



On January 7 2015, the colleagues and friends of Catherine Meurisse, editorial cartoonist at *Charlie Hebdo* for over ten years, were brutally murdered. After the tragedy, to distance herself from this act of violence, she went in search of the opposite of chaos: beauty. On her path: the Villa Medici, the Louvre, the ocean... all places of rebirth... and reconciliation with lightness.

Catherine Meurisse

Lightness

DARGAUD

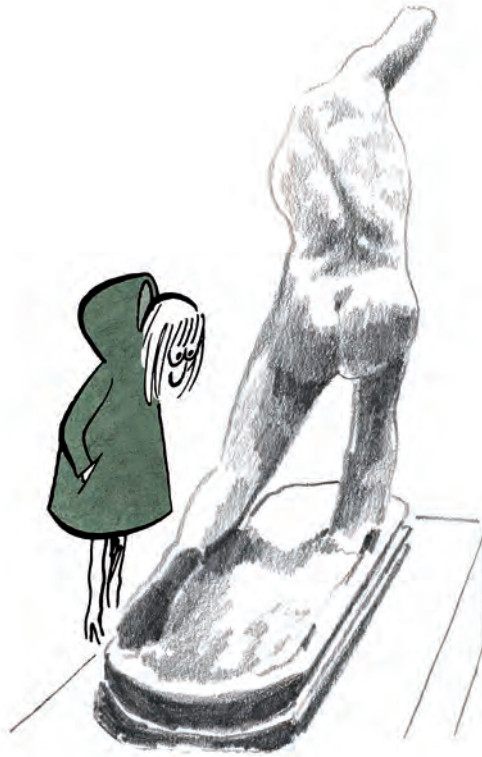
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Preface by Philippe Lançon

DARGAUD

PARIS BARCELONA BRUSSELS HONG KONG LAUSANNE LONDON MONTREAL NEW YORK SHANGHAI

Catherine, *lingère légère*

A novel by Henry James published in 1877, *The American*, begins with a scene written with his usual comic subtlety: a muscular American is reclining on a divan, looking at a painting by the Spanish painter Murillo. The painting depicts the birth of the Madonna. It is beautiful, but the muscular American finds it rather soporific, and prefers the copy that a young French woman is sketching. He asks her if he can buy it. He's spent the whole day walking around the city. It is his first trip to Paris, the capital of refinement and beauty, the heart of elegance and lightness. However, it is not the long walk along the quays that has exhausted this usually heroic specimen, but the beauty on the walls. "He was a shrewd and capable person," writes James, "and in truth he had often sat up all night over a bristling bundle of accounts, and heard the cock crow without a yawn. But Raphael and Titian and Rubens were a new kind of arithmetic, and they made him for the first time in his life wonder at his vaguenesses."

Catherine, who is rather slimmer and more fragile than our American, and who, unlike him, has a sharp, persistent sense of humor, has been strolling through literature, paintings and sculptures for a long time. I say 'strolling' so as to transport these things from the museum and implant them, through Catherine's work, into her half-imaginary everyday life. She never pits the trivial and familiar against creation and beauty. She uses them to emphasize creation and beauty, to tame them, to bring them to life. She mixes everything together because life mixes everything, and she turns them into magnificent comics where the writers, the artists, become the picaresque heroes of a fiction that she invents or that she inhabits, stories where caricature, self-deprecation, tenderness, reverie, the bite marks of lightness, always present, are channeled through her ink rather than her blood. Catherine removes from beauty all the weight that so often prevents us from enjoying it.

On January 7 2015, this ferocious and farcical comic's wonderful life and trade, vivid and sentimental, suddenly took on a terrible weight. The wings of those who weren't killed were leadened, by both the gravity of the attack on Charlie and the bullets themselves. For her as for me, the relationship with the thing that gives us the most intimate pleasure, the thing we love physically and, I believe, naturally, in shared solitude, in other words literature and art, was brutally destabilized. A new kind of arithmetic, as Henry James ironically remarked. In our case it's the opposite: a new kind of funereal arithmetic inspires a vague uncertainty, not exactly about ourselves, not quite, but about our desires, our frivolity, our perspectives on beauty, our lives.

That day, unlike some of the others, myself included, Catherine was fortunate enough to arrive late, and thus after the Kouachi brothers, to Wednesday's editorial conference. You'll find out why in the book: the irregularities of a heart that refused to get out of bed. You should always go through a break-up the day before a terrorist attack; the resulting depression allows you to avoid being there. Lucky, I say... but was it actually luck? What a poorly chosen word! Fate, that's all it was. The limbo of dead friends, the difficulty of taking in the violence that has been inflicted upon us, the perpetual orphanhood into which these two farcical Islamist ninjas plunged us. Injured or not, we all live it, I as she does, she as I do, us as the others do, injured or not. Everything in our lives since has been filtered by this event. We dream, we feel, and we experience things on the scale of the wall that has just collapsed upon us. The cyclone has passed, but its eye is in the grave and watches us, judging us, controlling us, to be honest, annoying us. Our privacy, our consciousness, our unconscious, everything is floating askew and feels as though it is being pulled under. What happened to the lightness? Hence the--almost Kundera--title of this book. The unbearable lightness of being when being itself has been so shaken by the event.

Everyone has their own little survival strategies, although strategy may be a bit strong: everyone gets by the best they can, like a freshwater sailor caught in a tempest that is beyond their skill. The maw of the monster opened. For some, it's a shark. For others, a whale. Catherine, like Jonah and Geppetto, is inside the cetacean's belly. She remembers Moby Dick. She tries to forget. She can't. Inside, she lights her little lamp. On the membrane, she reads as though in a cave the memories of our dead friends, her own first work at Charlie, her life, since January 7, in an attempt to survive. She combines Charb and Wolinski and the others in the future perfect, imagining the jokes they might have made. She shifts them around in her imagination and ours like the artists and writers she loves, because they are the artists and writers she loves – because they are her friends.

Ten months later, she finds herself at the Villa Medici in Rome. Standing before the statues and the gardens, she wonders whether it is possible to “induce Stendhal syndrome to cancel out the symptoms of January 7” – symptoms that worsened, incidentally, on November 13. Stendhal syndrome is a phenomenon whereby excessive beauty causes depression – and this is, perhaps, what the Henry James' American experienced at the Louvre. And thus she finds herself strolling with Henri Beyle through the ruins of Rome, or drawing in Ingres's studio that two kind graffiti artists lent her.

It's in Rome that Catherine's book takes its meaning and takes flight. What do the statues and the works of art say to her now? How do they move when she observes them, when she touches them? Can they help her to find this missing lightness, the essential lightness of being? What do their stories, their destruction, say about the world we live in? Catherine doesn't respond, she doesn't know. She draws the tale of her questions and her troubles, and draws them comically: her character repeatedly confuses the scene of an ancient massacre with that of January 7, her tears with those

of the statues. Trauma goes hand in hand with romanticism and anachronism. The relics arrange shapes, jokes, false mirrors, lines of flight. Confronted with these, at first there is no longer any lightness, but it returns through the artwork, the situations, the unshakeable absurdity. She gives a voice to Stendhal, to the residents of the Villa Medici, living and dead.

Catherine as the albatross in this Villa particularly affected me. Not only because that's where Velázquez painted the marvelous painting, *View of the Garden of the Villa Medici*, during his trip to Rome, this painting that appears like a twilight dream, reminding me that we now live as tightrope walkers, our feet balancing on this wire of nightmares and creativity, a cheese wire for the heart. Not only because Catherine plays with the theme: Diego, my love, you saw nothing in Rome – nor in Hiroshima, nor where the attack happened. There are moments where beauty is but a blind echo. But also because, in March 2015, two months after the attack, I was myself in front of the Spaniard's painting in Paris, and thus also in the Villa Medici. I stood before this painting and others in the Grand Palais exhibition dedicated to Velázquez, a bandage on my face, a graft playing up under my lip and, like Catherine, flanked by two bodyguards. I observed this splendor with my surgeon, the sun was shining, we chatted, I drooled slightly, I was reborn with a clown's face.

"I am beautiful, o mortals! Like a dream of stone," said good old Baudelaire. He's a great winter warmer for us, right, Catherine? For the long winter nights, with a fire burning and our companions of paintbrush and quill, with our sorrows, our memories and our loves. And for the evenings in the hospital, where I often recited his words to myself. We have more memories than if we were a thousand years old, so from now on it's a question of passing them on as quickly and as best we can, so that they do not create too heavy a burden for our futures. Catherine, the attack aged us overnight, but you make us young. It turned everything to stone, just like Pompei, but you make the shadows and the stones move. With your sharp angles that make us bleed with laughter, you move mountains so that they do not give birth to new rats that would gnaw too much at our hearts and our spleens. Catherine, you sink your teeth into the curves of the statues and like Éluard's poem you are "lingère légère." Your talent is neither unscathed nor encumbered. It has grown in lightness.

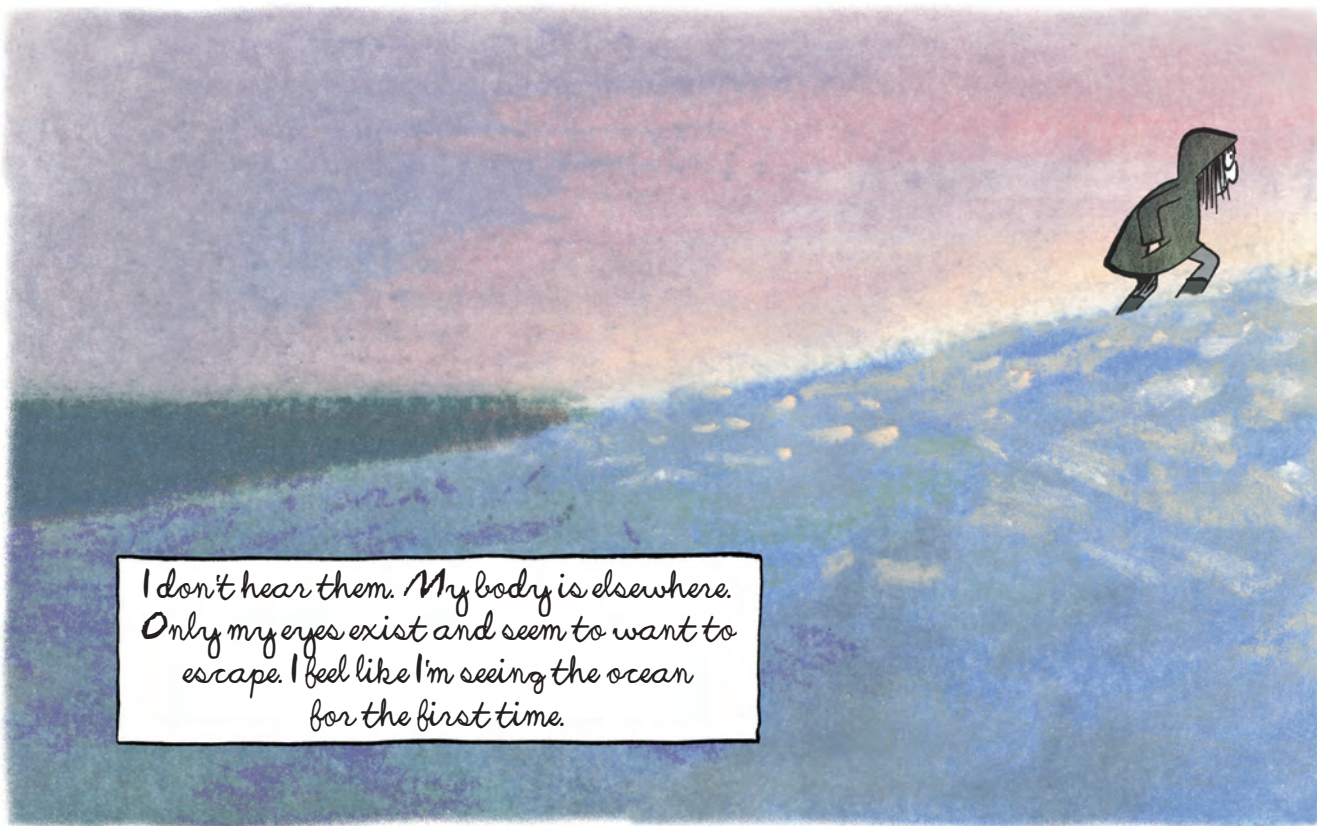
Philippe Lançon

**Lingères Légères* A collection of poems by Paul Éluard (1945)

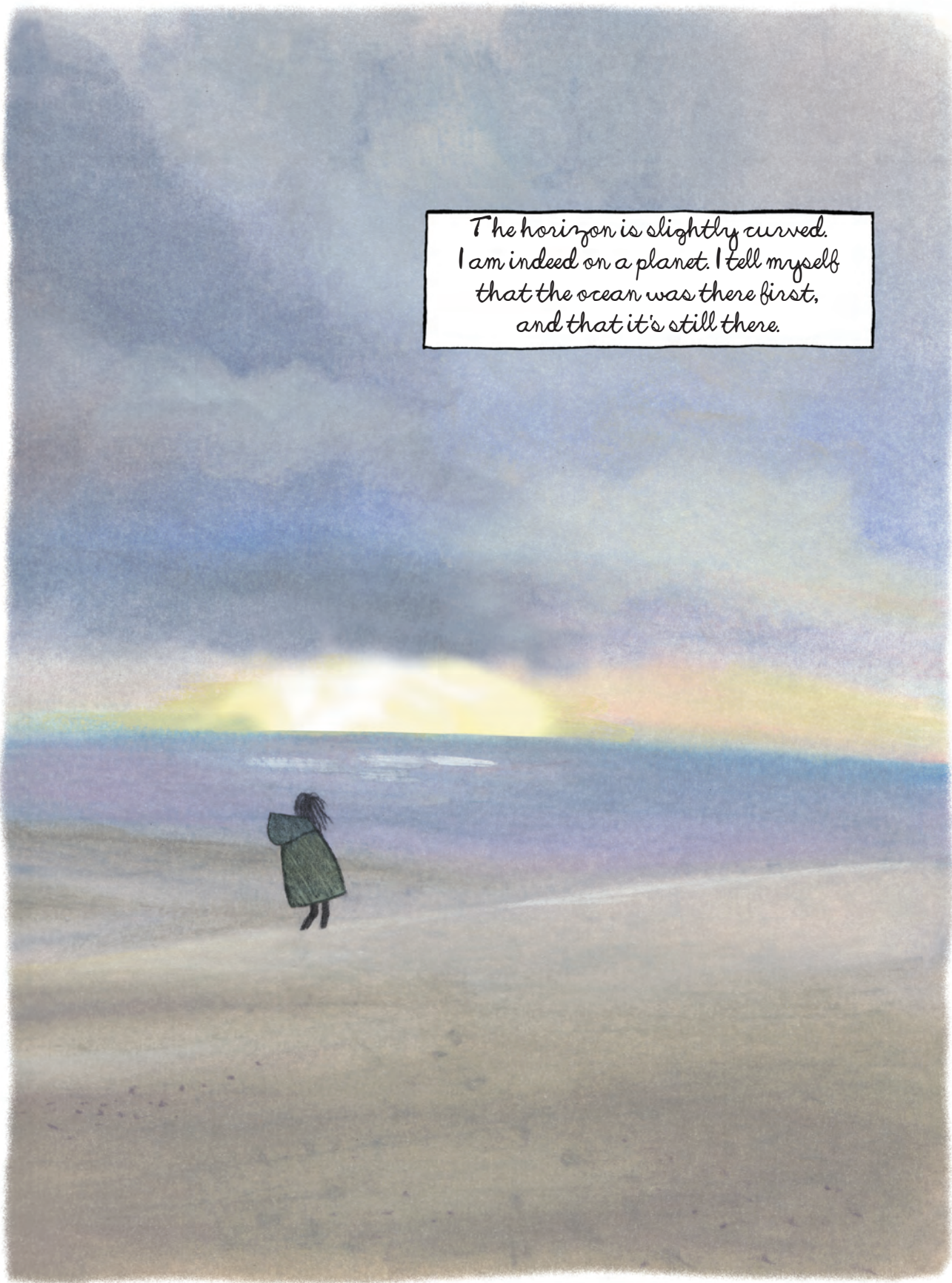
"We have art in order not to die of the truth."
Nietzsche



They say it's 2015, and that
January is nearly over.



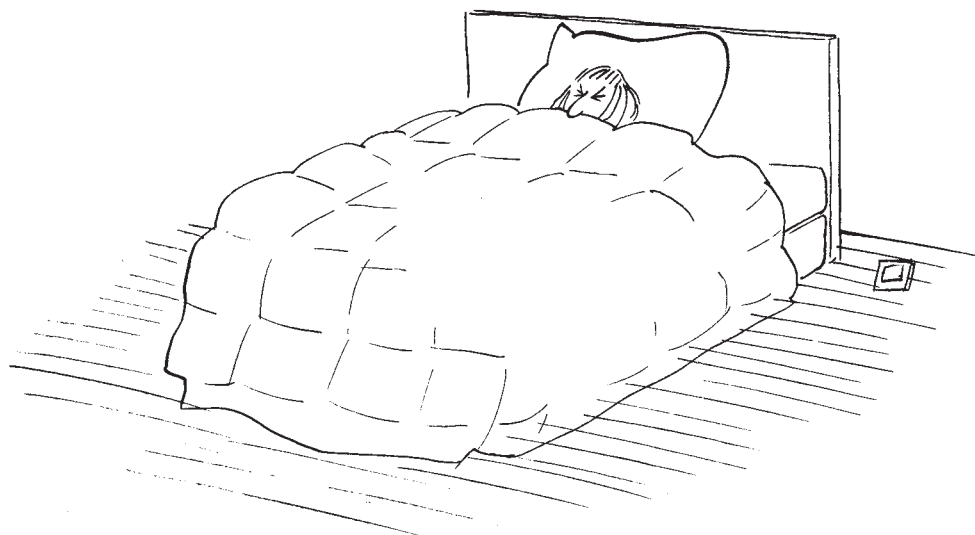
I don't hear them. My body is elsewhere.
Only my eyes exist and seem to want to
escape. I feel like I'm seeing the ocean
for the first time.



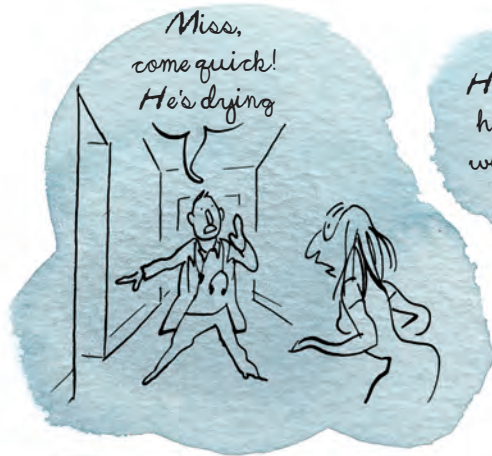
The horizon is slightly curved.
I am indeed on a planet. I tell myself
that the ocean was there first,
and that it's still there.



A few days earlier. January 7.







He wants you by
his bedside. His
wife doesn't know.



Bottling up my love for
you is what is
killing me.



I knew that repressing your
desire would be a ticking time
bomb! My shrink told me

B, after this, you
don't understand that
you should be with me...

No, my love, I prefer
a humble and modest
life to passion...











Get to safety



Try the first door you find.

Not a great way to meet the office neighbors for the first time.



The introductions are soon interrupted.



**TAK
TAK TAK
TAK TAK TAK
TAK TAK
TAK**

They're shooting in the air we can hear their voices



Who are they talking to?? They're shooting in the air



They were just shooting in the air in the newsroom



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Éditions Dargaud:

Drôles de femmes, with Julie Birmant

Éditions Futuropolis:

Moderne Olympia

Éditions Sarbacane:

Mes hommes de lettres

Le Pont des arts

Elza, c'est quand tu veux, Cupidon, with Didier Lévy

Ma tata Thérèse, with Fabrice Nicolino

Éditions Les Échappés:

Savoir-vivre ou mourir

Tout est pardonné, Collaboration

Charlie Hebdo: 1000 unes, Collaboration

Charlie Hebdo, les vingt ans, Collaboration

Encore des nouilles, Collaboration, script by Pierre Desproges

Noël, ça fait vraiment chier !, script by Elsa Cayat

Éditions Marabulles

La Vie de Palais, with Richard Malka

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