong that he startled with a small cry.

—Did you see it? You did!

Armand was trembling in his arms.

Marius closed his eyes, gathering his vision within himself, before looking once more at Armand.

—I saw it. I saw it. I don't know how, but I did. — His voice was warm with emotion. — Yesterday I also had a dream of you and I could not believe you were really there when I awoke.

—Tell me, Master, I pray you.

Marius' words were husky with pain as he told his nightmare of the burning palace. He felt Armand shudder at his side and bow his head, sharing the agony.

—Then I saw you alive and beautiful and full of power, the master of the house, a prince feasting in glory, but...—. For a moment he could not continue. —But you were something evil. Your eyes were cold and pitiless. Your smile was the smile of a god, but giving pain was as much an amusement for you as the feast you were offering.

Marius covered his face with his hands.

—I was devastated when I thought you were dead. Then it was hard to think that you may be alive and happy without me, I need you so much. But it frightened me most that you may have changed, and that it would have been my fault.

Marius felt the touch of Armand's hand on his bent neck, fingers pushing tenderly through his hair along the base of the skull, then closing on the roots, turning his head to him, delicate and imperious. But Armand's face was pale with anxiety.

—My lord and Master, look at me! Look at me now, outside our dreams, and tell me what you see. Tell me who I am, here, now, because I don't know anymore, not since that night of fire. Silence became solid and humming under the stars, for a long minute. Then Marius spoke, his voice young with happiness and ringing certainty.

—I see my boy, my love, my Amadeo. I see you alive and safe and beautiful. I see you grown up like I always hoped you would, wise and kind and full of grace. I see you endowed with the power to choose, and the capacity to love, and the terrible strength to hold on against the insufferable and even against yourself. I can't believe I made you. I am so proud of you, my son.

Marius stopped a moment. This was the most frightening thing he could remember doing, ever. But it had to be done, now, whatever the outcome. He thought it was small penance anyway for his faults.

—Amadeo,— he said, his voice heavy with emotion. —Now do you look at me and tell me what is left beyond my love for you, for what it's worth.

—Master, you have given me life for the third time tonight— whispered Armand, and he curled up at his side. —I see and feel your love, unchanged. I see your pain, even worse than mine has been, so searing that for centuries I was afraid to feel it, and I still am, Master. And I see your fear, the mirror and double of my own, which has kept us apart for so long. I hate this fear, and hate myself, and yet I love you all the more for feeling it. You are not God almighty for me anymore. There is no God almighty. But you are my Master and my father, and my lover if you will want me yet, and I would not have you any different.

—Then we are giving life to each other this time, my love— Marius answered softly, and he kissed the flaming curls.

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#### **4/a. Louis: Heart of a hunter**

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*Had we never loved so kindly,  
had we never loved so blindly,  
never met or never parted,  
we'd have never been broken-hearted.*

Robert Burns, *Fond Kiss* (1791)

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Louis was sitting beside Marius at the far end of the meadow, where his horses grazed calmly under the first quarter of an April moon. They could hear the faint sound of water in the trough on the other side, continuously filled by a nearby brook. Louis had carefully arranged for drainage of the overflow, so the ground would not become dangerously muddy.

—It is not much different from my times— sighed the ancient one. —Taller horses, though, — he added as an afterthought. Louis could feel Marius' happiness rippling from him, as clear as light, and he felt filled with peace.

—I would like to tell you something tonight. — Louis' tone was quietly determined. —I could not yet bring myself to it, but what happened between you and Armand has changed it somehow.

Marius looked at him, concern slowly spreading on his face, hearing an overtone of tightness in his voice. He covered with his large strong hand Louis' knee, and the younger vampire lowered his own to rest on it for a moment, taking comfort for what he wanted to say. Then he raised his head and stared in the distance at the shining black velvet coat of his mare.

—I know you took Armand not only because he would meet death without you, but also because you saw his beautiful soul and you knew who he would become, the love that was in him. I never was so wise. You know how I met Claudia...

He drew his breath in sharply, and Marius was flooded with the pain his friend still felt just saying her name aloud. He drew himself nearer. Louis looked at him, and smiled.

—Oh, I can stand it now,— he said, mocking himself. He looked away again before going on.

—I didn't ask myself what sort of person she may be. I only saw a helpless creature, and I wanted to spare her more pain, like I would kill off a wounded animal. Her loveliness and sorrow were something I could not stand to see any longer. She made me think of those terrible words in Matthew's gospel: *Behold the lilies growing in the field...* She was white and wonderful as a lily, and she was being cut and thrown in the furnace. My pity for her was also pity for the world and for myself, for the eternal, incomprehensible pain of existing. And then she was made an immortal.

He was silent for a while, his eyes lost. When he spoke again, his words were grave.

—She was utterly ruthless, like children can be. Yet her helplessness, and my compassion, lingered on. Her apparent childhood allowed me to avoid facing the most important question: was she really so different from me? How could I look at her playing with its prey like at a cat, cruel yet inevitable, and at the same time condemn myself for killing and feeding, as painlessly as I could? I could neither see her as evil as me, nor myself as good as I willed myself to think her. So I settled my uneasy mind to the task of giving her an education.

He laughed under his breath, but his laughter was bitter.

—Maybe I hoped to prove that a born predator like she was could grow a conscience. Maybe I hoped to prove that to Lestat, who did not seem to have a conscience of his own at the time. I only got an educated predator for my efforts, all the more cunning and deadly.

He leaned back on his hands, then turned to Marius.

—I loved her more than ever. Can you understand? She was guilty, yet she wasn't. She only was herself, with all the energy of her indomitable little soul. No more, no less than whoever else on this green Earth of God, and at least she was never hypocritical about it.

Louis paused a moment.

—She also loved you— Marius said under his breath.

—Oh, yes, she did.— Louis sighed deeply. —It is written, *Thou shall not judge*. It took me until that night in Carmel Valley to see she had been teaching me much more than I ever taught her. She taught me to love against my own conscience. She taught me to accept without question what I am, and what others are. And it was she who taught me to love Lestat.

Louis raised his eyes to a solitary cloud, trailing the sky on the northeastern breeze.

—I had not even realized his love for me. I could not believe somebody so completely alien may be fond of me, cherish me for the very convictions he did not share, and hold me so dear as he did. I believed love happened between twin souls.

He laughed quietly. This time it was a happy sound.

—I was a fool.

He lowered himself back among the grass and lay there, his long hands resting on his chest, looking up at the stars.

—I went crazy when she died. It was not only that I loved her and I knew she loved me just as much. It was not even for the injustice of it. No living being deserves death as punishment, and who is judging whom, anyway? She was no more a monster than they were, or than I am. Anger had crept in his voice. He waited a moment to steady it before going on.

—It was the horrible definitiveness of it that shattered me. The story finished there, no happy ending, and all that remained was to look at it for what it was. I could not delude myself

anymore that she would grow up and be good. Eventually, I had to realize she had grown already: she was a woman in her childish body, and her frustration was making her vicious. Soon she would not content herself anymore with just hurting me. She was slowly turning from a shark or a swallow, hungry and innocent, into a willful torturer, and I would not have had any power to avoid it or to protect her from herself. This I was unable to face for more than a hundred years.

Mariusus gently brushed his cold smooth hand on Louis' furrowed brow, and he turned his head to look at him among the leaves of lush timothy.

—But I still love her, more than ever— he said, —And I always will. My heart breaks thinking of her. Whenever I am with Lestat, I want to cry, because she gave him to me in the end.

Mariusus remained silent for a while. When he spoke, it was without words.

/Life is a very strange thing,/ he said. /Irreplaceable. I think humans have come to call this “a singularity”. What I am certain of, after all this time,/ he went on, more serious than Louis had ever felt him, /Is that nothing ever really passes away. Things only change. Nothing is forgotten as long as one is alive. Maybe even after that. I don't know, and I don't want to. It frightens me even more than the thought of my own immortality/.

He gently picked up one of Louis' hands and stared at it, tracing with his finger the course of each fine bone beneath the skin.

/In the end, we only own our awareness. So, everything is a gift not even death itself can rob/.

—It can take so long, however,— sighed Louis —before one can find a place for each bit of it, and learn to live with it.

He pushed himself up on his elbow.

—But we are the luckiest. We have all the time in the world, if nothing else, don't we?— he laughed.

—Indeed,— Mariusus smiled back at him. Then a blackbird chuckled his call among the leaves of a poplar. Louis slipped back down and began to sing softly.

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
take this broken wing to learn to fly  
all your life  
you were only waiting for this moment to arrive...  
Blackbird, fly,  
you were only waiting for this moment to be free...*

Lennon-McCartney, *Blackbird*, in *The Beatles* (1968)

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#### 4/b. Louis: Sleeping in the Devil's bed

*Grazie alla Primiissima Dea che ha dato le primissime parole all'identità di arma e ferita.*

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*I thought of you there next to me  
wearing your pretty face  
I thought of you in my bed  
You were there, bound and chained...*

Daniel Lanois, *Sleeping in the Devil's Bed*, in *For the beauty of Wynona* (1993)

::

The sun had set among the roofs of the old town, the moon was slowly floating higher, and still Louis could not wake.

He was dreaming of walking hurriedly in an ancient city he did not know, yet it somehow had the taste and scent of bleak, rainy Paris in those days of *fin de siècle*, or *fin du globe*, when he had met Armand. He was trying to escape something, a vision that haunted him and that he feared to meet around every corner of the empty streets.

Again and again, however he tried to change his course, he found himself returning at the same door, strangely bright in varnish red as dark blood, the only bright thing in the dreary blacks and browns around him.

He felt his fear grow until he could not stand it anymore, and in a sudden, desperate impulse he climbed the few steps and went in, his heart in his mouth.

He found himself in a room bare of furniture, walls covered all around in sheets of rippling, raw silk of a purple so dark it was almost violet, yet glowing like embers left over after a bonfire.

The door itself seemed to have disappeared under that wealth of silk.

The room was warm, and a rich, thick, animal perfume oozed from incense burners in the four corners.

It seemed that the room revealed itself to him slowly, as he focused his attention on some item, like it happens in dreams. In the very center was a narrow bed, or rather a tatami raised on a platform, covered in black satin flowing down on the sides.

And on it, his limbs shining brighter against the black gleam, with only an equally black cloth thrown over his nakedness, lay Lestat, bound hands and feet to the platform.

Louis could see his ice-blue eyes, astonished, frightened, yet unyielding, his perfect body, muscles moving under the smooth intact skin, and the ridge of his collar bone accenting the powerful shoulders, that most beloved place for his kisses.

Then he saw something else, and his heart seemed to stop.

He saw himself.

His double, all clothed in peacock blue, from his soft leather boots to his tight trousers, to the silk shirt flowing out of a rich, eighteenth-century waistcoat, to the stock tie around his neck.

He saw himself, Louis, near the bed. He saw the hunger in his own eyes, and even more he could feel it within, wrenching and irresistible. He saw Lestat's fear when that silent presence bent over him. He felt his helplessness without resignation.

Without a word, Louis slowly raised his hands above the naked body. Still standing in his corner, unable to move, invisible to them, he could feel into himself the emotions waving through both. He heard their thoughts, ringing in different tones in his mind. He was the executioner and the victim, the weapon and the wound.

*/Now I have you in my power at last,/ surged within Louis like a fountain of fierce, terrible joy  
/To do as I wish with you, forever/.*

*/He can't have me,/ rang clear Lestat's mantra, stubborn, desperate, /He can't touch my soul/.* With the slowest, quietest motion, Louis passed his fingers on Lestat's brow and cheek, down his neck, along the curve of his shoulder, resting them at last on that very place above the collarbone where the scented warmth of his body seemed to gather.

/Now you can't leave me. Now you can't put yourself in any more danger. Now I won't lose you. Now you depend on me for everything. Now at last I have the power to keep you for good. Now I can make you happy forever/.

His hand shifted lower, brushing against the solid shaft of the sternum, following the ventral line where the fine golden hairs crossed and parted. His finger hooked under the cloth covering Lestat's belly, drawing it down and to the side, oh so slowly.

Lestat did not move, did not even cringe under the delicate, raping touch. Instead he stared straight in those green eyes made long with lust.

—No! I won't— he cried.

—You are free to want or not want, as you wish— was the answer, Louis' voice velvety, purring, tender and dangerous.

From his corner, he thought for a moment he saw his double as a big black panther, rolling in delight and stretching, claws extended, before feeding on a coveted prey already slain.

Louis rested both his hands lightly on Lestat's sides, just above his hips, then he began stroking them upwards on the flawless skin.

—I don't need you to trust me. I don't want to own your soul. I only want to own your life, and now I have it all for myself.

—And what are you going to do with it? — he heard Lestat gasp, fighting the waves of desire that rushed upon him under those cold searching fingers.

—I am going, — Louis whispered closing his eyes and pushing his head back, so that his dark glistening hair flowed down his shoulders, —I am going— he chanted softly, —I am going to make you die of pleasure.

And nothing but pleasure came from those hands, those lips that now brushed along Lestat's arm, climbing to his neck with agonizing tenderness, coming, going, returning, changing course, losing themselves in the hollow of an elbow or behind a knee or around the nub of an ankle, feeling the twin tense muscles of his back from scapulas to loins, tangling themselves in turn among the rich blond strands of his hair and the crisper fur under the armpits or around his sex, while Lestat's body began to move even against his will, leaning to the touch, mad with unwanted delight, his breathing shallow and fast.

A cry escaped him when at long last he fangs sharply penetrated the artery running blue across the groin, and the irresistible rapture conquered Lestat's unwilling consciousness, annihilating the last of his resistance, carrying him away, where nothing else mattered anymore.

Louis woke suddenly, supine on his bed, and for a second the terror gripped him that he may be chained to it in his turn. He sprang up panting.

A cool darkness enveloped him, flowing into the room from the window open on the April night. He looked around. Lestat lay on the other side of the bed, head propped on his hand, and he smiled faintly when Louis met his eyes.

—You were dreaming, — he said quietly. —I saw it.

His voice was thin and troubled.

—Come to me.

Louis let Lestat draw him down to sit beside him.

—Can you remember it?

Louis nodded silently.

—May I tell you about it?.

Louis could not, would not assent. Lestat was silent for a while. When he spoke at last, his voice was filled with compassion.

—I was completely in your power. I could not escape you. You could do whatever you wished with me, and you ...wished to make me good. It was insufferable. You didn't try to force or cheat me to consent. You didn't lie to me as I did when I made you: you were not giving me a choice. You had that much respect for me. You didn't try to rob me of my own soul. It was complete control, pure and simple, unmasked and unashamed, performed by a will endowed with absolute power both over me, bound and chained, and on your own ambivalence. Now that at last you had allowed yourself to take your power into your hands, nothing more kept it apart from its prey. Yet control endured. Stronger than my fear, stronger than my rebellion, stronger even than your unconfessed hate, was your love for me. Your hunger for me.

Lestat brushed lightly his hand on Louis' temple, damp with sweat. He bent to breathe in the intimate smell.

—This I was afraid to face for two hundred years,— he went on. —The intensity of your love, strengthened by all the viciousness you have never allowed yourself to own, and yet you do own it. It is so sharp, so hard, like a perfect sparkling diamond cut out of evil, that you hide within your very heart.— He sighed. —You never cease to astonish me, my love.

—I am so sorry— whispered Louis. He sat with his head bent, hands covering his face. Then he passed them among his hair and raised his eyes to meet his maker's.

—Can you ever forgive me for ...for this thing?.

Lestat drew him nearer and hugged him tight.

—Don't ever ask my forgiveness for your dreams. "Every secret will be proclaimed from every roof and tower", remember? This was the control freak's ultimate erotic dream, and the devil knows I've earned as much. How many times have I made you frightened crazy that you were going to lose me forever? Moreover, I'm sure I didn't show such respect for your immortal soul when I took for granted you would gladly comply and make me a vampire in Raglan's body. Laughter rippled in his voice, and Louis could not but smile.

—And I'm not going to ask \*your\* forgiveness!— Lestat added, blinking his eye. —Won't we go out now, my beautiful hunter, before I begin to think about how to take my revenge?.

He took Louis by the hand, raised him to his feet, quickly kissed him on the mouth, and a moment later the warm scented night had engulfed them.

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## **5. Daniel: Full moon over Madrid**

*Around the time Daniel was made.  
English version follows Italian text*

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*Tu che guardi verso di me  
hai visto i tori nel sonno  
e hai lasciato Madrid*

...

*Tu che prendi a calci la notte  
bevi fiumi di vodka  
e poi ti infili i miei jeans*

...

*Tu col cuore fuori strada*

...

*Tu fai l'amore selvaggio  
e trovi sempre un passaggio  
per andare più in là*

Gianna Nannini, *Ragazzo*, in *Latin Lover* (1982)

::

Troppo freddo quel letto senza di lui. Le lenzuola di seta blu scivolose come gorgi di mare tra gli scogli senza il suo svelto corpo liscio cui aggrapparsi e l'onda calda dei suoi capelli bai. Daniel si rannicchiò a palla e aspettò il sonno con un dolore in gola.

Il sonno arrivò con i sogni. E nei suoi sogni si infilava il ricordo dei sogni sognati dai tori, la notte che ubriaco e ancora mortale aveva camminato nel silenzio attorno alla Plaza de Toros illuminata dalla luna piena, e aveva udito i sogni dei tori addormentati. Giacevano sulla paglia e sognavano di ruminare. Aveva ascoltato, l'ultima pace che avrebbero avuto prima della strage. Era stato il sangue, lo sapeva. Quei pochi sorsi oscuri che aveva attinto, o carpito, al corpo luminoso che gli riempiva la mente e l'anima ogni minuto come un dolore. Era stato il suo primo dono devastante.

I tori non sapevano.

Era fuggito, a piedi, verso la stazione, aveva comprato un biglietto a caso, era partito. Ora nel suo sogno di immortale riviveva quella lucida spaventosa irruzione di consapevolezza e la sua inutile fuga in cerca delle ottuse percezioni degli umani. Il terrore di trovarsi di nuovo solo con un tale insopportabile lampo di dolore l'aveva infine spinto a frugare in tasca per le ultime monete, a cacciarle in un telefono, a chiamarlo. Aveva cercato di intossicare la sua mente e il suo corpo con qualsiasi cosa nelle brevi ore che dovevano passare prima che venisse a prenderlo. Si era abbandonato a un torpore senza pensiero durante il viaggio di ritorno. Che fosse lungo, quell'intervallo di nulla, prima di dover affrontare di nuovo il buio, o la luce. Ora ormai sapeva. Ora capiva che cos'erano cinquecento anni di testimonianza della morte. Strano che avesse compreso soltanto dopo che il silenzio irreparabile era caduto tra di loro. O forse no. Forse era stato un atto di compassione, risparmiargli quella conoscenza finché era stato possibile. Ricordava quanto insopportabile gli fosse stata l'ineluttabilità con cui lo desiderava. Era stato padrone della sua vita, una volta. Aveva lottato per esserlo, con determinazione e tenacia. Aveva rimosso dalla sua vita qualsiasi cosa non avesse scelto. Era libero. Trovarsi, all'improvviso, ad avere bisogno di lui, a ogni istante, a ogni respiro; della sua presenza o almeno del pensiero di lui, senza sapere se l'aveva scelto o se era stato scelto o se era stato il caso, o il destino, a rubargli la sua vita, lo faceva soffocare. Era sopravvissuto a malapena. Forse non sarebbe sopravvissuto, se Armand non lo avesse protetto in quel modo. Se non avesse impedito che l'orrore della conoscenza si infiltrasse in un desiderio che comunque lo consumava.

Armand non gli aveva parlato di come trovasse le sue vittime. Non ce n'era stato bisogno. Daniel l'aveva visto, e aveva compreso.

/Non come i tori/.

Non riusciva a immaginare un coraggio più grande. Una notte dopo l'altra, da cinquecento anni, essere disposto a conoscere una pena tanto grande da far impallidire i colori della vita, e tuttavia non pretendere di conoscere o di giudicare chi provava quella pena... Soltanto scioglierla in una nuvola di illusioni, perché non c'è niente di reale che possa opporsi alla realtà del dolore. Neppure Louis aveva tanto coraggio. Louis non voleva sapere. Daniel era certo che se non avesse parlato per primo, quella notte, se non avesse dato di sé anche solo la scintilla del suo tono di voce, della sua curiosità, ora sarebbe stato morto. Ricordò quello che diceva sua nonna a proposito dei polli che allevava in cortile: "Io non mangio chi conosco". Il sogno si dilatava, come una lenta marea di sizigia, e i pensieri e i ricordi vi galleggiavano sopra come detriti di una burrasca. Il ritmo del respiro dei tori. Il ritmo del sangue dei tori. Il ritmo dei sogni dei tori. Dormendo temeva il tramonto come un rimorso: un risveglio senza di lui. Il sonno si smagliava, via via che la luce spariva dal mondo. Sentì che stava per destarsi, e non voleva. Passare dall'impotenza del passato all'impotenza del presente gli era insopportabile.

E lo sentì giungere. Ancora addormentato lo sentì entrare, inginocchiarsi accanto al letto, posarvi la fronte sulle mani, vicino alle sue. Si destò mentre le sue dita già passavano tra i riccioli lunghi, lucenti. Non si dissero nulla. Entrambi pensavano ai tori, e alla luna piena su Madrid.

::

Si sono appena svegliati, uno dopo l'altro, uno nelle braccia dell'altro.

Armand segue con l'indice la traccia delle vene sul dorso della mano di Daniel. Mani da uomo, mani grandi, la cui lenta perfezione non nasconde le tracce dell'uso.

Daniel prende la mano di Armand nella sua, la esamina, la rigira a osservarne il palmo. Una mano agile, intatta; una mano di fanciullo.

—Avevo terrore che tu aspettassi troppo,— gli dice piano. —Che i nostri corpi sarebbero stati troppo diversi. Pensavo a me stesso a trentaquattro anni. Avrei avuto il doppio della tua età. Avrei potuto essere tuo padre, e sarei stato tuo figlio. L'incesto in un gioco di specchi.

Armand sospira, gli abbraccia la schiena, posando la testa sulle sue spalle.

—Lo so. Vedevo i tuoi sogni. Ma eri così interessante... Ti vedevo cambiare nel tempo, ed ero affascinato. Non ho mai avuto vent'anni, venticinque o ventotto. Non l'ho mai desiderato. Ma ti guardavo, ed eri ogni anno più bello e più forte. Non riesco a distogliermi dal seguire le storie che il tempo accumulava, un segno dopo l'altro, su di te.



A Daniel sembra a volte di parlare con un marziano.

—Avresti voluto vedermi invecchiato, ammalato magari? Avresti voluto vedermi morire? Anche questo avresti trovato ...interessante?

—Avrei voluto che tutta la ricchezza della tua vita si raccogliesse non solo nella tua mente e nel tuo spirito, ma anche nel tuo corpo. Non riesco a scegliere di fare di te il mostruoso paradosso... che io sono.

Daniel si gira, lo abbraccia, affonda il viso tra i riccioli lunghi.

—Non dire così. Non pensarlo nemmeno. Sei il mio maestro, il mio padrone e il mio amore. Sei un miracolo. Un paradosso, ma di sicuro non un mostro.

Troppo vicino. Troppo tenero. Troppo felice. Rapido come il pensiero, Armand gli sfugge, si rivolta verso di lui, scopre i canini soffiando.

—Ne sei proprio sicuro?— ringhia piano.

Daniel sobbalza, poi scoppia a ridere.

—No,— dice, —Ma ti amo,— e afferrando il cuscino glie lo pianta sulla faccia.

—Cosa dicono del barattolo di vermi una volta aperto?...— ridacchia Daniel dieci minuti dopo, sputando una piuma e scuotendone altre dai capelli.

—Vieni che te lo spiego,— mormora Armand, e gli brillano gli occhi.

::

Too cold, the bed without him. The blue satin sheets as smooth as whirlpools surging around the rocks, without his lithe body to cling to, and the warm wave of his bay hair. Daniel curled up into a ball and waited for sleep with an ache in his throat.

Sleep came together with dreams. And into his dreams filtered the memory of the dreams dreamt by the bulls, that night when, drunk and still a mortal, he had walked around the Plaza de Toros in Madrid under a silent, full moon, and he had heard the dreams of the sleeping bulls. They were lying on straw and they dreamed of ruminating. He had listened, their last share of peace before the slaughter. It was the blood, he knew that. Those few dark sips he had drawn, or stolen, from the radiant body which filled his mind and soul every minute like a pain. It had been his first devastating gift. The bulls did not know.

He had fled, on foot, to the railway station, he had bought a ticket at random, climbed a train and left. Now in his immortal dream he was reliving that terse, frightening irruption of awareness and his useless flight back to the blunt perceptions of humans. The terror of finding himself alone again with such an unbearable flash of sensations, had forced him at last to search his pockets for the last coins, push them into the slot of a telephone, call him. He had intoxicated his mind and his body by whatever he could get his hands on in the few hours of waiting before he came to him. He had let himself slip in a drowsy, thoughtless stupor during their trip back home. Let it be long, that break full of nothingness, before having to face again darkness, or light.

Now he knew. Now he understood at last what five hundred years of witness to death did mean. Strange he had grasped it only after irreparable silence had fallen between them. Or maybe not. Maybe it had been an act of mercy, sparing him that knowledge as long as it was possible. He could remember how unbearable the finality of his desire for him had been. He had been master of his own life, once. He had fought, wilfully, stubbornly, to be such. He had removed from his life anything he had not chosen. He had been free. Finding himself suddenly needing him, every moment, at every breath; needing his presence, or at least the thought of him, without even knowing whether he had chosen or had been chosen, or if it had been chance, or destiny, that had robbed his life from him, was choking. He had barely survived. Maybe he wouldn't have, unless Armand had protected him that way. Unless he had prevented the horror of knowledge seeping through his consuming desire.

Armand had never told him how he found his victims. There had been no need. Daniel had seen, and understood.

/Not like the bulls/.

He could not imagine a greater courage. Night after night, for five hundred years, prepared to face a pain so deep that it washed away the colors of life, and yet not assuming to know or judge those who felt it... only dissolving it in a cloud of illusions. Nothing real is there to fight the reality of pain. Not even Louis has that much courage. Louis did not want to know. Daniel was sure that if he had not spoken first that night, if he had not given of himself even just the

spark of his tone of voice, of his curiosity, now he would be dead. He remembered what his grandmother used to say about the poultry she raised in her yard: "I won't eat acquaintances". The dream dilated, like a slow sizzling tide, and thoughts and memories floated on the surface like wash-outs of a storm. The rhythm of the bulls' breathing. The rhythm of the bulls' blood. The rhythm of the bulls' dreaming. Still sleeping, he feared sundown like a remorse: waking without him. His sleep grew thin, while light was taken from the world. He felt he was waking, and he did not want to. Going from past powerlessness to present impotence was unbearable. And he felt him coming. Still asleep he felt him come in, kneel beside the bed, his brow resting on his hands near his own. He woke up with fingers already threading among his long, shiny curls. They didn't speak. Both were thinking of the bulls, and a full moon over Madrid.

::

They have just awoken, one after the other, in each other's arms.

Armand trails with his fingertip the blue veins along the back of Daniel's hand. A man's hand, full-grown, whose slow perfection doesn't hide half a lifetime of use.

Daniel takes Armand's hand in his own, looks at it closely, turns it over to examine the palm. An agile hand, intact; the hand of a boy.

—I was terrified you would wait until too late,— he says under his breath. —When our bodies would be too different from each other. I figured myself at thirty-four. I would have been double your age. I could have been your father, and I would have been your child instead. Like incest made with mirrors.

Sighing, Armand kneels on the bed and hugs him from behind, hiding his face on Daniel's shoulders.

—I know. I saw your nightmares. But you were so very interesting... I saw life change you, and I was fascinated. I never was twenty, or twenty-five, or twenty-eight. I never wished to be. But I looked at you, and you became more beautiful and strong with every passing year. I could not stop reading the stories time was writing on you, stroke upon stroke.

Sometimes Daniel is under the impression he's talking with an alien.

—Did you wish to see me aging, getting ill maybe? Did you wish to see me die? Did you think this, too, would be ...interesting?

—I wished the richness of your life could be gathered not in your mind and spirit only, but also in your body. I could not get myself to make you a monstrous paradox... such as I am.

Daniel turns to Armand, embraces him, his face deep among the long soft curls.

—Don't say that. Don't even think it, ever. You are my maker, my master and my lover. You are a miracle. A paradox, but surely not a monster.

Too near. Too tender. Too happy. Fast as thought, Armand slips away, spins around, bares his fangs in a hiss.

—Are you quite sure?— he growls lowly.

Daniel starts, then he laughs out.

—No,— he whispers, —But I do love you,— and grabbing the pillow, he pushes it over his face.

—What's that they're saying about the can of worms once open?...— he chuckles ten minutes later, spitting out a feather and brushing others from his hair.

—Come here, I'll explain,— murmurs Armand, and his eyes are shining.

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Ἐποκατάστασις  
by mazaher, 2001

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*Being a cubist depiction of how Marius, Armand and Daniel found their way back to each other.*

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### **0. Armand: Why**

*Being a monologue about the reason why Armand exposed himself to the rising sun in The Vampire Armand by Anne Rice (1998).*

::

*"All right, Master-Mind. I see. Show Your cards, NOW".  
E aspettò il giorno con l'anima sguainata.*

::

I do know well the reason why I did it.  
I chose to see the game of Master-Mind.  
Told Him to show the cards that He kept hidden  
and saw there was no game or Master-Mind.

No God, no Satan, no everlasting Heaven,  
no Hell, no sense or reason to the world,  
only the Sun implacably returning  
to burn out me and my too restless mind.

I could not say my goodbye to my dearest,  
I could not tell them why I had to go:  
such step is lonely as only Death can be,  
and lonely did I face the deadly game.

I did not think, all thought was void and broken.  
I waited dawn with my unsheathed soul,  
and when light came and pain burned searing through me  
I knew it was Love that held me burning there.

It was not for the love of God invisible,  
not as a penance for my too many sins,  
it was your love that made it worth the suffering  
and love for you that brought me flaming back.

So now I know the limits of Impossible,  
no weight of doubt is holding down my heart.  
The sky is empty and free of ghostly authority  
and I can love you as never loved before.

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## 1. Daniel: Senza voce

*Being a monologue about irreparable distance ...e un incubo vecchio di quarant'anni.  
English version follows Italian text.*

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"Armand held himself above Daniel for a moment, resting on his elbows, his face right above Daniel's. Daniel's arms came around his back as Armand leaned down and kissed Daniel's lips tenderly."

Bette Bourgeois, *Daniel*, 1996

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*Verso la porta  
lei si voltò  
Ora vorrei andare,  
lo vedo che stai  
soffrendo ma  
non per questo ti amerò*

Angelo Branduardi, *Piano piano*, 1986

::

L'odore straniero del tuo corpo  
sotto la camicia, sotto le mie dita.  
La tua schiena sottile  
tra le mie braccia  
mentre steso sopra di me  
rimani immobile e mi guardi.  
I tuoi muscoli saldi  
le dita dure delle tue piccole mani snelle  
le tue agili gambe unite tra le mie  
e quei tuoi occhi alieni e scuri  
in fondo a cui c'è un'anima  
che non riesco a vedere  
mi fanno impazzire.

Sei sempre un po' più in là.

Ti chiamo e non mi aspetti,  
fulva antilope,  
non ti giri nemmeno  
a guardarmi riverso  
sul marciapiede, incapace  
di seguirti  
e intanto cola il buio su di me.  
Riluce l'onda baia dei capelli  
giù dalle spalle  
e in silenzio ti allontani  
intanto che senza voce  
urlo il tuo nome  
invano.

::

The foreign scent of your body  
under your shirt, under my fingers.  
Your slim back  
between my arms  
while lying above me  
you remain still and watch me.  
Your firm muscles  
those hard fingers in your small slender hands  
your agile legs stretched together between mine  
those eyes of yours, alien and dark  
and the soul at the bottom  
I can't reach to see  
drive me insane.

You are always a bit further.

I call you and you don't wait,  
tawny antelope,  
don't even turn your head  
to look at me lying  
on the sidewalk, and I can't  
follow you  
while darkness pours on me.  
The bay wave of your hair shines  
down your shoulders  
and in silence you go  
as without voice  
I scream your name  
in vain.

::

## 2. Daniel & Armand: Slipping down

*Before Daniel was made...*

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*Daniel*

*/Please./*

I startle, hearing his voice in my head.

He hasn't communicated with me since more than a week.

No words spoken, no thoughts sent, not even a passing look to meet my eyes. He stays on his own most of the time, yet he sometimes gives me a fright by suddenly appearing beside me.

No expression in his eyes. His face as smooth and still as water in a pond at night.

He's sitting deep in an armchair which seems too big for him. His hands grasp the armrests.

Still he doesn't look up.

*/Please./*

He never said this to me.

I am scared.

*Armand*

It can't go on. I can't go on. I don't care anymore. I am too tired to care. I give in. Once, only once, since my fourth life began -the first of my lives without a Sun- I felt like this, and I gave in. The shame I felt, when the Coven Master himself came to me and took care of my weakness, has kept me from losing control ever again. Until now. Now I am going through my seventh life, and there is no coven and no master anymore, and shame has lost its meaning. I am giving up control.

*Daniel*

—Please.

It is him I hear now. A whispered plead. He raises his eyes to meet mine, but still I can't read them. I see only darkness.

*Armand*

He is scared. It seems whatever I do either scares or angers him. His pupils dilate until his beautiful irises are all but devoured by them. His lips part slightly as the single word I uttered - almost against my will- reaches his ears. The fingers in his hands, hanging at his sides like he had forgotten them, are moving by themselves, flexing one at a time, his usual gesture when he's worried. I want to see him happy, but all I see when I meet his eyes is this. His happiness I can only steal when he's not looking.

*Daniel*

Slowly he slips down along the seat, his arms spreading out and stretching back like he was hanging from a cross, until he is sitting down on the carpet, still grasping the knobs of the armchair.

The black depth of his eyes keeps his hold on mine. But I can't read in darkness. Not yet.

What does he expect from me?

*Armand*

I feel like I'm melting under his gaze. I can't hold myself sitting anymore. I ache to open my mind to him, to open myself whole to his eyes. But still I am afraid. My presence is enough to unsettle him, my gaze chills him, my touch gives him shivers, my words never seem to carry

for him the sense I gave them. How can I invade his soul with something I am the only one to know the depth of, and that after fifty decades is shattering me at last?

*Daniel*

Something is tapping at the door of my mind. Quietly, lightly, like it didn't want to disturb. Like it doesn't expect I would ever let it in.

I look down at him, reclining at my feet. I can see him trembling. His fingers are white as wax as they hold now to the legs of the armchair. He lies supine, and his fiery hair is a crown of flames to his unreadable face.

—Help me— he is saying now, his voice so small.

*Armand*

I am drowning. I am swept away. I am desperate to keep my hold on the very arms of the cross I'm nailed to: the implacable contradiction between fear of losing control and the need for release. But it's useless. Here we go, here we go again, and my heart breaks.

*Daniel*

Like the tide from a broken dam, like the subtle implacable buzzing of perfect silence in a desert at night, like the rush from a shot of heroin, a feeling floods me. His feeling.

\*Loneliness\*. A pain deeper than I ever thought it could be. Like he has always been utterly alone in the universe. Like there never has been anyone to relieve him from himself, and hope is something only to be dreamt of.

*Armand*

He keeps his breath, trying not to drown with me in the same tide that's swept my mind and soul. I've killed him. Like everything I ever loved has been killed, or has left me. I am once more the murderer of the one I love. And now there is no place where I can go. No solution. No hope anymore of imagining a hope. I wish I could die too, just to be near him at least -at last- in death. But surely his place in death and mine would not be the same. How could we ever be allowed to share the same place, his innocence of fragrant flesh and my ancient bloodless evil?

*Daniel*

God! No, there is no god, or such pain would never be allowed on a living being. What I feel now is so searing that I don't know how to touch him. He's so deep into it, he can't hear me calling. I am frantic to get to him, but I could as well be dead. He doesn't even see me.

*Armand*

Alone. Alone. Forever. How could I let myself beg for hope once again? Loneliness is my destiny, and once again I have betrayed it. Loneliness buried deep in the earth, waiting for death to come. Loneliness of the spirit while I became detached from what happened to my physical self. Loneliness in a dark damp cell like I was dead already. Loneliness among hundreds of others in the catacombs, loneliness in front of the crowds in the Theatre pews; loneliness with the one who could have loved me, he who could understand me better than any other, and who left me in the end. Loneliness with this one flower of the flesh, whose eyes are now shut against my defeat. Again and again I allowed myself to hope for release, and every time my saviour left me alone. I can only hear the sound of loneliness anymore, and its voice endlessly repeats my guilt and shame.

*Daniel*

I am shy to touch him with my hands. His pain is so great it seems to make him brittle. His unvanquishable body now seems to have been turned to ashes, and I fear my hand would scatter them.

I touch him with my foot instead. I graze his chest with my naked foot; lightly, tentatively.

*Armand*

But he's touching me now. How is it that he's willing to touch me? How can he be still alive, and here, and touching me? It is his foot that's touching me. Like I was roadkill, and he was trying to check if I was alive. I am. I don't want to, but I am. And wounded, and dangerous. I don't want to hurt him, but I could. Why does he touch me? Why isn't he afraid?

*Daniel*

He lets me. He could kill me for what I'm doing, but he lets me instead. And in the face of this pain he carried alone and in silence for so long, I don't care if I live or die. I know I could not live on if I didn't try to do something to get near him, so I don't care if he kills me now for doing something wrong. I don't care for what's left of my dignity, or sanity, or common sense. We are both beyond the world of common sense here. His pain is unthinkable. I quit thinking, and keep touching him with my foot.

*Armand*

His toes are massaging my chest. The tip of his toes part my chamber vest and loosen the scarf-belt. I can feel them on my skin, kneading, touching. This touch of his is holding me, keeping me from disappearing in the whirlpool which is swallowing me. Or rather which was swallowing me. I breathe again, following the pressure of his foot. I enter my body again, surprised to feel... pleasure. His foot is shifting down along my sternum. It moves lower, to my belly. No-one touched me here since... I didn't allow anyone to touch me here since...

*Daniel*

I can feel each one of his ribs. I can feel the shaft of the sternum, and it seems to me I can feel the heart beating under it. Is it really his heart? Is it really beating this much faster?... His belly is flat, concave even as his back tenses while my foot moves down, to his navel and below. I stroke my foot, slowly, along the fold of his groin. His eyes close, those twin shimmering lakes of darkness shadowed at last by the mercy of his eyelids, and a sigh escapes his lips, or rather a half-stifled hiss. His release feels almost like a different sort of pain. I ache to embrace him, but I don't dare. I would envelop him and his pain and his loneliness and keep them as near my own heart as he and I can stand, but who am I to dare? Why would he allow just me, his human pet, to come so close?

I try to keep what I can have, as long as I can have it. I keep moving my foot along his body.

*Armand*

It's not the pleasure that sweeps me away now. I am acquainted with every shade of pleasure allowed to both human and inhuman bodies, and this is not it. This is different; this is something else. This is comfort, and comfort is something I had forgotten the taste of. I am letting go: of my body, of my mind, of my soul, of my memories and guilt and shame. This is a feeling I had lost four hundred and eighty-eight years ago. This is \*trust\* I am feeling. A groan escapes me as I close my eyes, as much of pain as of relief. I am giving up control to another. I am surrendering myself to another. I am his to do what he wants. If he should throw me aside and leave me, I know I will die.



*Daniel*

I see his body move, almost by itself, without his will or even knowledge. He slips nearer, stretching his arms; he throws his head back, uncovering his throat, and his shoulders rise as he arches up, leaning into the contact.

*Armand*

Something drives me and I can't resist. I am losing hold. My whole body tends toward him and my willpower has disappeared. I feel my hands releasing their hold.

*Daniel*

Now, like an alien power has taken hold of him, he is loosening at last his grasp on the legs of the armchair. His eyes are still closed, but he rises halfway from the floor and his arms extend toward me. Whatever happens, I can't just stand here over him. I kneel down and slip my arms around his slender frame and I hug him like I wanted to do since the first second I saw him, such a long time ago. I may be killed for this, but so be it. We both need it since forever.

*Armand*

This is bliss. He takes me in his arms, so fearless, so tender, and he holds me tight. I force myself to open my eyes and look into his own. I am scared that I will see triumph there, and once more my weakness and shame reflected in the eyes of one stronger than me. But what I see is ...\*love\*. Trusting, understanding, limitless love.

*Daniel*

His eyes open now and he looks at me. Now I know he will reject me, push me away, maybe kill me at last, now that I have dared what cannot be dared and I have touched what cannot be touched. But his eyes are clear now and finally I can read them. I see the eyes of a child. They are filled with thankfulness and love. There are no masks between us, and I can see at last that his real face mirrors what I am feeling. I love him.

*Armand*

I know at last what I am feeling, and I am amazed. I am grateful. I trust him. And I love him. I wish there was someone left to pray, for \*this\* to last forever.

*Daniel*

I love him.

*Armand*

I love him.

::

### 3. Armand & Daniel: Puzzle

*After Daniel was made.*

::

Daniel is laid out on the bed before me. Each limb is strongly tied with a leather thong to one of the legs of the bed. I can feel his eyes are closed under the blindfold. His lips are tightly pressed and he is holding his breath. He is waiting for me to do something. I sit across his waist and wonder.

He used to do the same when he was mortal. He lay there, waiting. But now?...

I press my fingers along the underside of his arms, from wrist to elbow to armpit. I draw blood in a thin line, gushing under my nails on his white delicate skin like purple ink on finest parchment. I hear him gasp when I reach the sensitive spot under his armpits, and exhale when I shift, slowly, down along his sides, hips, thighs, knees, legs, following my hands with my own body, until I reach the round tips of the tibial bones on his calves and circle them with a perfect "O" of blood. A single drop oozes down, staining the sheet.

He was alive, once. Each cell in his live body striving to survive. Blood of his own making coursing through his veins. Random patterns of electrical impulses forming and fading in the web of his nerves and brain. The comforting certainty that the eighth or ninth decade at most would bring release from memory.

I put my spread hand on his chest and press down. My hand is cold and hard.

But he wanted to be like me. Cold. Hard. Layer upon layer of memory piling up like layers of sand into stone. Painful memories never go away. After five centuries, I feel I am breaking under the weight.

I slap his side, between ribcage and hip. On the palm of my hand I feel the same tingling hurt he is feeling. A red mark seeps to the surface, turning slowly blue and violet and then green and yellow while healing at vampiric speed.

Now so much has happened. He has got what he wanted. He has also got what I feared. We are both buried in the deadly silence of the mind. Then I tried to die. I was saved, not by him. I recited my confession to another. I as much as left him for a pair of mortals.

I slip my hands inwards from the points of his hips and I pinch him hard on both sides of his groin. He bites his lower lip to avoid crying out.

Yet here he is on my bed.

Why?

I bury my hand in the soft pale fur around his penis. I grip it and pull a little and suddenly I feel slightly dizzy.

::Eh, già:: my mind repeats. One of my *dejà-vu* loops. His image then, all dewy of human sweat and desire, slips over his image now, and I feel time spinning around its axis that is right here in front of me, spearing through his belly from heaven down to hell. *Voglio che passi, eppure non voglio.*

I lean down above him and without touching him with my hands, I begin moving the tip of my tongue on his chest. I start at the dimple below his Adam's apple and then along his sternum. Light strokes like an arabesque of sensations traced by a thin paintbrush down to his navel. There I nip him hard. He moans in surprise.

He is so strong. He could snap these ties with a single move. He could fight me and maybe even have the better on me for a short while.

I raise myself to sit once more on his waist. I hear him force himself to calm down by drawing slow, deep breaths which fill his lungs under me like tidal waves. I ride on them like on a sailboat.

I have also learned about his wisdom. Unassuming, matter-of-fact, down-to-earth wisdom. So what does he want from me now, lying here below me?

I push my knee tightly under his balls and pinch both his nipples sharply. I can see I am hurting him now. But he remains silent. He never talks to me while we are having sex. Even as a mortal, he never did.

I can't guess and he won't tell.

Why then?

I release him and kneel down on the mattress between his spread legs, without touching him. I only look at him. His back arches slightly and he moves in his fetters, trying in vain to reach me.

*Che sia...?*

*Che sia...?*

*Che sia amore?...*

::

#### 4. Marius: Betrayal

::

So young and hurt and frightened you were  
at the time when we met, yet your soft lips  
grazed mine in a kiss that sealed your trust.  
You flowered as joy was yours again, your body  
shining and sleek and beautiful and healed.  
But the time came to fight, and I was not  
strong enough, brave enough to fight for you,  
my love, my child, my happiness and pride.  
You were betrayed to jealousy and greed.  
How many days, weeks, months, or even years  
did you wait in your jail for me to save you,  
before accepting that I would not come?  
I prayed the gods to take good care of you,  
made of your loss a sacrifice to them,  
hoping to save my soul by the same act  
that damned me to my hell. Hypocrisy.  
And did they listen, did they care for you?  
Now in my dreams, you never recognize me.

::

#### 5. Marius & Amadeo: I did not come

::

—*Paron*, why did you not come?

—I cannot bring myself to know.

But now your question compels me now to go through it, and once again I would prefer to die,  
like I so often wished to in all these years.

For one, if I could not keep you safe then, much less I could rescue you later.

If I had lacked the courage and the strenght at the time of the attack, much more I lacked  
them in the aftermath.

But the years passed and I was strong again... stronger than I had ever been before, and yet I  
did not come. This is most painful, so that I tried until now to avoid to think of the reasons.

The time came when I could have come, and I did not.

A new fear gripped me, a double fear.

One, that you would not recognize me, or love, or want me, or need me, or trust me anymore.  
The other, to call my sin with its own name.

I had been charged against my will with a task that did not concern me. Taking care of  
parents, when they are powerful and healthy, and of their other children, is not a task for even  
an elder son. Not if he himself has his own child to provide for. That is the sin. I had sold my  
life and soul to their selfish needs, in exchange for a sense of being useful and ...good.

I let myself believe that my first duty was to my parents and my parent's children, and not to  
you, my love. It is a sin for which there cannot be forgiveness.

Somehow I prized you, my own son, less than theirs, and your love and your trust less than  
their bidding, only to keep intact my selfish pride.

How ironic that obeying the gods may be a sin!

I was like Abraham, ready to slaughter Isaac, but none of the gods came down to stop my  
hand, and the knife hit, and hit your heart, my son.

I was afraid to demand of them that they took responsibility for themselves and their children,  
and that they let me free to care for you. No, I am lying again: I was always free.

Only my choices bound me. And I chose not to face this sin of mine, until now. I have suffered  
for this, but you have suffered more, and that is why there cannot be forgiveness.

Even you can't forgive me for this sin.

Marius is kneeling in front of his child, his head bowed down with sorrow and with shame. Armand takes his face between his hands. He does not speak, just puts his forehead against his maker's.

Marius feels his cool breath upon his eyes and the lightest of kisses on his lips.

—You're right. I can't forgive you. But I love you,— he says, —and hope that you may love me still.

::

## 6. Daniel & Armand: Of foals, and fear, and forever

*Kali O'Lena is a wonderful reining stallion and a registered Appaloosa (although he's unusually all black, without any of the characteristic markings). His Italian rider, Tonino Achenza, calls him affectionately Cariolina, "Little Wheelbarrow".*

::

December. It's late night in Paris. The Salon du Cheval has closed its gates to the last visitors of the day, who hurried out excitedly chatting about the Classical Dressage exhibition with the *pas-de-deux* by one black and one pure white Andalusian.

The hundreds of horses of all breeds -or of no breed at all, temporarily housed under these echoing vaults, are trying to relax after the hustle and bustle of the long day. Some are munching on hay or on what's left of their evening rations. A few still turn around in their boxes or shift uncomfortably from side to side in their stalls, disturbed by the strange shadows, by the sounds, by the smells of this foreign place. Some are lying down already, dozing off, heads hanging over their bended knees, waiting for deeper sleep and dreams of their familiar paddocks and friends at home.

Many of them won't ever get back there: they are going to be sold and taken to new places. They don't know yet.

They don't get asked.

Darker than the shadows, two figures move silently among the stalls, so quiet not even the horses can sense them. Silhouetted against the blue-white light of the security lamp at the head of the corridor, they walk along the row of dappled grey and occasionally raven-black rumps in the section where the Percherons are stabled, their tails tightly braided like the hair of Renaissance ladies. The easy-going, peaceful draft horses are always the first to fall asleep, and most yearlings and two-year-olds are already curled down and breathing heavily.

—May we go and see the Appaloosas? I heard Khali O'Lena arrived today and will compete tomorrow in the reining championship.

The whisper is so soft only the very nearest horse ear twitches briefly backwards.

Silence. No answer.

—Boss?...

Daniel is worried. Since they rose at sunset, Armand has been uncommonly withdrawn. He hurried the both of them here, quickly found out where the Andalusians and Lipizzans were being worked, and there he remained silent, leaning on the aluminium railing of the arena, watching without speaking a word, without moving a muscle, while those solemn powerful bodies danced to a music not heard by human ears. Even when the exhibition began, he didn't move from his place at the corner of the practice arena. There he stood all evening, taking in each of the subtleties in the dialogue between the riders and their mounts, all those little gestures that remain hidden during the show but are the substance of the shared work that builds perfection.

Daniel had tried to break that trance-like immobility, but the only words he got from his lover made him feel even more lonely.

—What are you watching that's so interesting?

—I remember,— Armand had said without turning to look at him, without taking his eyes off the heartbreaking beauty of a shining white Lipizzan doing piaffe under the bright light in the middle of the arena. His voice is centuries old, like the implacable, diagonal cadence of the feet on the golden sand, like the powerful hocks pushing the horse's body up at each step and the wavy, silky, full and spread-out tail just brushing the ground.

Daniel had felt left out. He felt he was on the threshold of that vast area of bliss turned to unspeakable hurt, where he had never been granted access as a mortal and that even now was denied to him.

He had had to read a book to get to know something about it, and while he had come to understand -with a sharp pang of acknowledgement- how some things are more easily made known to strangers than to loved ones, he could not yet make his peace with being excluded from any discourse about it.

He *\*wanted\** to know how it had been, no matter the pain.

No measure of pain coming from getting to know how it had been could be worse than always seeing that pain at the bottom of Armand's eyes. Then looking at him there now, silent and tense in the presence of these ghosts of horses, these horses of long ago, horses like those he and Marius had ridden together.

Daniel wanted to try and heal some of that pain. Take the bliss over to the reality of now, and leave the suffering in its place in the past, whence it shouldn't come out again unless as memories.

Yet he was not allowed to, and he could not even be sure why.

Was Armand trying to protect him? Did he think him too clumsy to be let into the delicate garden of tortures that was Armand's memory? Was he afraid that the knowledge of everything Armand had been, of everything had happened to him before they met, would warp irreparably Daniel's life and his link to him, tender, cruel, brittle yet enduring as it was?

Silence. No answer.

Daniel had felt a lump of tears in his throat, and had gone off by himself to look at the Welsh and Shetland ponies.

He has come back to Armand when the Salon was beginning to empty of people and the lights were being put off for the night. He has found him still there, his chin on his crossed arms on top of the fence, one foot on the low rail, at the edge of the dark and empty arena.

Armand has been startled by the light touch of Daniel's hand on his shoulder. He has turned to look at him, his eyes unfocused, a slight frown on his brow, and without a word he has led Daniel into their aimless prowling among the resting horses.

Now Daniel is scared. There is something otherworldly in Armand's aloofness tonight. Not like his usual shifting away from any emotions that threaten his fastidious self-control; rather like he's shut up in a bubble he doesn't want to come out from, a bubble of feeling nothing.

Daniel is stifled, choked. Sadly he walks beside him, not daring to touch the slender body tantalizingly gleaming a few inches in front of him. Daniel's breath still catches whenever he looks at the barely visible embroidery of faint scars that course that ivory skin after the burning.

They stop at a pen where a few Camargue mares and foals are gathered.

/They look no better than sheep when they're resting/ Daniel thinks /Yet when they are ridden they transfigure into something else, horses for heroes. The Romans conquered the world with horses such as these./

The dim light of the night lamp accents the cream colour of the rumps and necks, the slightly convex noses, the flowing manes.

One foal is not sleepy yet. He's trying to entice the others to play, but all are dozing near their dams, some standing, some lying down flat on their sides under their mothers' bellies, some couched on bent legs like cats.

A big Rottweiler bitch comes trotting towards the pen. She belongs to the breeder whose Friesians are stabled in the next row. The mares have seen her pottering about the whole day and know she's friendly, so they acknowledge her presence with just a nod of their heads or the flicker of an ear and they get back to sleeping.

The foal, however, is eager for company, and he clumsily canters to the rail to make friends with the big black-and-tan animal. He stops abruptly, his forelegs parted, and reaches across the bars towards the stranger with his velvet white nose, sniffing deeply.

The bitch stops, then walks near. She sniffs also, and recognizing the scent of a newborn, she puts out her large wet tongue and slaps a big lick on the foal's nose. He's frightened by the unexpected move.

/Predator!/ his instincts scream. He leaps up, turning in mid-air, and gallops all out to his mother. She wakes up suddenly and gives a throaty nicker to her baby, who pushes himself against her big warm belly and sticks his neck under hers to hide from his own fear. The other mares also wake up and stomp a little in the sand, but soon they sense there is no real danger and quiet down again.

The bitch, a bit hurt by the outcome of her friendly gesture, trots away, panting a little, on her own nightly business.

The foal's mother is pressing her neck above her baby's in a comforting gesture. He begins to relax, his short fluffy tail comes up from between his thighs and he smacks his lips and chews,

feeling safe and happy again. He turns around and makes for the full udder. He finds the fount and the darkness is filled by the sucking sound of his lips on his mother's teat.

Daniel is so fascinated by the scene unfolding in front of him that at first he doesn't pick up the other sound. Then it penetrates suddenly. He turns to look.

Armand is laughing softly, his agile body leaning on the pen's fence, hands clasped at the end of extended arms. His eyes are shining. He doesn't have that faraway look anymore. He's slipped into the \*here\* and \*now\* again, for a moment, this moment. He looks like what he is, a seventeen-year-old boy witnessing a tender exchange between a mother and her son. No hurt, no fear, no memories.

Daniel can't stop himself. On impulse, he hugs him from behind, sweetly and tight.

At once he feels Armand startle under his hands, like a frightened prey struggling to wrench free in a panicked, flight-or-fight reaction. There was a time when he would just let go. Now instead, fast as thought itself, his vampire instincts take over: his predatory instincts to grab the victim in his arms. He holds fast.

—Shh... It's only me. You're safe,— he whispers, and his voice breaks under the weight of the centuries-old abuse heaped upon that child's body.

The memory floods him of an interview he had, thirty years ago, with a teacher of autistic children. When leaving, he had said goodbye to her pupil by firmly passing a finger across the palm of his hand, in an unpremeditated gesture of acknowledgement and affection. The boy had shivered for a moment, then a bright smile had lighted up his face, his blindness to feelings broken for a moment.

The warmth of this long-forgotten touch fights the chill he feels coming from the taut body he holds now in his hands.

—Please. Trust me. I am here. You are here. It's all right. Please,— he begs, without leaving him, his hands clasped across Armand's slim chest which is now shaken by ragged breaths. He hears his heart beating wildly, yet Armand doesn't move, just stands there, rigid in his arms. Daniel feels him on the brink between giving in or slipping away. He knows he couldn't hold him if he chose to go. He knows he could lose him now, maybe forever.

—Please,— he whispers once more. He leans forward, like he was trying to enclose his lover's shivering figure within an invulnerable shield against all evil past and present. He can see Armand's eyes are closed tight, that his eyelids are quivering.

—Don't think of the past. This is now. This is here. This is me. And I love you. Let me love you. There is nothing else he can do to get himself to be seen by this child made blind to love, too frightened to open his eyes and look at him. He can only hope his love, his passion, his compassion and tenderness for the helpless, wounded soul that is now revealed to him may be enough to keep Armand there. He doesn't dare to hope that their eyes may meet at last. Silence. No answer.

Beaten, Daniel begins to loosen his embrace. He has lost again, and the defeat hurts even more because both are defeated this time. But before his arms fall down at his sides, with a sudden resolute movement, Armand is turning around, and he opens his eyes and now he is looking straight at Daniel.

—I do. I trust you. I love you,— he says, his voice low but clear and sure as mountain water.

—Love me— he says again, and Daniel feels this beloved body melt against his own and hug him like he never had before, like a son to his parent, like a friend to a friend, with the complete abandon of the age when betrayal and suffering are nothing more than tall tales yet, and the wonder of life and love still shine untouched by pain. Completely \*there\* for the first time, nothing held back. It's bliss.

They only let go when one of the Friesians stallions slips into deeper sleep and begins to snore loudly. They both laugh under their breath, and on they go, arms around each other's waist, towards the rest of their life together.

::



## 7. Marius & Amadeo: Black heart, white heart

*This is set in the time after The Vampire Armand, by Anne Rice (1998).  
The quote is from Homer's Hymn XXXII, To the Moon, 7-10*

::

The night is warm over the Island. The sky is clear, shimmering with stars, and a young moon is just rising above the horizon. The man came on the beach at dusk and sat waiting for her, as still as a statue. Now, as the gleam of her light traces a pattern of flickers on the surface of the ocean, his lips part as he repeats ancient words:

εὐτ' ἂν ἀπ' Ὠκεανοῖο λοεσσαμένη χροά καλόν,  
εἴματα ἔσσαμένη τηλαυγέα διὰ Σελήνη,  
ζευξαμένη πώλους ἐριαύχενας, αἰγλήεντας,  
ἔσσυμένως προτέρωσ' ἔλαση καλλιτροίχας ἵππους

*When up from the Ocean, after washing her shapely limbs  
and wearing her luminous white dress, divine Selene  
hitches her high-necked fillies, as shining as eagles,  
and drives them impetuously forward, their manes like waves...*

He falls silent when he catches the almost inaudible sound of steps on the soft sand. At some distance, the slight figure of a boy is walking toward the mobile boundary between the waves and the beach. He is naked, his hair flowing over his shoulders. He does not turn to look at him; he steps straight into the sea, and he keeps walking toward the moon like he was following her bright dancing path, until he disappears underwater.

The man holds his breath, lost in the magic of the moment: Was it a vision? Did he really see him?

He breathes again when the dark water is broken suddenly by a sprinkle of liquid light as the boy surfaces and begins to swim in long agile strokes. He dives, he breaches, he disappears again, deep within his own game, or rite.

The moon has floated upward to the lowest, laced cyrrus, when the boy swims back to shore, walks out of the water, and raises his arms to comb the water out of his hair. Silver droplets shine under the moonlight along his taut sleek side as he faces the beach, and a small, dark pattern becomes visible for a moment on his skin under the left armpit.

The man's ancient heart skips a beat when he sees him come straight in his direction. The boy sits down on his left, silent, his eyes pools of darkness as he looks onto the horizon. Neither is willing to break the magic of the night. They know each other so well, yet in front of such a solemn moon they feel foreign to one another. It is a sudden impulse that brings the man to make the silence human with the sound of his human voice.

—Is it a tattoo you have under your arm?

The boy turns at last to look at him, startled out of his *rêverie*.

—It is, — he answers, and he pauses before adding, his words devoid of emotion:

—I had it made in New Orleans, after... after he left me.

It is the man's turn to be startled. They had never talked about this.

—Tell me,

he asks, trying to keep his voice neutral. He knows the boy's soul is an animal of deep forests, as secretive as a jungle cat. He doesn't want to shy him away with the scent of his own feelings.

—Look, — the boy goes on, and he raises his arm again. The shape of a heart is tattooed on his ivory-white skin, one half filled with black, one half only contoured.

—I felt nothing when he left me. I was a void. I kept no track of nights or weeks, just drifted on without a purpose. I didn't care if I lived or died... Indeed, I would not have been able to tell the difference.

His tone is quiet, matter-of-fact, as though that memory, with all its import, was preserved in a jar of alcohol on a shelf. As though it didn't hurt anymore.

—One night I found myself at the river docks, where all sorts of homeless people gathered to find a temporary shelter. A cargo had just come in from Brazil, and a crowd of refugees had flocked to shore. Famine had flared out again as white settlers in the interior burned the forest to make room for pasture. I was walking by, not feeling my hunger, when an old woman called at me. “Exu,” she said, “Exu the lord of contrast holds your heart”. She took me by the hand. I saw she knew what I was, but she was not afraid. “Remember, the heart is never all black, as you think, neither all white. The heart is always half-and-half, half evil and half good.” She then pressed her fingers on my forehead, and it was like a light was turned on. I was awake again, and feeling was back, and I understood then something I had never understood before. Louis has seen my white heart. He knows my black heart too- all too well. He will never forget what my black heart has done, to his daughter and to countless others, and what it could do again. I forgot for so long your warning: never let your pain be so great that it becomes a weapon. Those I made suffer, I made suffer just to know I was not alone in my own pain. But he chose to look at my white heart, and for the love of that he chose to stay with me so long. I had the tattoo made so that I would try and not forget ever again.

A single tear trickles down from the man’s eyes and drops on the sand between them. The boy presses his hand in his own.

—What is it, *Paron*?

The man takes a deep breath before he manages to speak steadily.

—I saw you play *lippa* or *scalon* with the other boys at dusk. You never cheated, and never allowed any of them to cheat. I saw you share your sweets with the beggar children in the streets. The only thing you never shared was me. I saw your white heart every minute, and your black heart in your jealous eyes whenever someone or something took me away from you. But I could not see my own black heart until it was too late for us both.

He lapses into silence. How can he tell this guilt, and his despair? His voice is clotted with grief as he forces himself to go on, his eyes to the ground.

—My black heart held in itself the desire for power. I wanted power to keep my beloved happy and safe from all evil. What is worse, I believed I had such power. I felt I was a god, and didn’t even realize my pride. I strove for perfection, and thought I had it: an impossible perfection. An arbitrary perfection. Who was I to know what another’s good was? Or to believe I could prevent the unexpected to strike? I tried to grow a garden of unlimited delights for those whose life was in my hands, and I failed, because no garden can grow outside the real world, and the real world is made of limitations. I did not know then about Siddharta’s story, how his father had built a palace closed against all evil, and Siddharta escaped it because he wanted to know life outside; but that is what I tried to do, and you were taken from me by force just before you escaped of your own will, like Siddharta. You would have escaped, in the end. Somehow or other, human or not, you would. That’s why it was impossible for me to face you. I had failed you on both sides, and had nothing to give you anymore. I had neither been able to defend the garden, nor allow you to leave it when you felt it was time. It was my fault that you were trapped there, like the dog in Pompeii, chained to the wall while the volcano erupted and stifled him to death. Now I see you wielding a different power. You control yourself. You never presume you can divert fate; you are always ready for surprises, and that they will be bad is an assumption for you. You tread the razor’s edge, and you are so good at it that nobody can see how difficult and dangerous your path is, and how accomplished you are at following it. You have become different from anything I could have imagined, and you shine like Antares, and I am ashamed of myself.

He feels the boy’s cool breath on his temple. He shivers. He tried so hard, for so long, to fight this dejection, and now it has caught up with him at last. The only white he can see, or feel, is the gleam of that unreachable moon. He is aching to lean toward those lips, but he dare not. A chill pierces through him when he feels their touch, as the boy whispers in his ear.

—I know your white heart. I know where it lays. I am the Master of the Keys, and I hold the key to it. Let me show it to you. We have time.

A breeze is rising. The moonlight breaks into sparkles on the ocean, and a seagull cries once. Then there is silence.

::

## 8. Daniel & Armand: Vesper

music: Angelo Branduardi, *Il Trionfo di Bacco e Arianna*, in *Domenica e lunedì* (1994)

*This is set in the time after The Vampire Armand, by Anne Rice (1998).*

::

Ἔσπερε, πάντα φέρων, ὅσα φαίνολις ἔσκέδασ' αὖτως,  
φέρεις οἶν, φέρεις αἶγα, φέρεις ἄπυ πατέρι παῖδα.

Sappho, fr. 95

::

Night Island.

He is sitting on the flagstones of the terrace facing the ocean, his back to the wall, legs stretched and crossed, head bent under the weight of the sound pouring from the headphones he's wearing. His breath follows the rhythm. No rock music tonight. He's listening to the rippling happiness of *The Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne* in the words written by Lorenzo de Medici on a summer day in 1473. He feels drawn to its utter lack of sentimentality, its ease with the presence of death: joy without illusions.

*Che dolcezza vuoi che senta  
chi ha sete tuttavia...*

What sweetness can ever taste  
those who are always thirsty...

A new vibration adds to the sound of music: a light, aerial step sets a-quiver the beams of the terrace, a step he recognizes at once... restless yet contained, anxious yet controlled.

—Hi boss,— he says, and he lowers the headphones to hang around his neck.

A cloud of hair comes down on him, a cool kiss grazes his lips, and in a moment melts away. His maker sits down at his side, one knee bent, arm resting upon it. His slender hand gleams in the light of the moon while the music still tingles faintly from the headphones.

—I've been with Marius.

The words are blunt, the voice is low but raw with unrest.

—I know. I saw you on the beach.

The silence between them is like brittle ice. Both tread softly, afraid to break it, afraid of the void beneath.

—You know I'm not leaving,— Armand says again. His tone devoid of question, yet it is a question. Emotion frozen, yet visible under its cold transparent shroud. The maker's fear makes the fledgling shiver. He reaches down to touch Armand's small hand and he feels those fine tough fingers squeeze his own and tremble slightly.

—It's OK, boss,— he whispers, trying to keep his tone neutral. —I'm not leaving either.

A sigh escapes the other's lips, an unbidden sigh of relief, and now Daniel hears himself speak words more forward, more tender than he ever thought he would ever dare address to his maker.

—You'll be fine. Take it easy. I know how difficult it must be. You had such a short time together, and then the pain must have seemed to last forever. Don't hurry, let it come out little by little. I don't want you to hurt yourself by keeping it inside any longer, or by letting it out all at once.

—Aren't you jealous?— Curiosity, a hint of surprise.

—I can't be jealous of Marius. I owe him what I love most in eternity. You, who love me.

He bends to quickly kiss his maker's temple. The scent of his hair fills his nose. There is tension still in that scent - a thread of worry in the taut muscles of his neck. Daniel shifts without rising, slips between the wall and Armand's back, quietly begins to massage his shoulders. The knots don't loosen. Instead, the mane of curls flows forward as the head bends, and the spine quivers under his fingers.

—What's wrong? Tell me, *carissimo*. Can't you tell me, please...?.

His maker shakes his head and Daniel hears a muffled sniff. He strokes his temples, damp with sweat from the effort of holding in the tears, and he gathers back the unruly strands of hair with the gesture of a mother. A thought hits him, as though sparkling from those shiny waves. —\*You\* are jealous of Marius, isn't it?.

He feels his maker's back tensing against his own, and a sharp intake of breath. This must be faced at once, before the thorn can fester. But he's so frightened to hurt him...

—I may fall in love with him. He is so strong and warm and shining and so worthy of love. Or he may even fall in love with me... there is no pain between us to stand in the way of love. There is no silence of the heart. I've often felt his eyes upon me, his mind touching mine, since we met here. We may prefer each other to you, and you would lose us both... you would lose your chance to have your time with him at last, and lose whatever nearness we have been able to let grow between us until now. Is this what you fear?

A sigh. His maker nods, the slender nape of his neck appearing beneath the parting hair. Daniel gathers him in his arms and hugs him tight.

—Don't be afraid, my love. Don't fear that your two loves may cross and hurt you. Do take your time with Marius. We have time. I love you and I'll keep loving you and none else. You are my first priority, just as you have been his. I can wait, but you two waited too long already. Don't let this one fear stop you now. Trust us both, trust yourself, trust our love. Take what's your own. Be happy with him, let him be happy with you, and I will be happy also. Please, my love, won't you be happy at last? You'll find your place near him, and when you're comfortable there, I'll come and find you. Will you trust me, beloved? We both love you. You are safe.

—*Sì, dolce, anima mia, di te mi fido.* But I don't trust myself,— he breathes in response. —I know I'm safer now than I ever have been... safe from anybody but myself. For such a long time I hoped for this to happen, and then I did not dare to hope anymore, and now I am afraid that I will make some horrible mistake and lose him once more, or lose you. I want you both, but I am so scared.

—I know. You can't cope with us both at the same time. Don't be too demanding on yourself. Believe me, it will be all right. You're not going to make any mistakes. Our love for you doesn't lie and we are not mistaken loving you. Let us both love you. You are so tired, be rested in our love.

Daniel keeps stroking his hair and as his words die out he feels his maker's body suddenly melt against his own and its light weight relax and lean on him.

—*Grazie, amor mio.*

Daniel feels himself blushing. He had never heard Armand thank him before. His maker's arm reaches back and upwards, circles his neck, pulls him gently down. Their lips meet in a lingering kiss.

An owl cries once.

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## 9. Marius & Santino: Supernova

*This is set in the time after The Vampire Armand, by Anne Rice (1998).*

*Reference is made to Marius turning Benjamin and Sybelle, the kids who saved Armand after he exposed himself to the sun.*

*It is my opinion that Marius acted in that occasion so out of character for his reflective self, either because a neuronal pause of Anne Rice's, or because of an uncharacteristical panic attack of himself. Faced with the very real and chilling possibility to lose Armand forever, he grasped his chance to at least keep someone who had been near to his beloved.*

::

—Well?

The voice is sharp, self-assured, even somewhat defying.

—Good,— a lower voice answers, hearty, slower. —You are on time.

The summer night is quiet over Isola, lost in the country at the north-west of Padua. The few scattered houses surrounded by the fields are mostly dark, the shutters closed. A big, copper-coloured moon, almost full, is floating up like a balloon behind the stalks of maize, already in bloom and taller than a man. Cicadas are still singing in the top branches of poplars, but their violin chant is dwindling, taken over by the bassoon of frogs. Rippling noise of clear water running in the ditches, scent of maturing cobs and of plane trees.

Unhurried steps sound on the gravel in front of the ancient, silent, empty villa. A figure comes out of the shadows and stops to stand in front of the stone steps to the main doorway.

—Show yourself then,— this black figure, the first voice, now goes on.

The loud staccato of horse's steps on gravel answers his words at once, the precise, collected rhythm of a *passage*. A majestic white shape is coming up the lane, past the stone pillars of the open gate. Mane and tail are waves of milk under the moonlight. An Andalusian mare, dancing barefoot under her bareback rider, her face and arched neck streaked by the purple leather of the old-fashioned bridle as by a trickle of blood. No other sound is heard, even the frogs have fallen silent. Only the bats are flurrying on their hunt.

Ten yards away from the steps, without even stopping, the rider nimbly jumps from his mount and in a single fluid movement he slips the bridle from her head and the bit from her mouth. The mare trots on towards the clipped clover lawn, and she begins to quietly graze.

—*E alla pastura / fa andare il palafren senza la briglia* (and to the pasture / is sent the palfrey with no bridle on).— The first voice is ringing with irony. —You never forget your Ariosto, Roman, I see.

—There is no sense in letting her be bothered by the bit, and the reins may be trampled, Santino,— the older man says back, without animosity. —It is not easy anymore to find leather like this.

They face each other, keeping their distance, silent. Both wary, feigning ease.

—Does this place suit you?— the rider asks, breaking the silence.

—Yes, I like this quiet. I thank you that you came, Marius.

Santino's voice suddenly lowers. He can feel the unease of both. He knows Marius won't be the first to ask him why he called him, and Santino won't force him to. He is uncomfortably aware of the courtesy Marius has shown him by dismounting and approaching him on foot. He won't insult him by acknowledging this tribute openly, but he knows he has been entrusted with the task to lead the conversation, and he now forces himself to override his own nervousness and get straight to the point.

*/Or we may pass the whole night sparring with words,/ he thinks to himself.*

*/Go on, then, Santino,/ the other's thoughts ring at once in his mind, and he bites his lip. He should have known better than to try and shield from one so ancient.*

—I used to come here to see my friend Andrea, the painter. Mantegna. Nothing much has changed since then,— Marius goes on aloud. —You asked that we meet in Venice, but Venice would have been too crowded. It's La Sensa, the feast of the Ascension. They are having fireworks at the Lido tonight.

—And Palio tomorrow in Siena— on impulse, Santino echoes him.

*/I'm crazy to tease him this way, while he is trying to put me at my ease/ he regrets.*

Marius grimaces.

—I never settle with myself whether they are more stupid or more cruel, racing blood horses on a stone pavement like that. Strawn sand is not enough to give grip. But we aren't here to discuss horsemanship, I think,— he says, and waits.

—We are not. And I am grateful you came. I was not sure you would.

—When I was trapped in ice, you came to help me. When the remains of the suicides had to be burnt at the morgue in New York, you were with me. How could I not come when you called me?

The Roman is smiling, but a current of unrest troubles the surface of his mind. Santino can perceive it. It mirrors his own.

—I am the one who owes you,— he begins.

—Don't flatter me, Santino,— Marius breaks in. —We know each other well enough. We know each other's faults.

—I am not going to flatter you... not even with truth itself,— Santino sighs, —and I am not here to compare faults. I am here to try and put things right between us, if I can. Make up in part for my own share of faults.

—Do not apologize, Christian. I don't wish to lie to you. I am not ready to forgive yet what you did to me, and it is not my place to forgive you for evil done to others.

Marius' voice has a point of sharpness, as if he is trying to control an anger he nevertheless feels unfair. His mind goes back to one long-ago fight with Pandora, who seemed so intrigued by that new coven of Jewish renegades, followers of Jesus. So full of answers, so empty of questions. So sure they could be saved by faith, hope and charity, yet so ready to forget the last one applied also to infidels like him. He now begins to regret being here.

—I am not going to apologize. I am going to help, if you will allow me.

Now it will happen, this is the moment he brought himself to face. No more time to lose in doubts.

/Just keep talking,/ he tells himself.

—I want to speak to you about Benjamin and Sybelle,— he says. His voice is steady, and so is his gaze. Marius blinks once, surprised.

/Thank you, Roman, for not reading my mind,/ Santino thinks again, sure to be heard. /I needed to discover if I'd be able to say this aloud/.

—I think I understand what moved you to make them. Your words of explanation are echoing still in Armand's mind. I heard them through him. Believe me, I understand.

Santino fights to keep his voice calm, his words slow. Calm is needed to discuss this. Decisions must never be taken in a troubled state of mind, and an important decision is going to be taken tonight.

—Are you going to be my judge, Santino?— Marius' tone is hard, a touch of fear is seeping through.

—It's not for me to judge the way you played your cards,— Santino answers, not heeding the sting in the other's words. He goes on, quietly but with blind determination.

—I only see the strain among you now. Daniel is troubled and scared by their presence.

Armand doesn't feel up to teaching them as they are now. You don't either. I do. I like them, and I think they find me interesting. They find anything interesting. They're fearless, open to every wonder of their new life. You three need time to straighten out the events of the last few centuries. Benji and Sybelle can wait. I can keep them company. Let me help. Let me take care of them while you, and Armand, and Daniel, find a new way to be together. There are stages you have to go through that can't be skipped or delayed anymore. There are old wounds to heal at the very core of love before love can spread further.

There. It is said. He had not said that single word, \*love\*, unless in spite, since more than six hundred years. It had to be said now, whatever the outcome. He knows Marius could torch him on the spot, but even this does not matter. He feels good.

The Roman frowns. He had known he would be probably in for some surprise tonight. He has debated with himself whether or not to take advantage of his age and power to glean some information from Santino's mind. He has resolved not to. He has come with prudence, but in trust. And now he's taken aback, caught between panic and anger.

The panic he has felt at his own beloved killing himself, at his being rescued by two mortal strangers, at his loving them so much, at the thought that he may lose them to death.

At love not waiting for ancient pain to cease before kindling new fires.

At Santino now, confronting him with something he would rather forget.

Anger at himself for feeling so frightened and acting on impulse when he made the two children. For letting himself be led by the emotion of the moment.  
Twice only in two thousand years he lost control of himself, overtaken by a need stronger than reason, and both times pain has come from it.  
He fights to find something to say. Santino is waiting, patient, silent, leaving him time. Marius is grateful for that, yet it compounds his confusion.  
Who is this person in front of him now? He used to look on him as a dangerous enemy. He is here tonight as the most dangerous of friends. He wonders if he'll be up to facing either.  
/I'm afraid/ he thinks with a shiver.  
/Remember. In the past I have been witness to the depth of your fear as well as the height of your courage. You never quit, do you, Roman?/ Santino thinks back to him, without either irony or pity.  
It is encouragement enough. Marius suddenly knows what he needs to confront.  
—What sort of tutor would you be to them, Christian? Or should I call you coven master? The doctrine of which divinity would you teach them?  
Marius can't help a hint of contempt tinging his words. Faith and reality have always been at odds along the twenty centuries he's witnessed.  
Santino can feel it, but he shrugs it away with an effort of will.  
—Do not let us start discussing theology,— he grins.  
—I am not going to give my children, and Armand's, to a believer in a creed of murder, Santino. We both have hurt him too much already. I need to know what you feel now about your God.  
Earnestness is warming Marius' voice.  
/Not all is lost, then, maybe,/ Santino tells himself. But he still has to answer, and show him his soul as naked and raw as Marius' was just now when he gazed upon it without being asked.  
/Is this the price to pay?/ he asks himself.  
—I'm feeling cheated. Me, the coven master! Cheated by God. My God, in whom I put my trust— he whispers, yet his words are strong and clear.  
—There is no God, Santino.  
—I know, but my heart still refuses the peace of not believing. I am still angry with my former God,— he answers.  
—I feel even more embittered than I'd have thought possible. I feel like I let myself be misled by some ambiguous phrasing in the lines in small print at the bottom of some contract with God, with life, whatever. Even now, I can't really say they are lies. But if I had been less trustful, and had paid more attention to them, I'd have thought twice before signing the contract. Yet I did sign it, so I have no ground to try and get my own soul back now. This hurts.  
—When was it that you ceased to have faith?  
Marius goes on ruthlessly. The same necessity pushing him to ask and Santino to answer.  
/Il medico pietoso fa la piaga cancrenosa (pitiful physician means festering wound)/ Santino thinks again. /And the wounds of both of us have festered too long. Be pitiless, Roman/.  
—I would think it was during the time when I was teaching Armand. At the beginning, I was obviously much better at reading his mind than he was at shielding his thoughts. I was startled by what I read. How could I not be struck by his character and his story, and the depth of his love for you? I ended up... heartbroken about the reasons and the outcome of my choice to go against you.  
—Whoever would suspect it? Sarcasm is heavy in Marius' voice. —You were still playing the grand Inquisitor, but it was not a game for your victims, or was it?  
Santino's endurance is running short. Confrontation gives sharpness to his words, yet he strives to keep the dialogue going.  
—Maybe I fought against the radical reassessment of my own beliefs that this implied. Maybe this is why I taught Armand to shield so well, even against myself. Maybe this is why I sent him away to Paris. Like a poison to my beliefs, were Armand's pain and passion, and the effect of the poison worked in secret for decades, until I left the coven, and here I am.  
/Wounded by my own past, just as you are, but still standing and ready to fight for myself/ he thinks. /Like it or not, Roman/.  
—I wonder how I can believe you,— Marius says, doubtful. He knows how difficult it is for anybody to be truthful about one's own soul.

—I swear by Buonarroti's statue of the Night— Santino says, without a hint of sarcasm in his voice. —Is this enough for you? Whatever I believe now, it is as much distant from your own beliefs as was the doctrine I taught my Roman coven. We never had the same beliefs, what else can I swear by now to convince you? Come on, do read my mind, drink from me, do what you will.

—Drinking from you would be an act of love. I do not love you, Santino.

—I'm not asking you to love me. Just to trust me. To believe that I'm different now, although still myself. That I am capable of learning from mistakes, even if I can't find a remedy for them. That this makes me human enough for you to let me help. That I am not going to make of your and Armand's children two heartless monsters.

Santino is fighting himself not to plead. This is a second chance to not only go on, like he always did, with stubborn will to live, but to go back and face the irreparable past, and maybe redress something of its outcomes. He built this chance with all his cleverness and determination, risking all on this one evening.

*/Alea iacta,/* he thinks.

—I asked them also, with Armand's permission, to come here tonight. They're waiting in the chapel,— Santino goes on softly.

Marius is startled.

—They trust you.

It does not sound a question, yet the question is implied.

—I gave them my word of honour.

Marius takes a deep breath.

—Who else knows about it?

—Maharet knows. And Lestat. Lestat is very fond of them, especially Sybelle. They all trust your judgement. I hope you will trust mine.

—But how can we take them from Amadeo...

Marius slips back to his old cherished name, and his voice threatens to break.

—Armand will come back to them, because they are his chance to regain what he has lost, by fault of others even before than ours. His childhood, the company of peers, the chance to play children's games. Just as Daniel is his viaticum to being a grown-up, so Benji and Sybelle are his passage to childhood. I won't deprive him of that, nor will you.

—I didn't mean or want that.

—I know.

Silence stretches between them. One step can change the future. It is again Santino who speaks first.

—Whatever happened between us, does not mean that we are going to be or must be enemies forever, Marius,— he says.

The Roman shakes himself from his thoughts. He has resolved. He rests his hand on the other's shoulder, in an age-old gesture of friendship.

—I entrust them to you, Santino, and with them, my own life— he says, and their eyes meet.

—Go to them.

The door of the chapel is open. The scent of burning wax and the faint light of candles comes from it. Smell of linseed on old nutwood pews. Soft sound of voices. The tall black shape of Santino stands against the inner glow. Marius can see Benji running to hug him and the slender, ghostlike figure of Sybelle following. He hears Santino say:

—I will be the best of teachers, because I would be the worst of masters. Never trust me without question, and you will learn to love somebody else beyond each other. And to love life as you never loved it before, because this will be a different life you don't yet know. Come, children, let us teach each other.

—Armand is always telling us to never give for granted what we will be feeling in ten years, nor in ten days,— Benji answers. —But I *\*am\** happy now!

Marius smiles in the dark. He turns away, to his mare and to Amadeo.

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## 10. Marius & Amadeo: *Exsultabunt domino ossa humiliata*

One evening in Venice, in the late XV century.

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The man is tired. Although he looks little more than forty, he is feeling much older than his years as he is walking home at last in the chill of a January evening.

His travel has been long and exhausting, and before dawn he will have to take care of his affairs at home also, after an absence of almost two weeks. He has already summoned the administrator of his properties in *Terraferma*, and then he's waiting for news about the discussion in *Collegio*. There was a proposal about entrusting him with the restoration of Guariento's fresco of angels in the great hall where the *Maggior Consiglio* meets... Those endless cohorts of angels, with their rainbow wings, sweet unreadable faces, and pointed spears.

He can't remember anymore the times when he was free from his duties – when he felt young, eager to travel and to study. When he still knew the meaning of *otium*, that secluded garden of the spirit.

He stops at last along the dark alley, in front of the heavy larchwood door. He sighs. More responsibilities wait for him there, so many people whose life depends on him.

He raises his hand at last, but the iron hammer has barely touched the mallet, and at once the door swings open. A young boy comes running to kiss his hands, his mass of wavy, fawn-coloured hair cascading down his shoulders and his eyes dark with awe and affection as he looks up at his master.

—*Paron... quanto gavemo aspetà!* Master, how long you kept us waiting for you! and, almost breathless with hope:

—*Paron, sta casa stasera?* Master, will you stay home tonight?

The answer comes in a voice low with regret:

—*Fio mio, no, vorà che vaga fora deboto.* No, son, I will have to go out again at once.

A half-stifled groan escapes the boy's lips, but he's already in a hurry to make the most of this short time allowed him.

—*Vegna drento, Paron, se scalda, che xe bora. Xe pronto el bagno.* Come in, Master, warm yourself, this north wind is so cold. Your bath is ready.

He takes him by the hand, leads him inside. The servants flock around, happy to see their Master back, eager to help, but the boy takes charge at once: sending one outside to fetch the saddle bags, another to put more water to the boil, yet another to the kitchen, preparing some spiced hot wine for their Master.

He holds his hand while they cross the hall toward the bathroom. His Master is the only one in the whole of Venice to have a room with a bath, a large deep basin of white *sasso d'Istria*. He knows the other boys in the house gossip about it: such luxury, such extravagance. He doesn't care, his Master is wonderful, the bath is one more of his Master's wonders.

The small room is warm already from the hot water in the basin, and faintly scented by the perfumed oils in the row of jars on a shelf.

—*Cossa vorlo stasera, Paron? Rose de Damasco?* Which one tonight, Master? Damask rose? They both love Damask rose, but it gives laxness of the limbs, and his Master must go out again tonight.

—*Menta del Marocco xe meglio. O piuttosto lavanda?* Moroccan mint is better. Or rather lavender?

—*Menta va ben, grazie.* Mint will be fine, thank you.

The boy pops open carefully the heavy blown glass flask, pours some oil in the hot water, stirs it with his hand, and the fresh, stinging perfume of mint pervades the room.

He hurries to his Master, begins to slip off his boots. The man gestures him to stop, one hand on his shoulder. The boy looks up to him pleadingly.

—*Quaeso, nolis te tangam?* Please, won't you allow me to touch you?

The man smiles through his exhaustion at this unforeseen exhibition of half-learned Latin.

—*So' giazzà, fazzo mi, che ve giazzè le man anca vu.* I am ice-cold, I'll do it myself, or your hands will become cold too.

—*No importa, Paron, ve prego...* I don't care, Master, please...

He lets the boy undress him, his small strong hands quick and wise along every ply of his body.

Their warmth touches his skin and his soul at the same time. He doesn't want to go out again, although he must, and he doesn't want to go away again, although he knows he will have to, when spring comes. He only wants to stay here, and let the boy, his boy, his love, lead him by the hand to the hot water in the basin, and to a sleep without dreams.

He drops his face below water for a whole minute, trying to imagine what it could ever have felt like, being in his mother's womb. But the boy waits at the side of the basin, he feels he is beginning to be worried. As he surfaces again, he can hear his almost unaudible, relieved sigh. The boy takes off his own coat and shirt and, naked to the waist, he begins to help washing him, scrubbing his back, massaging his hair.

His Master has an unlimited supply of the finest soaps, and it is camphor tonight. Camphor is warming and tonic. How he would love to use *cipri* instead! But no, he knows *cipri* is only for nights at home.

The touch of those fingers, delicate and thorough, seems to reach at last to a frozen core inside the man. He feels slowly melting, until a tide of denied feelings comes rushing over him and pours forth in words.

—*Per cossa me faxi 'sta carità? No go merito.* Why do you do this for me? I have not earned this.

The man turns to look at the boy, his eyes full of regret. How he loves those dark, haunted eyes, where affection, mirroring his own, is shining once again instead of diffidence; that sharp features, where a reclusive soul endlessly paints a passionate story; and those hands of magic, which time after time take his eternal burden from his back, for a short while.

The boy doesn't answer. He can't find words. His soapy hands fall at his sides. He tries to speak, but he can't.

The man raises his arm, circles the boy's narrow waist, pulls him near in a hug filled with emotion.

—*Zogia, angelo armà de lancia, paron de la mia anima... Exsultabunt domino ossa humiliata*  
My joy, my angel with a spear, you Master of my soul... These unworthy bones will rejoice in their Lord,— the man whispers, and he kisses the boy's hair.

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## Senses

by mazaher, 2001

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### **Touch: Dalliance (Armand & Daniel)**

music: The For Carnation, *Empowered Man Blues* (2000)

*English version follows Italian text*

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Daniel è disteso supino sul ruvido tappeto di fibra di cocco. I jeans sbiaditi sono sbottonati, i piedi scalzi. E' a torso nudo, le braccia distese e aperte, le gambe unite, gli occhi chiusi. La pelle e gli abiti sono umidi del suo sudore umano, pervasi dall'odore muto dei capelli incollati alle tempie.

Ai due lati, appena oltre le sue dita che si contraggono, i due enormi amplificatori da cui arrivano note basse e lente.

Sopra di lui si china Armand. Non lo sfiora nemmeno. Soltanto l'onda dei capelli fa rabbrivire la pelle nuda del suo petto. Daniel percepisce ogni movimento come se lo sentisse sul suo corpo, come percepisce la vibrazione della musica che lo attraversa.

/Non muoverti,/ sente ripetere nella sua mente la voce di Armand. /Non aprire gli occhi/.

Ora Armand soffia sulla sua fronte, un fiato lieve e freddo che scende nel luogo sacro tra gli occhi e poi lungo il dorso del naso. Lo sente sulle labbra come un bacio non dato e si contrae, ma non può disobbedire. Nulla lo lega, eppure è legato da un intreccio di volontà come da tesi lacci di filo metallico.

Il soffio scende ancora mentre la musica si snoda come un serpente, scende sul collo e l'arteria palpita al ritmo del cuore affannato.

—Prendimi,— sussurra, le sillabe ingarbugliate dal desiderio.

/No,/ risponde in silenzio il suo amante, il suo padrone, il signore della sua anima e del suo corpo.

Il gelo di quel fiato segue la linea delle clavicole, si annida nella fossetta del giugulo, e intanto la musica sembra fare fusa da leopardo e il suo diaframma ne segue il passo attutito come un'eco delle nere membrane degli amplificatori. Più rapido lungo la linea ventrale, ed ecco che quel freddo gli colma l'ombelico come pioggia nel cavo di un sasso. Senza fretta scende ancora, e la disciplina di stare fermo diventa troppo crudele mentre quelle dita salde e sapienti sfilano i jeans, ancora senza toccargli la pelle, e il tocco è solo immaginato come il tocco delle note sulla sua anima intanto che il tessuto spesso scivola lungo le sue gambe e lo lascia ancora più solo nel vuoto privo di contatto.

Avanti e avanti va la musica, sottovoce, e lontano si intrasentono arabeschi evanescenti di tastiera basso e batteria, mentre il soffio leggero di nuovo gli sfiora il ventre tracciandovi spirali e Daniel trema impotente al desiderio di quel corpo che sente così vicino e che pure non c'è. E nel buio dietro gli occhi chiusi, nel buio nero della musica, sul tappeto che gli punge la schiena, nell'attesa di una carezza che non viene, crocifisso tra la pena e il desiderio, si accorge d'improvviso che la voce nella sua mente ora tace, e la musica è finita, ed è rimasto solo nella stanza.

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## Indugio/Corteggiamento

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Daniel is lying supine on the rough sisal carpet. His faded jeans are unbuttoned, his feet bare. His chest is also bare, his arms outstretched, his legs together, his eyes closed. His skin and clothes are damp with human sweat, permeated by the muted smell of his hair glued to his temples.

At his sides, just beyond his twitching fingers, two huge speakers from which are coming bass, slow notes.

Armand leans above him. He doesn't even touch him. Only the wave of his hair gives a shiver to the naked skin of his breast. Daniel can feel every movement as though he felt it on his own body, just as he feels the vibrant music go right through him.

/Don't move,/ he hears Armand's voice repeat in his mind. /Don't open your eyes/.

Now Armand is blowing on his forehead, a faint cold breath going down to the sacred place between the eyes and then along the bridge of his nose. He feels it on his lips like a kiss withheld and he contracts, but he can't disobey. Nothing is binding him, but he is bound by a steel braid of will.

Blowing, the breath goes lower while the music uncoils like a snake, reaches his neck and the artery pulsates at the rhythm of his breathless heart.

—Take me, — he whispers, syllables garbled by desire.

/No,/ answers silently his lover, his owner, the master of his soul and of his body.

The chilled breath follows the line of his collar bones, nests into the jugular cavity, while the music seems to purr like a leopard and his diaphragm mimics its soft pace, echoing the black membranes of the speakers. Faster then along the ventral line, and now that chill fills up his navel like rain into the hollow of a rock. Unhurried, it goes lower still, and the discipline of lying still becomes almost too harsh as those tough knowing fingers peel off his jeans, once again without touching his skin, and the touch is only imagined while the thick fabric slides along his legs and leaves him even more lonely in a void without contact.

On and on plays the music, softly, and mazes of keyboard bass and battery fade far away, while the faint breath again reaches his belly tracing spirals and Daniel is trembling helplessly with his want for that body he feels so near but which is not there. And in the darkness behind his closed eyes, in the black darkness of the music, on the carpet prickling his back, crucified between pain and desire, waiting for a caress that never comes, he suddenly realizes that the voice in his mind is now silent, and that the music has stopped, and that he is alone in the room.

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## Sight: Touching (Louis & Lestat)

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The sky is overcast, dense clouds shut out the faint light of the new moon. A low rumble of thunder rolls near. The first gust of wind sets the streetlamps swaying, and Louis' shadow dances in front of him as he walks up Rue Royale.

As always, his hand strokes the cast-iron railing of the front steps. The surface is worn smooth by decades of touch, and the tiny irregularities of the fusion have been erased, leaving a sleek hard metal skin and the dry smell of iron and carbon.

Louis knows Lestat's fingers ran along this same railing when he went out at dusk, and he smiles.

The house is dark and silent, he must still be out hunting. Louis reaches to his back pocket, fingertips sliding along the old, pliant leather of the bridle browband which is his keyholder, clipped to the belt of his jeans. The familiar weight of the bunch of keys is retrieved, the heavy one selected with a single, fluid gesture, and he feels its precise click when it turns in the latch and the door opens on the darkness inside. A warm, wet tongue on his hand, a big, heavy body against his legs.

—*Bonsoir, Mojo*,— he says, and he kneels to hug his furry neck. —*Où est Lestat?*

A lick on his face, and Mojo trots away.

—*Attend-moi*,— he laughs softly as he just manages to catch his receding tail.

From the sound of his panting, Louis can feel Mojo is smiling. Still holding the thick bushy tail, he follows the dog along the corridor and up the stairs to Lestat's bedroom, feet and paws making small sounds on the shining parquet. Mojo stops and sits in front of the closed door, nose raised expectantly.

—*Lestat est ici, n'est-ce pas? Bon chien. Reste!*

Mojo sighs, then he lies down, his large head upon his crossed forelegs. Louis thanks him with a scratch behind his ear, then he turns the ancient brass doorknob shaped like a seahorse, and he enters the room. Darkness inside.

—Lestat?— Silence. —Are you there?

Two more steps inside, and his foot touches something solid. He reaches down at once, trying to make out the form of the body lying on the carpet.

—Lestat, are you all right?— A pair of hands grasp his arms and pull him lower. Gentle thumbs quickly follow the line of his eyebrows, gentle fingers brush back his hair. A warm, eager mouth comes up to kiss his lips.

—I was waiting for you, my beloved,— he hears Lestat whisper. —I was aching to touch you, and here you are.

Louis kneels down astride his maker's body, runs his hands slowly up along his sides and on his chest. Lestat can almost feel him smiling in the dark.

—*L'amour est aveugle*,— he hears him say softly.

—*Il faut se toucher*,— Lestat completes the sentence.

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## Sound: I can't hear my own footsteps (Louis & Santino)

*Io non odo i miei passi lungo il viale  
muto per ove il sogno mi conduce...*

I can't hear my own steps along the muted  
lane wherein I'm walking in my dream...

Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Poema paradisiaco (Un sogno)*, 1893

::

Just picture a junction at night, void of traffic, quiet, bats silently fluttering under the orange glow of the lights where insects are swarming. The black figure of a man is silhouetted sitting on the guard-rail, one foot on the ground, the other tucked under, head bent, immersed in thought. He raises his eyes suddenly: something, someone is coming?...

Out of the cone of light, walking softly on the dusty weeds beyond the corrugated aluminium barrier, the other one approaches.

—You do stir up a lot of noise, Louis,— sneers the one sitting under the light.

/I have to credit the Roman for being the first to notice how careless he is/ he thinks to himself under his smooth, impregnable shields. /Marius always catches the essential/.

The other one lithely jumps the rail and sits down next to him, two feet to his left, and the light shines on his black silky hair neatly tied in a tail.

—I want to know where I am and where I come from, Santino. The sound of my feet leaves a track,— he says quietly.

—Then anybody could find you.

—Not anybody. Even after the book and before the culling, when many were searching for me, nobody found me that I didn't allow to. Yet I want to be found - by those I want to find me.

—Don't you think you're just lucky, Ace?

—No, I don't. It's my choice. Like a warrior well versed in the teachings of Don Juan Matus, you erase your traces and become invisible. But you are also alone. Safe, and alone. Nobody looks for you, for you are not even seen. Is this enough for you?

—You know it has to be enough. Who wants to find me who doesn't hate me?— he answers, his voice more bitter than he would have wanted it.

—I do —the other says under his breath —And here I am.

—Why?

—Because your loneliness is a waste. You have had the terrible courage to change your mind. Don't let the aftermath of something you have left behind weigh down your life any longer. Unless your loneliness is a shield against something else.

—What would that be?

Santino is uneasy. He's used to be the one in command of the conversation, but this one tonight is taking an unexpected turn, and for once he can't react quickly enough. He feels worse than found, he feels found out. Yet, whence is it coming, that insidious release of tension, how is it that not being in command tastes so safe? Who is this man who can talk to him this way and make him feel so good?

—Friendship. Love.

Words like the blade of a knife. His face goes blank for a moment, then collects itself again in a wicked grin, against the pain, against the truth.

—Friendship? Love? Love is a hobby, Louis, and I don't need hobbies. I have enough on my hands with everybody's hate to while away my time.

—*Love is a danger of a different kind*<sup>4</sup>— smiles the other.

—Are you quite sure it isn't worth to try it, sometimes, Santino?

And, silent like a wisp of smoke, he's disappeared.

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<sup>4</sup> Eurythmics, *Love is a stranger* (1991).

## Smell: No more to be found (Marius & Amadeo)

::

People milling around in the vast glittering hall. The buzzing noise of a busy evening in the arcade at Christmas time.

Nothing natural in sight... even the potted plants and season decorations are plastic. It's cheaper than replacing those which wither and die in the pressurized atmosphere and artificial light of this building, this spaceship sealed against the bleak outside world where beggars shiver under their covers of newspapers, this spaceship traveling to Consumerland at a thousand miles per hour.

Two figures walk more leisurely among the hurried stream of bodies, a middle-aged man and a boy. At first sight, nothing obvious distinguishes them from the average customers. Only a calmer demeanour, a deeper look in their eyes, softer voices, fewer words.

The younger one stops suddenly in front of a door, half-ajar on the darkness of a storage-room.

—Do you smell it?— he asks the elder, and his eyes are shining.

—What?

—*Secchiaio*,— the boy answers —You know, the damp, moldy smell of the room behind the kitchen, under the stairs, where the water jars and the copper buckets were kept. Moldy bricks, wet stone. It's years since I smelt it,— he ends, a touch of sadness in his voice.

The man lightens up at the memory.

—Yes, you're right. *Secchiaio... varda ti*, fancy that, in an arcade! And do you remember the smell of water in the buckets? The copper behind it, cool and metallic. You don't feel it anymore. Now it's chlorine and pollution, instead of the clean smell of rain filtered by the bricks of the well. Do you remember when we had the new well built in the courtyard? Pebbles as top layer in the filtering tank, right under the granite pavement, then gravel in the middle, and sand at the bottom. Paduan rounded bricks, the very finest pores, for the chimney of the well, Euganean granite for the bottom slab. You chose the design for the *gatoli*, the Istria stone gutter holes in the corners of the courtyard. It was a rainy autumn, the well was filled in less than a month.

The man is still talking, lost in his memories, when he feels the boy's hand touching his, cool fingers entwining his.

—Let's get out,— he hears him plead, his voice suddenly young with some unexpressed pain. He lets himself be led against the flow of people, towards the nearest exit and through the crowded parking lot, to the empty darkness of the neglected field just out of the harsh light of the lamps.

—Snow,— the boy says under his breath, so as not to let his voice tremble.

—Snow is coming. Snow still smells the same.

The boy lets himself fall sitting among the dried out weeds, his back to the darkness of the field, his head bent down. The man crosses his legs and sits down in front of him. His larger frame, silhouetted against the parking-lot lamps, overshadows the kid's, whose face is lost in darkness.

The man can feel in the other a pain like his own pain. Yet, what does he know anymore of this young man, this foreigner he used to love, and who used to love him back so much?

Tentatively, he puts both his hands on the boy's knees.

—The smell of new grass growing,— he says, his voice slow and deliberate.

—The bitter, fresh smell of the leaves of the fig-trees in July,— he adds, following his nose through memories and along this unexpected talk.

He's happy for the darkness shrouding them both, he's happy he can barely make out the boy's eyes and that his own are invisible against the light. Until now, since they met again, they haven't been able to really look at each other, nor to really speak to each other. Too deep is the pain standing between them, too much to look at it, or through it, or to talk about it. Yet both know that nothing they can do together, no time shared between them, can have any sense, unless the pain has been addressed and accounted for. This is a chance neither had hoped to have, and the elder feels he's not alone trying to stretch and try for their souls to meet, somewhere, if only in the memory of a scent.

The boy raises his questioning eyes to meet the man's.

—The smell of your greyhounds,— he responds, and a small smile lightens up his face.

—Of *piacentino* sheep cheese seasoned with saffron and black peppers for Christmas.

—Holocausts burning in temples,— the man goes on, and he grimaces.

—This one I don't miss. It was worse even than horse fat melting in the pan to make grease for our horses' hooves and tack.

—That was terrible,— agrees the boy. —But I loved your linseed oil, and the pigments, each with its own shade of smell so that I could pick them up in the storage room without lighting the candle.

—Limestone from Nanto, wet with rain.

A hint of enthusiasm warms up the tone of the man's voice at the memory.

—Drenched box hedges after a summer shower,— the boy echoes back, with the ghost of a laughter in his words at the thought of raindrops gleaming on his hands and wetting his hair after he dipped halfway into the closely clipped bushes to inhale the sombre, dark-green scent.

—The powder made with the dried roots of *Iris Florentina*. Bianca's room always had a scent of iris,— the man recalls fondly.

—Those black Etruscan *buccheri* you took home from Tarquinia. I can still smell their earthy, subtle scent when you filled them with water.

The boy's voice is still awed by the simple, age-old magic he witnessed then.

—They said they were made with the last veins of earth from Eden, and that they retained some scent of the lost paradise,— the man whispers back, his wonder for such magic, older even than his mortal days, undampened by his scepticism.

—*Freschin*, the rotting, watery smell coming from the sea when the tide is low. Dead seaweed and fish.

It's the boy's turn to grimace.

—When the seagulls and the small white herons, the *garzette*, come to feed on the damp sand and shallow water of the velme,— the man goes on, and he sighs, suddenly homesick.

—*Oldani*, balls of resin and perfumed powders to keep in rooms, wardrobes and pockets. You had them made for you with myrrh and storax and cloves for a spicy touch. You insisted that I always carry one with me to guard me from disease,— the boy smiles, and his heart aches, remembering the tenderness of that large cool hand slipping the scented ball into his pocket.

—Longobardic mortar. Once I met a man, Guido Mor, a history teacher at a university, who could tell you the time a medieval wall had been built from its smell and the taste of the mortar,— the man adds playfully, loving the game.

—Hair spray. Ugh, I hated that. I'm happy women don't use it anymore.

The game is catching on, part jest, part wistfulness.

—Old nutwood pews in churches, the very scent of silence —says again the man, reverence in his voice.

—The paper of *The Fifteen*,— the boy blurts out.

—Which fifteen? —asks the man in surprise.

—An illustrated encyclopedia for children in fifteen volumes,— the boy answers with a blush, — in the nineteen sixties. The paper smelled great.

—The perfumed pard.

Now it's the elder's voice that trembles a little.

—Our perfumed pard,— the boy repeats, and his small hands cover the man's on his knees.

—She was scented in winter,— the man continues.

—Her head left its perfume on our clothes. So dense, deep,— echoes the boy.

—She burrowed between us under the covers in bed.

The man's voice is down to a whisper.

—She kept us both warm.

Fondness rises in the boy's words for the long-ago gift of trust and happiness.

—I miss her scent.

How hard to acknowledge need for this man who never found help, and comfort, and shelter, yet helped and comforted and sheltered so many.

—I miss her too. Almost as much as one other smell,— the boy adds almost unwillingly, under his breath.

—Which?

—Yours, when I hugged you at your return. You smelled of the night and the sky and the stars and of places I had never been to. I miss that.



—*Fio mio*, son, you don't have to.

—Don't I? *Paron*, Master?

—No.

The man's arms stretch open, a gesture of surrender, of offering, his eyes down, waiting, hoping. The boy bends to him. The lightest kiss grazes his forehead and he expires, half grateful, half disappointed. But a moment later the boy's arms are around his neck and his head is on his shoulder and he finds he can hug him tight at last, that slim strong body his fingers remember so well.

He feels the boy sniffing deeply at the junction between his shoulder and chest.

—You still smell the same,— Armand says softly in his ear, and there is happiness in his voice.

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## Taste: Blindness (Lestat)

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It is two hundred and twenty-nine years since I became blind to taste.

*Le visionnaire aveugle* in Buenos Aires, Jorge Luis Borges, wrote about the sombre red haze, the blood haze, enveloping his world. He slowly lost his sight when he was in his forties. I lost the sense of taste all at once at half his age.

Now it is only blood for my lips and my tongue, just like it was only blood red for his eyes. No more greens, no more yellows and blues for him. No more summer peaches, no more spiced roast meat, no more *beignets* for me. Only the ever-present, rusty taste of haemoglobin.

I have become a gourmet for this oxidized iron molecule. I can recognize arterial from veinous blood. I can recognize a blood group just by the sip of a few drops. I can tell the taste of each component apart in this dense, life-giving soup. I would be a Nobel prize haematologist, if I still cared for prizes.

Blood is my life.

But I still try to remember what it felt like. The taste of food in the mouth. Its feel on my tongue, down my throat. The taste of things that were not food... Of the stems I used to chew on, after pulling them neatly off their tubular foot, while I lay low in the grass, waiting for the trap to catch some fowl for my own and my family's dinner. Of the panting kisses my proud dogs planted on my face after we had killed a deer. Of the bodies of my lovers in Auvergne, three lifetimes back in the past. Of the varnish that coated Nicolas' violin, its sharp taste filling my mouth and nose one night when he played Tartini so beautifully, and I did not know how else to show my awe than by kissing the shining belly of the slender, tawny instrument still quivering with the echo of the music.

I cannot remember the tastes. All else is present to my memory with threatening clarity, but tastes are lost forever.

Memories are making me hungry with a need deeper than survival. I am aching for something more, something as warm and shining, and forever lost for me, as the sun itself. I am ravenous for the taste of all the juices of the Earth. I crave to feed on the substance of life itself.

My steps have brought me back to Rue Royale. I linger at the gate, my *rêverie* slowly melting into the reality of the stone pavement under my feet, the faint creaking of the hinge, the thick scent of jasmine and the glimmer of the moonlight on the surface of the fountain. And suddenly it is there, the feeling of *that* taste, and suddenly I know why I have come back here. I know what I am going to do.

The flowery, heady, wine-like taste of my beloved.

The very taste of life.

::

## **Sotto la doccia**

(Armand si chiede come Marius abbia deciso di trasformare Sybelle e Benjamin)  
by mazaher, 2001

::

Sto in piedi sotto la doccia. Il getto veloce e caldissimo mi scorre sulla pelle gelata senza scaldarmi. Ho sempre freddo ormai. Chiudo gli occhi e mi accorgo di ondeggiare impercettibilmente, destra, sinistra, destra, sinistra. Sento il calore dell'acqua colpire prima una spalla, poi l'altra, e svanire prima di giungere alle reni. Stringo le braccia sul petto. I capelli bagnati mi si incollano alla faccia.

Ondeggio e penso, perchè?

Perchè l'ha fatto?

Li avevo affidati a lui, contando che non avrebbe permesso a nessuno di fare questo. A nessuno: non a nessun *altro*.

Non può essere stato il panico. Non dopo che sono stato in qualche modo restituito a un'esistenza a cui, più che rischiarla, avevo rinunciato. Lui non ha paura: non ha mai paura al punto di smettere di ragionare. La paura lo fa rallentare, non gettare in avanti a capofitto, mai. E' per questo che la sua cavalla andalusa si butterebbe da un tetto se lui glie lo chiedesse.

Non mi riesce di credere neppure che sia stato il desiderio. So esattamente la misura della sua capacità di resistere al desiderio, già cinquecentotrenta anni fa. Se mai qualcosa è cambiato, lui si è fatto anche più forte. Non è stato il desiderio, neppure il desiderio di sentire il sapore di chi io amo... (amavo?).

Che cosa dunque?

Quanto poco lo conosco. So soltanto frammenti, e mi sfugge ancora, sempre, il tutto. Ogni suo atto ha gusto e peso e odore inconfondibili e suoi, e io li riconosco, ma non conosco lui.

Rimane una possibilità, inaudita. Forse ha voluto cambiare. Forse il dolore di come sono andate le cose tra noi gli ha fatto pensare che fosse colpa sua, per aver aspettato troppo, dubitato troppo con me. Forse proprio lui ora ha fatto un salto nel buio, contro ogni sua convinzione, contro ogni regola, proprio lui, per fede. Lui che non ne ha mai avuta. Lui che non è cambiato per nulla e per nessuno, nè per dèi nè per demoni, nè per gli uomini nè per le donne, in duemila anni, ha voluto cambiare.

E di nuovo, perchè?

Per amore?

Per amor mio?

::

**Marius a Amadeo. Frammento di una conversazione**

by mazaher, 2003

::

(..)

Abbiamo visto

la foschia mattutina

sui colli Albani

la pioggia sulle greggi

e i fumi obliqui.

Abbiamo visto

i delfini saltare sulle onde

metafora istantanea della vita

e, forse, le sirene.

Abbiamo visto

le foreste del Libano

la luna nuova

sul deserto

e Petra tutta rosa nell'aurora.

(...)

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**Risveglio nella stanza in penombra**

PAUL VALÉRY, *Rêve d'intérieur*, in *Charmes ou poèmes*, 1922, modified by mazaher, 2006

::

Un esclave aux longs yeux chargés de molles chaînes

Change l'eau de mes fleurs, plonge aux glaces prochaines,

Au lit mystérieux prodigue ses doigts purs;

Il met un rêve au milieu de ces murs

Qui, dans ma rêverie errant en son silence,

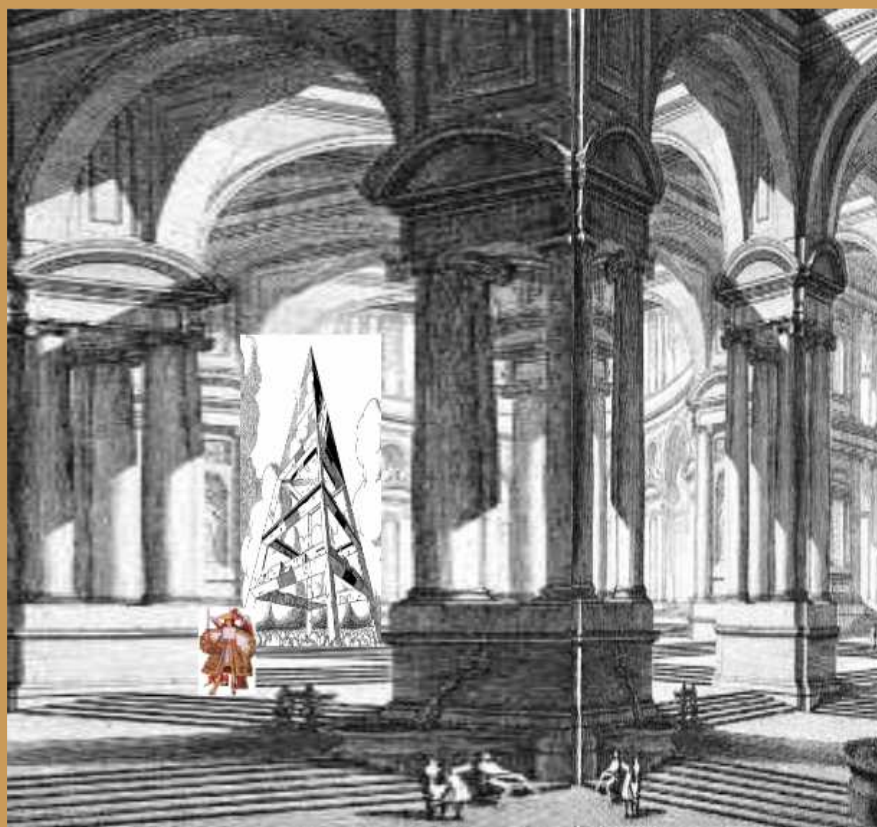
Passe entre mes regards sans briser leur absence,

Comme passait le verre au travers du soleil,

Et de la raison pure épargne l'appareil.

::

# LE THÉÂTRE D'ARMAND



IMPRIMERIE DES INNOCENTS  
1899

IMPRIMÉ À PARIS  
DANS LE LIEU DU THÉÂTRE ENFLAMMÉ  
AVEC PAPIER DE LARMES  
ENCRE DE MALÉFICE  
ET CARACTÈRES TREMPÉS À LA LUNE  
DANS L'AN DE DISGRÂCE  
MDCCCXCIX

ANTIQUA PUELLA MISERERE MEI

LA VRAIE HISTOIRE DE LA FIN DU MONDE  
COMME ELLE FÛT RÉCITÉ AVANT NÔTRE SEIGNEUR JESUS-CHRIST  
DANS L'AN DE NÔTRE DOUTEUSE SALVATION 1789

LE QUATRIÈME ARCHANGE, OU  
LE DESTIN D'URIEL

VOYAGE MYSTIQUE  
DE LA PRINCIPAUTÉ DE KIEV À LA RÉPUBLIQUE DE VENISE  
PUIS À ROME ET À PARIS  
AVEC UNE DIVINATION À PROPOS DU MONDE NOUVEAU

ARCHITECTURES THÉÂTRALES  
ESSAI ILLUSTRÉ À PROPOS DES BÂTIMENTS FICTIVES  
DE LEUR ILLUMINATION  
ET DE LEUR EFFETS SUR LA PSYCHOLOGIE DES SPECTATEURS

MYHTE ET RÉALITÉ DE L'ESCLAVAGE  
ANCIEN ET MODERNE  
ET COMMENT S'EN SERVIR EN THÉÂTRE

DES LABYRINTHES  
LA FICELLE D'ARIADNE, OU  
COMME ELLE DONNAIT À THESÉE UN FIL, UN RÉCIT  
ET LA MÉMOIRE DU MONDE AU-DESSUS

CENT-QUARANTE-QUATRE MANIÈRES DE MOURIR  
EN THÉÂTRE ET DEHORS