

## Michelle Tjondro – Halcyon Days

Tonight, the evening was different. The flowers would not hush, and the river birds drank their moonlit reflections. Avignon on Rhône's edge grew still; a zephyr mustered enough strength to stir several leaves, and – splosh.

Almost human, but surely it was a folly of the swans. In any case, one would, by now, be distracted by the brilliance of the Pont d'Avignon ahead.

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On a sultry night three summers ago they soared as high as heaven, and their joy was untouchable. The lights of the city could not dim the lovers' glow in their eyes as they embraced below the Eiffel Tower. All around them danced the quiet murmurings of similar unions, fuelling the lyrical throbbing of Paris' heart.

But it was not to be. He was summoned to follow the commands of *La Marseillaise*, and each could neither send nor receive affections. And that Sunday, she donned her pastel blue dress, the one with the daisies on the collar, and told herself to smile as the impatient steam train puffed away. From that distance, he wouldn't be able to tell the tears from raindrops.

Afterwards, she visited the church for the second time in her life. The first, it served only as a shelter from rains which had arrived unusually early that year. Now, instead of facing the altar, she gazed in awe at the stained glass windows. But what was the purpose of beauty when it could not enhance a life?

Like tears which do not make their mark on the ocean, she convinced herself that his parting would pass gently over old wounds of the heart; that the truth of love's existence would triumph. She refused to see where the end might be. And so the weather began to sing a more earnest song, the landscape still lay bare with the absence of men's footprints.

Golden leaves that year were eager to meet the ground, and the pelting snow confined her to the chilly cottage. Even the cat disapproved of her sadness, and so she was truly alone. It was in this time of greatest despair, that the news arrived.

Quietly but startlingly, *oh*, the sorrow of it.

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At the edge of the embankment she stood, unsure of her next move. The clarity of the night sky astounded her; the sounds of the night; a welcomed serenade. She had been asleep all this time, changing life to death.

In her hands she carried his final memento. The carefully penned letter now contained hundreds of faint fold-lines, each a reminder of her yearning.

“Dearest, I am certain...this may be the end.

I see your hands begin to tremble as you read these words, but you must remember that I did all I could. In my naivety I said I would return but only this letter will survive, I am promised. Here, souls are silenced, then lost. It is only a rasping shell which continues the struggle to claim the battle on the Somme.

I am fighting much more than the pitiless wind to send this to you; an enemy of the other kind has me at his mercy. He is spinning the revolver’s six chambers over and over; the deliberate clicking matched the impossible pace of my heartbeat.

Remember the sparkling Seine? In the *Jardin des Tuileries* our emotions remain carved upon the bark of the Judas trees. Memories speak more than time allows me to describe. My luck grows scarce in this game of roulette.

My head aches from the pressure of the revolver’s muzzle; I cannot see which chambers are loaded. Do not be scared for me: you should fear only the unknown. I know my fate, pure and simple. Like a dying constellation, we soldiers cannot be saved. The suspense of death has dissipated, and I wait.”

Here, the scrawled words became more frantic. She imagined the scene in her mind, but she knew best that imagination seldom provided comfort.

“I am ready to leave, and you will join me one day, in a place where there is no darkness. Tell those at home that I am sorry. And to you, the marionette in this country’s game, I love you more than ever, but I have changed: lifeless yet fervid. I am not the love you farewellled in your blue dress.

It is the end. I sense his fingers raring to depress the trigger.

Forgive me, I am young”

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She felt his tender breath on her cheek, and held the letter to her lips. Was she shivering because of the cold? Perhaps it was his presence?

*Show me the light, and I will come to you.*

The silky wind wrapped itself around her, persuading her to step closer to the river. Its hands guided her, towards an ultimate catharsis.

*This is the way. Love was, will be, those halcyon days.*

It was all she needed. A gentle push, and she allowed herself to escape into the shadowy Rhône. *Oh*, the irony of war.

The letter she always clasped so urgently now fragmented and faded into the water. Her body drifted downstream and began its journey. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Inexorable, it was the union of two spirits.

And on they glided.