

Mauve Desert

NICOLE BROSSARD

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Words and phrases in English and italics in the original French edition
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– Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood and Nicole Brossard

The punctuation of this novel adheres carefully to the author's and
translator's instructions.



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Reading is going toward something that is about to be, and
no one yet knows what it will be....

ITALO CALVINO

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MAUVE
DESERT

Laure Angstelle

A

ARROYO PRESS

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The desert is indescribable. Reality rushes into it, rapid light. The gaze melts. Yet this morning. Very young, I was already crying over humanity. With every new year I could see it dissolving in hope and in violence. Very young, I would take my mother's Meteor and drive into the desert. There I spent entire days, nights, dawns. Driving fast and then slowly, spinning out the light in its mauve and small lines which like veins mapped a great tree of life in my eyes.

I was wide awake in the questioning but inside me was a desire which free of obstacles frightened me like a certitude. Then would come the pink, the rust and the grey among the stones, the mauve and the light of dawn. In the distance, the flashing wings of a tourist helicopter.

Very young I had no future like the shack on the corner which one day was set on fire by some guys who 'came from far away,' said my mother who had served them drinks. Only one of them was armed, she had sworn to me. Only one among them. All the others were blond. My mother always talked about men as if they had seen the day in a book. She would say no more and go back to her television set. I could see her profile and the reflection of the little silver comb she always wore in her hair and to which I attributed magical powers. Her apron was yellow with little flowers. I never saw her wearing a dress.

I was moving forward in life, wild-eyed with arrogance. I was fifteen. This was a delight like the power of dying or of driving into the night with circles under my eyes, absolutely delirious spaces edging the gaze.

I was well-acquainted with the desert and the roads running through it. Lorna, this friend of my mother's, had introduced me to erosion, to all the ghosts living in the stone and the dust. She had described landscapes, some familiar, some absolutely incompatible with the vegetation and barren soil of my childhood. Lorna was inventing. I knew she was because even I knew how to distinguish between a Western diamondback and a rattlesnake, between a troglodyte and a mourning turtledove. Lorna was inventing. Sometimes she seemed to be barking, so rough and unthinkable were her words. Lorna had not known childhood, only young girls after school whom she would ostentatiously arrange to meet at noon. The girls loved kissing her on the mouth. She loved girls who let themselves be kissed on the mouth.

The first time I saw Lorna I found her beautiful and said the word 'bitch.' I was five years old. At supper my mother was smiling at her. They would look at each other and when they spoke their voices were full of intonations. I obstinately observed their mouths. Whenever they pronounced words starting with *m*, their lips would disappear for a moment then, swollen, reanimate with incredible speed. Lorna said she liked moly and salmon mousse. I spilled my glass of milk and the tablecloth changed into America with Florida seeping under the saltshaker. My mother mopped up America. My mother always pretended not to notice when things were dirtied.

I often took to the road. Long before I got my driver's license. At high noon, at dusk, even at night, I would leave with my mother yelling sharp words at me which would get lost in the parking lot dust. I always headed for the desert because very young I wanted to know why in books they forget to mention the desert. I knew my mother would be alone like a woman can be but I was fleeing the magical reflection of the comb in her hair, seeking the burning reflections of the blinding sun, seeking the night in the dazzled eyes of hares, a ray of life. 'Let me confront aridity,' and I would floor the accelerator, wild with the damned energy of my fifteen years. Some day I would reach the right age and time as necessary as a birth date to get life over with. Some day I would be fast so fast, sharp so sharp, some day, faced with the

necessity of dawn, I would have forgotten the civilization of men who came to the desert to watch their equations explode like a humanity. I was driving fast, alone like a character cut out of history. Saying 'so many times I have sunk into the future.'

At night there was the desert, the shining eyes of antelope jack rabbits, *senita* flowers that bloom only in the night. Lying under the Meteor's headlights was the body of a humanity that did not know Arizona. Humanity was fragile because it did not suspect Arizona's existence. So fragile. I was fifteen and hungered for everything to be as in my body's fragility, that impatient tolerance making the body necessary. I was an expert driver, wild-eyed in mid-night, capable of going forward in the dark. I knew all that like a despair capable of setting me free of everything. Eternity was a shadow cast in music, a fever of the brain making it topple over into the tracings of highways. Humanity was fragile, a gigantic hope suspended over cities. Everything was fragile, I knew it, I had always known it. At fifteen I pretended I had forgotten mediocrity. Like my mother, I pretended that nothing was dirtied.

Shadows on the road devour hope. There are no shadows at night, at noon, there is only certitude traversing reality. But reality is a little trap, little shadow grave welcoming desire. Reality is a little passion fire that pretexts. I was fifteen and with every ounce of my strength I was leaning into my thoughts to make them slant reality toward the light.

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*And now to park the car in front of the Red Arrow Motel. Heat, the Bar.
The bar's entire surface resembles a television image: elbows everywhere
leaning like shadows and humanity's trash repeating themselves. I have a
beer and nobody notices I exist.*

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CHAPTER ONE

Longman puts his briefcase on the bed. He has been hot, he loosens his tie. He heads for the bathroom. He thinks about the explosion, he thinks about it and it's not enough. Something. He knows some lovely little footpaths, delicately shaded areas. He hesitates in front of the mirror. He washes his hands. He thinks about the explosion, he thinks about it and nothing happens in his head. He removes his jacket, throws it on the bed. A ballpoint pen falls to the floor. He does not bend down. He lights a cigarette. He fingers the brim of his felt hat which he almost never takes off. He thinks about the explosion. For the pleasure of sounds he recites a few sentences in Sanskrit, the same ones which earlier delighted his colleagues. He paces the floor. His cigarette smoke follows him about like a spectral presence. Longman knows the magic value of formulas. He thinks about the explosion. The slightest error could have disastrous consequences. Longman stretches out with white visions then orange ones then the ground beneath his feet turns to jade – I / am / become / Death – now we are all sons of bitches. Longman rests his head on the equation.

I had the power over my mother to take her car from her at the most unexpected moment. My mother had the unsuspected power to arouse in me a terrible solitude which, when I saw her in such closeness to Lorna, devastated me for then there was between them just enough silence for the thought of their commingled flesh to infiltrate me. One night unexpectedly in the obscurity of their room I came upon my mother, her shoulders and the nape of her neck braced like an existence toward Lorna's nakedness.

I'm driving. Howling, rock-jaw'd, mouth full of lyrics I sing to the same beat as the woman's voice exploding the radio. A voice of doom interrupts the song. I howl. I lean on the announcer interrupting the music until the earthquake ebbs into the distance, tidal wave, resorbs into the Pacific blue. The desert is civilization. I don't like leaving my mother at night. I fear for her. Mothers are as fragile as civilization. They must not be forgotten in front of their television sets. Mothers are spaces. I love driving fast in my mother's Meteor. I love the road, the vanishing horizon, feeling dawn's fresh emptiness. I never panic in the desert. In the middle of the night or even in the midst of a sandstorm as the windshield slowly covers up, I know how to be isolated from everything, concrete and unreal like a character confined to the steering wheel of an old Meteor. In the dark of the dust I know how to exist. I listen to the dreadful sound, the roar of wind and sand against the car's metal body. I yield totally to blindness. I lightly press two fingers against each eyelid and look inside the intimate *species*, at time going by in the back of my mind. I see seconds, small silvery scars,

moving along like creatures. I recognize the trace of creatures who have passed through there where seconds form pyramids, spirals, among the remains, beautiful sandstone chevrons. Only once words I was unable to read. And their form soon faded as if it were a partial transcription of light deep in the mind.

I was driving avidly. Choosing the night the desert to thus expose myself to the violence of the moment which propels consciousness. I was fifteen and before me space, space far off tapering me down like a civilization in reverse, city lost in the trembling air. In my mother's Meteor I was exemplary solitude with, at the tip of my toes, a brake to avoid all disasters and to remind me of the insignificance of despair amid snakes and cacti in the bluest night of all ravings.

I am my mother's laughter when I pale in the face of humanity's distress. Never did my mother cry. I never saw her cry. My mother was unable to imagine that solitude could be like an exactness of being. She trembled when faced with humanity's noises but no solitude really reached her. In the worst moments of her existence my mother would conclude: 'This is a man, we need a bed; this is a woman, we need a room.' My mother was as obstinate as a man struggling with the desert. She did not like men but she defended the desert like a feeling leaguering her with men. She was a woman without expression and this frightened me.

Every time I think of my mother I see girls in swimsuits lying by the Motel pool. This motel, purchased in 1950, my mother renovated it and spent fifteen years paying it off with polite gestures, discipline and energy repeated in the heat of Tucson afternoons. But before Lorna's arrival, everything is vague. Vague and noisy like the to-and-fro of travelers, of suppliers, of the chambermaid.

Lorna's presence will always be linked in my memory with my first years of school and especially with learning to read and write. I liked to read but don't remember reading otherwise than in Lorna's presence. She would watch me, static watcher, monitoring every blink of my eyelids, spying any flutter of sensation, the slightest sign upon my face liable to betray an emotion. I would follow her little game with a discrete eye but when I happened to look up, it was my turn to follow

upon her lips the strange alphabet which seemed to constitute a dream in her gaze. I would then invariably ask the question: 'What are we eating?' as if this could keep her at bay or protect the intimate nature of what I had experienced while reading.

One day when looking for some blank paper to draw on I saw, at the far end of the kitchen, Lorna and my mother sitting on the same chair. My mother was on Lorna's lap, who was holding her by the waist with her right arm. With her left hand Lorna was scribbling. Their legs were all entwined and my mother's apron was folded over Lorna's thigh. I asked Lorna what she was writing. She hesitated then spun out some sentence to the effect that she was unable to read the marks her hand had drawn. I was about to exclaim, to say that ... it made no sense when I noticed the ease of Lorna's hand in my mother's hair.

Yet that night. Very young I learned to love the fire from the sky, torrential lightning branched out over the city like thinking flowing in the mind. On dry storm nights I would become tremors, detonations, total discharge. Then surrender to all the illuminations, those fissures which like so many wounds lined my virtual body, linking me to the vastness. And so the body melts like a glimmer of light in the abstract of words. Eyes, existence give in before that which comes forth inside us, certitude. The desert drinks everything in. Furor, solitude.

In the desert there is the pursuit of breaks clouds sometimes make. Sometimes they are like little lead pellets the sun shoots toward the horizon to signify tomorrow's coming future. I am well acquainted with lead, copper, cartridges and all weapons. I know weapons. Any desert girl learns at a very young age how to hold a weapon and to drive a car. Any young girl learns that what glitters under the sun can also hurt or excite feeling so utterly that shadow itself turns to crimson.