

Outside

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Looking In

“Since from the very heart of these delights a bitter something springs, something to sing even amid flowers.”
Lucretius, Canto IV

Benoît: It’s just not possible.

Nathalie: That it might be at all true.

Benoît-Nathalie: This feeling I have, of being all alone and always outside looking in.¹

Nathalie: I always feel confused on my birthday. I feel so sad . . . yet all these happy people show up with gifts. I never know what to make of it.

Benoît: When I give a birthday gift I know it’s a consoling gesture. I think there is no gift in the world greater than consolation.

Nathalie: You found one! You know I’ve been trying to find one of these for years.

Benoît: I know.

Nathalie: It’s beautiful. An eye . . . I really need one.

voice over: My life is no longer my own. But my soul? I am not free to be where I wish to be, but I am quite free not to believe I am where I am not completely.²

Benoît: The coffee has to stay on the bottom. Not too much water. I’m not sleeping over there tonight. Make sure the coffee doesn’t go up the sides. I wonder if Mom still has the small yellow lamp? I want it to taste like good coffee. Remember to bring kleenex. No wonder they call me elitist. There’s no black blacker than black velvet. Mustn’t have too much . . .

Nathalie: With my new eye, I see way beyond myself. I see a light, I see a candlestick, I see a chicken, I see a cookbook, I see a set of dice, I see another candlestick. It's black and elegant. But I prefer this one . . . short, transparent and bright. Like a child chandelier.

voice over: On the road from self to self
A bubble
Noon³

Nathalie: So, did you finally find something?

Benoît: I gave up. I was loosing my mind.

Nathalie: Looking can be stressful . . .

Benoît: But the hardest part is to imagine yourself in each of these apartments. All those decors: I saw rococo, design, colonial, hippie . . . It's crazy . . . Yesterday, I went to see one: wall-to-wall flowers. Dried flowers, flowered wallpaper, drapes, tablecloths and bedspreads . . . In the bedroom, Nathalie . . . there were flowers, and two little twin beds. On each bed was a king of garter . . . yellow . . . and on top of those, two big Spanish dolls. When I came out of there, I felt feverish.

(In English)

voice over: What would you want to be?

Nathalie: Who? Me or my country?

voice over: Oh! yourself.

Nathalie: I would like to be . . . a tree.

voice over: A tree?
What kind of a tree?

(English in original)

Nathalie: How do you say "chestnut tree" in English?

Benoît: Sometimes I think I just can't go on. I have so little energy and willpower . . . I won't fulfill a single dream.

Nathalie: Incredible! For me, it's just the opposite. I feel I'm doing just what I want, to be just where I want to be. Every day, I outdo myself. I amaze myself!

Benoît: I'm barely using thirty percent of my potential. I should tap into the other seventy percent, but I have no idea how to do that.

voice over: Now ye brave hearts that have weathered many a sorer strait with me, chase your cares with wine — tomorrow we shall plough the mighty sea!⁴

Benoît: I see the Place Ville-Marie searchlight scanning the sky and lighting up the softly falling snow.

Nathalie: I see an old guy with a grey hat and a mustache . . . Hey, that's the guy that cut in ahead of me at the bank last week! You know, the kind that's all smiles and just takes your place. People like that should be shot.

Benoît: Tomorrow, I'll be celebrating eleven and a half years of loneliness . . . I haven't been too lucky. How much longer will I have to wait?

Nathalie: Wait? Benoît, there's no time for waiting. We're almost in the year 2000. Fate is an outdated belief. We know now that life is a web of determinisms. You have to open yourself to love. Now, that guy who I talked about . . .

Benoît: Whom you talked about. He's the object, not the subject . . .

Nathalie: Direct object, right?

Benoît: That's right.

Nathalie: I can't talk. It's a good thing you're there to correct me. Thanks, Benoît. I don't want to make mistakes. I really want to improve.

voice over: Forget the trees
Forget the stones
And the road in the forest

Benoît: Stay there, lost one
I will rescue you⁵

Benoît: As I explained something to my students, I used the word oekumen, and I ask if anyone knew what it meant. No one could tell me.

Nathalie: No one?

Benoît: No one.

Nathalie: Oekumen! Such intellectual weakness.

Benoît: That's what I said. And they laughed.

Nathalie: They laughed.

Benoît: One of them said: "Speak French."



Nathalie: Do you realize this means that French is a second language even for francophones?

Benoît: If they don't already know something, they reject it.

Nathalie: That's terrible: a culture that basks in its ignorance ... proud of its ignorance.

Benoît: Some of my students can express just two emotions: joy and anger. Don't ask them about disgust, embarrassment, felicity, exasperation or contentment.

Nathalie: They can't do it?

Benoît: No.

Nathalie: That's not just sad: it's dangerous.

Benoît: I know. I see it every day. It'll turn us into barbarians.

voice over: I am no longer content with beautiful things. Of all that I see, nothing entertains me. I feel that I am destined for great things, that admiring beauty is nothing but an illusion, that for me, what is vital is no longer there, that my passage on this earth cannot be a bed of roses, that I have something to accomplish, a role to play in a most terrible drama.⁶

Nathalie: Friday night, finally! I didn't have too many problems this week. Monday, I choked on celery; it rained cats and dogs ... Tuesday, I spent the entire morning looking for my keys ... Wednesday, Sebastien called me. Thursday ... nothing. Nothing ever happens to me on Thursday. I'm protected. And Friday, today ... I shopped all day and couldn't find anything.

Benoît: You know, that guy whom you spoke to me about.

Nathalie: Gregory's friend?

Benoît: Uh-huh. I called him.

Nathalie: I don't believe this.

Benoît: I swear. He invited me to have dinner at his place, but he warned me that I'd have to leave by 10 p.m. because his nephew was coming over.

Nathalie: That's weird.

Benoît: I got there, and everything was pink: the walls, the furniture, vases, pictures, his face — all pink. I wanted to turn around and run.

Nathalie: Why? Because of the color?

Benoît: Well ...

Nathalie: Well what? Pink is nice. Fear of colors is abnormal.

Benoît: I keep imagining catastrophes that never happen. In front of my place there's a tree. Its branches touch some electrical wires. I see a city worker going up the tree with pruning shears; he reaches over, and all the lights go out in my place. He's been electrocuted.

I leave the house to go shopping. I'm waiting for the light to change and I see a woman with a stroller slip on a sheet of ice. The stroller rolls into the street, a car drive by. Bam! Bye-bye baby. It's exhausting...

voice over: In the dark times
Will they also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing
Singing about the dark times⁷

Benoît: There's nothing we can do about it. Nothing ever happens around here. We'll always be removed from everything.

Nathalie: If that's what you think, why don't you leave?

Benoît: Probably because I'm a coward. Besides, I can never save any money... so I'm stuck here.

Nathalie: We won't build a country with people like you. Do you know what we should do with people like you? Buy them a plane ticket. One fucking way.

voice over: What can be said against nationalism, at least in its ethnolinguistic form, is not only that it does not provide any solution to current problems, but that, given the chance to implement its policies, it actually aggravates those problems. It is almost certain that, for the time being, cultural freedom and pluralism are better protected in large states which know themselves to be plurinational and pluricultural than in small states which pursue an ideal of ethnolinguistic and cultural homogeneity.⁸

voice over: A nation is not merely a burden or a type of fundamentalism. It is also a memory, a culture. Only once this memory, this culture, has been recognized can we open up to others. To downplay the national memory in favor of cosmopolitanism is to expose people to a kind of national depression that prevents them from meeting the other nations and that causes them to become tense, maniacal, or to persecute others.⁹

Nathalie: I've been elected!

Benoît: No!

Nathalie: Yes! I'm in charge of the skating rink. It's about time women got involved. This year, that rink is going to be fantastic... hard as a rock... and so smooth...

Benoît: I'm tired of being asked for money. I always say no, then it takes me weeks to get over it. I'm not selfish, I just can't stand the pressure. And with all those causes, how am I supposed to choose?



Nathalie: I solved that problem ages ago. I donate twice a year, once to the Parti Quebecois, and one to the spca. Those are two causes that mean something to me.

Benoît: That's just my point. I wouldn't want it to mean something to me. Donations aren't about you; they're about other people. Of course, I wouldn't want to give money just to ease my conscience either. I just want to give freely, with a sense of abandon.

voice over: Nothing is more popular than generosity.¹⁰

Nathalie: One thing I'm really proud of is my sense of style. I may not be rich but I have a unique style.

Benoît: I agree.

Nathalie: If I go into a store and see something nice, I won't mind buying it, even if everyone else is wearing the same thing. No. Nothing is worse than originality for originality's sake... It's all about restraint... Not everyone has that, you know. But still... You have to have a little touch that contradicts restraint... something strange. You have to find a certain tension. That's what it's all about. Tension. But what I'm most proud of, really, is that my sense of style reflects my relationship with society. That's truly important.

Benoît: What do you mean?

Nathalie: I mean... There are rules to be followed, and I take pleasure in following those rules. Refusing to conform is in such a bad taste... You know what? In spite of that, you need a touch of anarchy.

Benoît: Anarchy?

Nathalie: A little. But not the revolutionary kind. No... Just the ordinary kind.

voice over:

poplar aspen long-fanged trembler
wolf poplar ominous griffin immobile uprooter
of moss and soil poplar narrow
leaves low-browed poplar straight line
poplar dried horse rancid blinders
balsam poplar embalmer of tears bud-speared
poplar cotton fruit poplar
selfless cotton balls she-cats tongues
rickety she-birds' legs matchstick poplar
windbreak of the forest parapet and cooper
winters' white coal¹¹

Benoît: I see two films a week, I read novels, I read the paper; I listen to a little music, I watch tv, I talk to people... I keep myself entertained... But I learn nothing. I'm not learning anything anymore. I have a certain body of knowledge that's not going anywhere. I'm like a dried-up peach pit.

Nathalie: But you share your knowledge. It travels into the minds of your students, and they take some, have some, and make up their own minds.

Benoît: But how can you teach others when you've stopped learning? How can you ask others to move when you're standing still?

Nathalie: We can't do it all, Benoît. Life is divided into two parts. There is a time to know and a time to learn. If life was different, I'd be unbearable.

Benoît: If life were different ... But if life were different, Nathalie, it wouldn't be unbearable. It would be bearable, at last.

Nathalie: Are you asleep?

Benoît: Yes. I'm dreaming.

Nathalie: What about?

Benoît: I'm dreaming that you're drinking a Margarita. There's a little umbrella in the glass, and you're playing with it. You're putting it into your mouth and your eyes open wide. The umbrella has just opened in your mouth. You try to take it out, but you can't. I hear you groan. Nathalie! You're choking!

Nathalie: Don't try to tell me he's not good-looking. He's gorgeous. Look at his hair, his ears, his nose ...

Benoît: Yeah ... he has intelligent eyes.

Nathalie: Very intelligent.

Benoît: Nice eyes and eyebrows.

Nathalie: Yes.

Benoît: And quite a pair of lips.

Nathalie: Great lips, huh? And a warm skin tone. There's something sexy about this guy.

Benoît: But he's still missing something to be my type ...

Nathalie: Come on!

Benoît: ... for me to be involved ...

Nathalie: What do you need?

Benoît: Look closely.

Nathalie: Well?

Benoît: Look at his neck. It looks like an extension of his face.

Nathalie: You're delirious.

Benoît: He has no jaw. No, just not square enough for my taste.

voice over: Or to go once more oh, forest filled with mystery — to that place I know, where in brown stagnant water the leaves of years gone by, the leaves of adorable springs lie and become soft. It is there that my useless resolutions sleep most peacefully, and that in the end, my thinking amounts to very little.¹²

Nathalie: I really loved the movie. It was great.

Benoît: What?

Nathalie: All through the film I didn't know which character I could identify with. It's as if they were both right and both wrong at the same time. That was great.

Benoît: Of course. Nowadays, as long as something asks questions rather than answering them, as long as it casts doubts rather than light... then we say it's powerful, deep and open-ended. We favor anything that's middled. At least, we used not to be afraid of the truth, not to be afraid to make choices and resolve dilemmas.

Nathalie: Poor Benoît! How long do you plan to walk around feeling nostalgic? We're going forward, Benoît. The time for truth is over.

voice over: I would need a small live animal
very much alive
standing in the palm of my hand
lying on my eyelids
or free
to bring me closer to the seasons¹³

Nathalie and Benoît: On the mighty mountaintops
We hear nothing but the wind.
We see nothing but the sky.
We feel nothing but the sun
Farewell

Notes

- 1 Eugène Guillevic
- 2 Marcel Jouhandeau
- 3 Daniel Boulanger
- 4 Horatio
- 5 André Harvey
- 6 Marcel Jouhandeau
- 7 Bertolt Brecht
- 8 Eric Hobsbauwm
- 9 Julia Kristeva
- 10 Cicero
- 11 Paul-Marie Lapointe
- 12 André Gide
- 13 Roland Giguère