

In cabin'd ships at sea the boundless blue
on every side expanding with whistling winds
and music of the waves, the large imperious waves.

(Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems*.

Penguin Classics. London 1986).

Château Saignant¹

Xavier Queipo

Le sang cuilat. Je voudrais un château saignant. A scarecrow (elegant, but a scarecrow) crossed the ship's deck towards the stern, where during those soft hours that precede twilight, she used to meet up with others of her species, in an inharmonious concert of exclamations, stories, legends and gossiping tongues.

Reclining on my blue-and-white-striped chaise longue, I felt that I could not stand it any longer. I must get up and run after her, run as I had never run before and, suddenly, without allowing a single word to besmirch the epic grandeur of the act, slap her soft cheek, smothered in Egyptian face powder; and then, before her surprise had allowed the release of the full savage response of her hysterical scream, spit out an insult, grotesque, shocking and unique.

But no. I would not do it now. The poetic moment had passed and the steward was coming, laden and dribbling as he dragged himself along like a sea lion on the ramp of a fishing boat. He left my château saignant on a side-table, fastened to the deck with two screws for greater safety during the days of unpredictable storms that were doubtless awaiting us on our crossing to Durban. He went on towards a chair where one of those immaculately unkempt individuals smokes Pall Mall and devours the Financial Times as eagerly as one presented with his favourite food.

I correct my posture, bad for the spine of a future sufferer from rheumatism (a family weakness, inevitable I think), I attack the delicacy on my side-table and I make a resolution (I do this several times each day) not to criticize anyone because they are different, and to keep an open mind.

¹ from *Ártico e outros mares* (Santiago de Compostela: Edicións Positivas, 1990)

Why is everything we perceive rather remote, rather strange, rather transmuted, as if it had never existed? Why is it that we look at ourselves from outside, observing ourselves? Why is it that we nearly always do what is most convenient and hardly ever what we want to do?

There are unthinkable exoduses –that of the steward who goes off towards the stern instead of the kitchen, and who will return with his visage venusianly verdant; leaps in the dark –like that of the gentleman with the Financial Times, who tries to give a passionate kiss to a stewardess; bottomless wells –like my unfathomable melancholy today; and, at the end, the change of state, ether, annihilation, the final passing, the art of the unthinkable, the last act of the freethinker: touching nothingness and enjoying the sight of emptiness.

The masculine sea –a useless poetic act to make it feminine– always the foam-covered sea, which twists itself and squeezes itself, which stores in its depths ancient coral bonsais, sporadic unshining stars, fish with lights and lanterns and giant squid that struggle daily with huge cetaceans. Always the same, welcoming you and then holding on to you for ever like those inscrutable and uncertain loves.

The mist, a ubiquitous companion ever since our departure from the port of Faro, had still not cleared. From time to time the deep sound of the foghorn could be heard, only interrupted by the cackling of the witches, who had progressed from tea and pastries to neat anisette. They were like clockwork parrots wound up by tea and energized by anisette, and their figures, faint in the midst of the threads of mist, seemed to come from a sepia photograph from the times of voyages between Plymouth and Benares.

I knew, I know, that they can do little or nothing to enrich my life. I boarded this liner to forget. They cannot isolate me. So I do not stop turning the same obsession over and over in my head. They will not succeed. I will refuse again and again. I will insist. Their indifference will fade away like mist under the power of the tropical sun.

Night falls. The bell tinkles to announce dinner. Tomorrow we shall reach Mindello and you will feel at home. The chance to call Paris. To talk again. To hear that voice. To enjoy that light. To hear that laugh again. It had occurred to me to drop everything; my job in South Africa, my career, my dreams. Drop everything and go back to Paris with new-found passion. I refuse to wander like Ulysses, denying myself. I refuse to think that it will never be. That the decision has been taken. That it was the most rational thing to do. Yes, indeed (turkey schnitzel for first course), first of all draw up a plan. Mark out the exact route. Then the finest part will begin. Yes, the pursuit itself, without anyone knowing, without taking so much as a single false step, presenting the possibility –a minimal one– of being discovered, letting oneself be seen at irregular intervals and always in public places. Our friends will say that it looked like me. She will say that I am far away and will weep. Metro stations. Bus-

stops on rainy days. Open-air concerts. Markets. Museums and art galleries. Department stores. Fashionable places. And so on, in this way, until the day, as delayed as it is desired, and then we shall be like characters out of a film by Rohmer, so straightforward and at the same time all nuances, hidden corners and creases, we shall be as stone (cod in cream for second course, I am going to put on five kilos in fifteen days on board), we shall be rolled along by the water that will lap against our sharp edges and smooth away our creases, making us sweeter by the moment, but we ourselves going out to meet ourselves, loving each other and letting ourselves be loved in poetry that knows nothing about restrictions. We shall feel the hours passing over us like a flock of starlings or, when underwater –this seems more appropriate– a shoal of mackerel, of sand eels, or of flying fish.

You are alone at the table in your Paris flat, 40 rue Dufour, rive gauche, what is more. I know that you are unhappy. I am alone at table 12 in the dining-room of the liner Sagres. You must know that I dream about you. The pitching and rolling amuses me. The movement is not the same every day despite the stabilizers. I am amazed as I discover its cadence, its rhythm, its variable yet regular amplitude. Desire. Desire returns. The sluggish Nordic steward goes away. Two gannets fly by. Do not ask for a château saignant. No. Not now. Do not ask him for it. The solicitous steward will bring it and you will have to smile at him while he –the professional– awaits your satisfaction in perfect silence. Do not ask for it.

At this time of day a man of the world asks for a vodka, or perhaps a dark rum or more prudently a glass of Perrier, or nothing, or some company, or a bed. But not a Bloody Castle, an absurd thing to ask for.

I walk over to the guard rail. The mist is clearing. The bow can be heard plunging into the sea and leaving wakes of foam behind. The beach. The transparent water is green with weed and sea. The blacks. Thousands of blacks on the beach. The sea teeming with weed and blacks. The green sea full of blacks who do not swim, they only leap among the waves and weed. The beach speckled with weed and blacks. The water splashing my sleepy face. The night. The moon -white- illuminates everything. It is reflected in a sea of blacks and weed. The weed and the blacks glint, their backs coated in sand and noctilucas. I dream. Perhaps tomorrow on the beach. I dream that you will stay in Paris. Wild thing. My little wild thing. Yen yeré cumbé. Impossible to return. Everything will be islands and blacks and nights by the time this cruise finishes in Durban. Wild thing. My little wild thing. Yen yeré cumbé.

Off to bed. The cabin is small and smells of diesel oil and kitchen fumes. I shall try to sleep. I have daydreamed enough. I know that one day I shall wake up behind a door, not knowing what shut it nor what it is that, slowly now, opens it and leans against the frame awaiting I know not what, or simply letting the air in. I shall be blind, or dead, or dreaming,

and by then it will not matter to me who enters or leaves my life. But not now; now it is time to relax my anxiety-consumed body. È così bella, you would say to me when we were making boundless love in that hotel that we never left because it was raining, or it was hot, or simply because it was so good to be together like that, making love in great waves as when the Cheyennes, grasping their tomahawks -dust and painted horses ridden bareback- attack a caravan of women on their way to the longed-for West, packed with legendary adventurers, with legends, with adventurers and with buffaloes.

At this hour of anguish, when the shadows become indistinct and I confront alone the cockroaches that emerge from the kitchen fleeing from the kitchen assistant's Rentokil fury, I see you, writing and rewriting in your native Italian a letter that you will later translate into our shared French, full of unacademic expressions. Perhaps you will never be able to send it to me. I should do the same. Write to you. Write to you and not repeat in a permanent vision of the Odyssey, that my name is no one, no one, anyhow. La brume du matin on the deck. The empty spaces left by the cleared-away hammocks. It is very early. Breakfast has not yet been served. You will be the only one, at that time of day a man of the world asks for a tomato juice with Perrins sauce and an egg. But you are a man of your own world and despite your hangover -only you losers drink- you will ask for an orange juice, and the steward, Nordic and androgynous, will bring you the sickly-sweet sort and you will be incapable of saying no, he will never know whether it is because he is Nordic or because he is androgynous. You will drink that foul concoction while the first witches approach their tables, as does the old man in the white linen suit who picks up the copy of the Financial Times again, and two virgins from Brabant (one will doubtless be called Geneviève and the other Caroline, or Martha, or Catherine, but the first will definitely be Geneviève).

Will the mist clear? Will the little women from Brabant go as brown as berries? Will the man with the Financial Times gain the sexual favours of the androgynous steward? Will the parrots reach Durban in time for the slave market? Will I see you again, touch you, run my tongue over the beach of your breast? Yes. The mist cannot last, not in the environs of Cape Verde, nor in the heart of the Nordic man, nor in the way I see things.