

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

WHAT THE THREE STORKS WERE SAYING

TRANSLATED BY PETER MANSON

What the Three Storks Were Saying

It has snowed all day. The earth is white as a bride, and the limpid constellations make the milky sky sparkle with diamonds.

Two sinister groans pass over this cold daydream of snow and moonlight.

The first is that of a door turning upon its ancient hinges: the door of Nick Parrit, who is leaving his cabin, – a nest in the undergrowth. Nick Parrit picks up two sheaves of hawthorn sticks which are leaning against the wall, shakes off the grape-like mounds of snow with which compassionate winter made them blossom again before they burn for eternity, and goes back inside.

The second groan, quite similar to the first, comes from the air.

Is it the wind which moans in despair through the wet, grey branches?

Or some passing bird that weeps for the death of the leaves?

No, it is not the wind: for not one tree is trembling and the whole forest is motionless. And yet, if you look at Nick Parrit's roof, upon the stone where a bunch of wild gillyflowers had been left to dry that summer, you will catch sight of not one bird, not two, but three, all white and casting a pale shadow on the mossy tiles bathed in pale moonlight: three storks, each perched melancholically on one thin leg, dreaming, their beaks buried in their chest-feathers, at the feast of Twelfth Night, the feast of the Kings, which the morning bells had pealed, and sending out to the stars this rhythmic song in a language I do not know, but which I believe to be their own:

Auro rex agnoscitur

Homo myrrha: colitur

Thure Deus gentium!

II

In Which We Learn that a Rose Can Make One Both Laugh and Cry

Children, you have tasted the first and best of all joys, from the moment of your first smile.

The first time you woke up to your mother's kiss, that morning dew, and fell asleep at a kiss from your angel, that dew of evening.

The first round you danced in May, when the birds were singing, without knowing that it was crowned by a dance of ethereal fairies, and the first alms you gave, when the poor were shivering, without knowing that it was inscribed in a missel decorated with fleurs-de-lys by the saints of heaven.

The first story that was told to you, when, arranged in a circle before the fire, you warmed your bare feet at the flaming Yule log,

these are the sweetest memories, aren't they? Ah! then, you should know that all these enchantments are as nothing next to the naïve delights which threw the reverie of Nick Parrit into turmoil, every time he turned his eyes towards the great rose which blossomed, red and content with its existence, next to three chestnuts, on the old mantelpiece.

You have seen him throw with rapture upon the somnolent embers those beautiful sheaves which blaze joyously; it is because he understood, – inside every old man a poet sleeps – how bizarrely charming this rose was, next to the fire. The summer passes its baton to the winter in the perfume of this flower, smiling in the radiance of the hearth: "All is not dead," he dreamed, "o my rose, and I love you like a final illusion! You alone are not where your companions are, and because I have been able to make you happy, you reward me with your purple splendour and with your scent that mixes hope with memory!"

At that moment, Nick Parrit broke off and drew an enormous puff on his great pipe. The smoke swirled in the air, sketching fantastic figures which all had a radiant appearance, then vanished to fainter and fainter blue.

The old man contemplated the rose. His gaze grew drunk on the crimson and his thought played out in a vermilion splendour.

The same guttural cry was sent forth by the three storks: it did not trouble his reverie at all, but, with a jolt, it reawakened Master Puss.

Who was Puss? you will ask me. Puss, or to be respectful, Master Puss, was a fat old cat having a coat blacker than the conscience of Iscariot who sold his God for thirty pieces of silver. At the collar of this coat, long and silky hairs were turning white, like a scholar's stole: he was a great thinker, stuffed with dignity. Seated in front of the fire, his two white paws resting softly on the flagstone where his vast tail unfurled, full of nonchalance, his eyes half-closed and letting only a thin crescent of his pupils shine through, he dreamed an Egyptian poem on the immobile and copper-coloured horizon.

But the strange thing, which has made me muse for entire evenings, is that with all this grave majesty and those haughty airs, he had a voice so thin, so shrill, so sharp, that in the evenings when the hearth-log whistled the tune whose bass was sung by the black-clad cricket, those two paltry performers would drown out entirely the miaowing of the royal personage.

It was with one of these imperceptible cries that Master Puss replied to the three storks whose stretto had disturbed his dream.

This stretto was softened by the snowy branches, and at the moment when Nick Parrit, whose reverie was taking on a melancholic tinge, cast his eyes on the cat, it was no more than one of the lamentations of winter. And yet the old man understood what guests were perched upon his roof, and he murmured, his eyes raised to the ceiling, "Lord Christ, who was born twelve days ago, let them bring me no unhappiness! Here is a sinister cry: is it that which makes me sad? This rose gladdened my thoughts as the sun does a brood of robin red-breasts, but now..... now it makes me

weep, for this is truly a tear... Come, come, Nick Parrit, no childishness. One can be discouraged. You have often been in solitude, but tears! Will a rose make you spill them, you who have not wept since the death... – Ah! I have it! The heart often has more intelligence than the head. This rose can very easily make two streams of my eyes! It is as crimson and fresh as Deborah was, a year ago this evening, when the pale child, having gone out to gather a pebble to make a lucky charm for our cake, came back in with her cheeks coloured by the cold to a rosiness I must never see again! It spreads its scent the way Deborah spread her youth around her. But I ask myself why does it live in winter when all is dead, while my daughter died in spring when everything is reborn. That seems to me barely comprehensible...”

And he wept.

“Oh! Those were good times when we ran in the sun, she dancing and striking her tambourine with her elbow” – he cast his eyes upon a tambourine hanging on the wall, wound round with a few cypress branches mixed with bunches of rowan berries – “and I singing a ballad from my young days! Why did it not last? It is said that God the father is very old: he made a mistake and cut her down with the blow which was destined for me... – At least, when God the son will succeed him, he will not throw upon the child the earth which should cover the father! – All the same, it is very sad! We were restless as two butterflies, and today everything has changed: she sleeps in death, and I bury myself each evening in the desolate solitude of my forest, and in old age... – Tinker, woodcutter, two careers where one at least belongs to no-one but God!

“She would have danced upon a gossamer thread.... and knew so many pretty songs. Ah! the one she sang to me, crouched upon the old sequinned rug which is now in her coffin, one summer evening, the one which became her favourite, I would give the rest of my days to be buried in her sweet music!”

And at the same instant a third cry was launched into the air by the three storks and one of them departed towards the church in the neighbouring village.



Deborah's Song

Straight away the bells rang in the church in the neighbouring village, and the ecstatic seraph which was sculpted above the portal descended silently to the ground. She cut a long veil from the snow which had been spangled in daytime by the footsteps of the bullfinches, and threw it over her sky-blue robe, so that she seemed to be clothed in a white shroud strewn with blue stars. She hid her pensive head in her arms, and, letting her hair down over her shivering wings, stretched out into the night and soared.

When the bird landed on the cabin, the angel halted and, while the bells pealed madly, intoned to a slow, sad tune this laughing saltarello, contrary to the ignorant belief that angels sing only hymns:

*Lilies! lilacs! verbenas!
Flowers! let me throw them by the handful!
Roses cradling dreamlike songs,
nests buried in soft fragrances,
I want to dance my crazy dances
in an enchantment of flowers!*

*In scented avalanches
the periwinkles pour from my hands;
crimson, in the breast of a white sunbeam
I sing and float like a dream....
– The evening wind lifts to the stars
their fresh perfume and my song!*

*When, drunken and fantastical,
one shoulder bare, striking my tambourine*

*upon my lowered brow, I arch
my soft arms into a pure crescent,
or fix with grave poses
my blue eyes on blue paradise,*

*Some old abbé, the one who says the mass,
– if he would move aside my chaste tresses
blonder than honey –
would strew upon my unveiled neck
more kisses than there are stars
than there are stars in the sky!*

*Among those whose cheeks are bathed in tears
because of my proud pouting
there is still one brown-haired horseman.
Let a fairy change his timid tears
one evening into limpid pearls
and I will have, for sure, a divine necklace!*

*But oh! would I let an insipid love
make my pomegranate mouth grow pale?
To be happy, I only need
beneath a sunlit sky
my hairnet that is filled with hair,
and my hair with ears of wheat in it...*

And it was with such sadness and melancholy that this blithe and winsome song of sixteen summers was intoned, to the sound of bells, flung out joyously to all, that the woodcutter, without asking who was singing it among the forest trees, began to weep at the strange music; and when it had vanished into space, he said: "O my dear dead girl, will you never again let this distant birdsong be heard? Those lilacs, those lilies, those verbenas that you stripped of their petals and threw into the air that was drunk on your voice, you have not outlived them! And yet it was a song

of hope: everyone smiled at you and you smiled at everyone. An old priest held your chin while complimenting you, a young man cast a passing gaze upon you, you thought at once of love, you said: they adore me! and you laughed, certain that at the first sign from your finger love would build its nest in your heart! That naïve poetry sums you up you entirely! But why murmur it with a plaintive air? Say it again with your cheerful bee-like buzzing, I have a rose to give you for the saltarello of the flowers!

And at that moment the second stork flew off towards the cemetery which slept in the shadow of the church, and let out a cry.

Puss, who, having finished his poem, had buried his head in his untidy white ruff, woke up again at this cry and rubbed his whiskers against the feet of Nick Parrit.

IV

Hic Jacet Deborah Parrit

There is nothing more solemn than a graveyard upon which winter has thrown some feet of snow. Then the only inequality that remains in the other life – that of the tombs – vanishes beneath that dazzling and fraternal sepulchral stone. All the dead are brothers, for one day at least. The wooden cross is no more, nor the marble angel, and, alone, the tall cypresses, disturbed by the night wind, unpetal the pensive blossoms of snow, piously and amicably, the rich man's cypress over the bodies of the poor.

All the same: I pity the poor dead who, stitched into their pale shrouds without the power to lift a finger, feel the slow and mysterious drops of the melting snow seep regularly through the cracks in the coffin! I am sure they are so cold that it would be a happiness for them if they heard the Trumpet of Josaphat sound through the lightning, and the thunderous voice of God casting them down into the flames of Satan.

Among all these buried tombs, there was one which was simple and perfumed with flowers in summer.

One who opened the coffin would have seen, a seraphic smile arrested on her frozen lips, a young girl crowned with white roses and outlining on her shroud a smooth and fragrant profile.

It was the pale sleeper, Deborah Parrit.

“Deborah Parrit?” enquired the wandering stork of a sombre owl who darted his red eyes over the calm serenity of the funereal plain.

“The dead girl of the swallows?” muttered the nocturnal guardian: “the one to whom all the swallows come to offer a dead leaf before they emigrate and an orange blossom when they return from the skies which are always blue? – *Hic jacet Deborah Parrit..*” he read upon a stone where a

ray of moonlight had melted the snow in a strange fashion.

Then the angel of the portal arrived, and the two birds flew away swiftly, in silence.

The angel had a long golden clarion upon which she sounded thrice.

At each one of these radiant fanfares, to which the psalm of the wind in the rosemary replied, the coffin of Deborah Parrit unnailed itself, and upon the dazzling snow there arose the dreamlike vision of the young girl who was whiter still. When she climbed into the air, all the tombs of the cemetery were opened and all the dead rose up and, without any gesture, for they were imprisoned in the immobility of the shroud, greeted the one who was returning to the light, with a lugubrious “Alleluia!”

A moment later, the moon was hidden, all the tombs were covered once again by their stones, and silence alone lingered over this solitude.

V

The Dance of the Flowers

And when the cat had rubbed his whiskers along Nick Parrit's legs, the old man took his two white paws, adorned with cuffs, in his hands, so that Puss, letting the tail which he carried like a rapier settle beneath his black coat, gravely ensconced and comically gauche in his lace leggings, had the air of a drunken musketeer who would have left his felt hat in the bindweed of the arbour.

"O my Puss," Nick Parrit said while stroking him, "do you remember the radiant enchantress? you loved her... and when the scatterbrain was sixteen, and left open the door of her mocking-birds' cage, you purred and did nothing, you who throw yourself upon all the birds of the forest!"

And Puss replied by purring, as of old.

At that moment, a voice trilled in the distance, and no longer melancholic, but wild and capricious:

*Lilies! lilacs! verbenas!
Flowers! let me throw them by the handful!
Roses cradling dreamlike songs,
nests buried in soft fragrances,
I want to dance my crazy dances
in an enchantment of flowers!*

And lightly and silently the old sequined rug from times past was spread, which sparkled in the light of the fire as once in the sun, and more lightly and silently still there appeared

crimson, in the breast of a white sunbeam

like the saints upon the dull silver ceilings of the choirs of old churches, a smooth and diaphanous shade.

And the shade looked at the old man and said, "My father" in a voice at once thin and melodious,

and danced more gracile than the breeze, when, placing dew-drops in the cups of the violets, it walks upon tip-toe for fear of awakening them. Little by little, from transparent phantom she became again the blonde child that she was, but sweeter still and more ideal, having a body of glory.

“Deborah!” exclaimed the woodcutter. And when her father had recognised her and kissed her forehead, everything that still recalled the tomb faded away, for a father’s kiss rejuvenates even the dead.

There alone remained on her forehead the crown of white roses which young girls wear in the coffin, so that the old man might understand that she had not returned for good, and would not be bitterly disappointed. And with that melancholic jewellery she wore the pink dress embroidered with silver, from her happiest days, so light and so luminous that she seemed made of the blonde vapours of the dawn, through which the night stars gleam, pale and indistinct.

Sometimes she crossed her two slender and lily-like hands over her chest, and, with her ethereal hair undulating down her back like two wings, she seemed, her eyes raised skywards, to fly away to blue and mystical regions, sometimes she twirled madly as if in a dizzy spell, and laughed beneath her pale crown of death.

And when she began her intoxicated dance, she picked a few roses from that crown, stripped them of their petals, and mixing them with the pistils of the royal red rose with which her father had conversed, tossed them into the air, and, taking down from the wall the piously conserved tambourine, gathered into it that perfumed snow and tossed it up again.

This time her smile was so celestial that the flowers, enraptured, remained floating in the room.

Then, in the midst of this enchantment, she rushed forward with a vertiginous whirling, and her hair was borne aloft in the perfume of the roses!

VI

And Where is the King Cake?

She stopped at last, sat down capriciously on a wooden chair, placed Puss upon her knees as in the time of her childhood, took the old man's hands in her own, and, without saying a word, drowned her blue gaze in the eyes of her father, who, enraptured and transported, looked, to assure himself that he had not been misled by a vision, to see if the dancer cast a shadow on the wall turned purple by the flames.

And while they contemplated one another in silence, the white petals and the crimson petals floated in the air.

“O my father,” said Deborah, “have you wept greatly for me? At evening when I am in my coffin and the icy moonlight penetrates through to me, I think of you. It is very cold in the tomb, my father. When the sun returns you will place flowers over me, won't you? but flowers of many colours, I hate the white. These pale roses hurt me to wear. If I was not afraid of being surprised by the dawn, and not being able to say farewell to you, o my father, I would go into the woods to gather a crown of winter violets, that would be more cheerful. But, in Spring, I will ask my dear swallows, those bohemians of the blue sky, to drop one of them onto my cross; for I no longer have any liking for the dull whiteness of orange blossoms... – My father, this is Twelfth Night: I know that, because I have counted three times sixty-six Angeluses since the Day of the Dead when there was a procession in the cemetery. When I said to you a year ago that it was the last time that I would Draw the Kings with you, I did not think I was mistaken; but, if I say it this year, I am sure of myself, for the dead do not make two voyages upon this earth.”

And, saying that, she poured out the most affectionate remembrances of past kindness, and seemed, so many precise and lively memories did she share, to have never known the seven planks of the coffin.

“The Kings! let us draw them as a family, good father! I say as a family, for Puss will have his slice,

he, your only friend since I departed.” And, stroking the cat from whom sparks were springing –
“Have you prepared the legendary cake?”

At that moment the third stork cried out, flew off towards the portal of the church and brought back the angel who sounded three times upon her golden trumpet over the fortunate thatched cottage.

VII

The King Cake

“Who will be the poor man? and first, do you have the cake?...” and she continued to babble childishly in this manner, when a sombre thought veiled the questioning naivete of her gaze. “So you have been truly unhappy, father, since you have been taking care of my tomb? This is the first time that you have not had a king cake. Ah! you will bring me neither coloured flowers, will you, nor white ones: I don’t want anything!”

And with these words she poured out a radiant and mystical tear.

And the green pot of the red rose she had stripped bare was suddenly lifted from the ground, with its red-spined stem, held by a hand luminous and transparent as the water from a sunlit spring. The sparkling tear fell into the depths of the perfumed calyx, and the angel with the sky-blue stars appeared, enveloped in her wings, and stood behind Deborah who had hidden her blonde head in her father’s two hands.

The old man did not see, and said: “I have not sold my firewood because I was shivering and kept it for myself: how will I buy the cake when I have only such bread as I need in order not to die, the forest not giving me, in winter, those blood-coloured blackberries which you crush, Puss, in summertime.”

The young girl replied: “I know that you sold my sequined diadem to pay for my tomb, but does one not remain, were it only the small one which is fading beneath its crescent of topazes, enough to buy a little, a very little cake?..”

Then, at the sound of the bells which rang like the *Gloria in excelsis* of Easter Saturday, the angel murmured “O Dead girl, do not worry, I will ask God for a celestial cake, but God will want to be paid.”

“Oh! what will we give him, O seraph!” (They were so deep in their ecstasy that the presence of an angel seemed to them a very natural occurrence.) – “What will we give him, we who are the poorest of the poor?”

And the angel smiled, pointing at the rose, in its green pot, which contained the young girl’s tear, the most precious of all treasures.

Then she unfolded her wings and disappeared.

Deborah placed her head back in the old man’s hands, without pronouncing a single word, but their two minds billed and cooed together like two doves who have been separated for a day.

This reverie was interrupted by the cry of the three storks who flew away, their legs folded and their necks horizontal, to carry good fortune to the thatched roofs of other lands, contrary to what is said by spiteful people who make them out to be a sinister bird.

Puss lifted his head at this sound and was the first to see the seraph of the portal descend, carrying in her two hands the longed-for cake.

“Here, she said, is that which archangel Gabriel sends to Deborah: he has accepted the young girl’s tear, and has made of it a pearl having a blonde radiance.

“This pearl is reserved for the father of the young girl who will wait some time yet upon the earth before flying away with her to Paradise.

“This pearl will be a star on the old man’s forehead; and the young girl will have her own candour for a halo, with is the whitest of aureoles.

“As for the flower which was unpetalled by her virginal hands, it has taken on again its crimson brilliance beneath this precious and sacred dew. And it can no longer be stripped bare except by celestial hands, and it will be the seraphim who will cast it into splendour, singing:

Rosa mystica!

when the father and the daughter will knock, shivering with azure, upon the door of heaven.”

And saying this, she set down the cake and flew away.

The cake was the moon.

And when it had been cut into four slices, namely:

The old man’s slice,
The dead girl’s slice,
The slice for Puss,
and the slice given to the poor,

when they had been placed upon the tambourine beneath the veil left behind by the angel, the veil of snow spangled in daytime by the footsteps of the bullfinches, which sparkled now with silver stars

the young girl uttered, with her most ethereal voice, the name of her father, her own name and that of Puss, and, placing the white paw of the cat beneath the veil, made him choose for whom each of the slices would be destined.

One quarter remained, which was the slice to be given to the poor, and was left upon a stone outside the door.

And scarcely were the three other quarters uncovered than they vanished in a melodious brilliance. The room streamed with dazzling lights.

Then Deborah cradled herself in the light and murmured with a paradisiacal voice:

*crimson, in the breast of a white sunbeam
I sing and float like a dream....*

She detached the white roses which remained in her crown, and each one of the flowers fell in a rain of stars.

And suddenly that glory faded, and through the window-panes, where the frost embroidered its arabesques, could be glimpsed the slice given to the poor, which curved itself into a pale, dull crescent in the sky turned pink by the dawn.

And Nick Parrit heard only the wind which hummed in the awakening distances:

*Lilies! lilacs! verbenas!
Flowers! let me throw them by the handful!
Roses cradling dreamlike songs,
nests buried in soft fragrances,
I want to dance my crazy dances
in an enchantment of flowers!*

Then, he heard nothing more.....

– Except the light steps of the dawn shivering upon the snow, and a few dead branches creaking under their white burden.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In a note added to the manuscript long after it was written, Mallarmé described *Ce que disaient les trois cigognes* as a “narrative on a freely-chosen subject”, written at the Lycée in Sens some time between 1856 and 1858. Mallarmé would then have been between fourteen and sixteen years old, though the critic L.J. Austin has identified echoes of Baudelaire in the story, which would place it a couple of years later, around 1860 – the manuscript which survives may be a revised version of the schoolboy’s narrative. The piece may have been partly a response to the death of Mallarmé’s younger sister Maria in August 1857. It’s juvenilia in the strictest sense, but with echoes in the later work. The parent or angel watching over the child’s sleep reappears in Mallarmé’s sonnet “Apparition”, while the figure of the revenant, and the imagery of flowers, tombs and the powerless fingers beneath them, are recalled in the 1877 sonnet “Sur les bois oubliés...” The phrase “clarté mélodieuse”, applied here to the disappearance of the cake, is later used by the heroine of “Scène: Hérodiade” to describe her own jewel-like eyes.