

# LES ROULEURS

*Madeleine Monette*

## The Grace of a Flock of Birds

**M**ore than once, she does not admit it with ease, she wished for someone's death. One time would already be too many, even in a short life of thirty something years, but it would never have turned out that way, especially not when she was a child, and it definitely never will – she doesn't have it in her.

Arièle, nicknamed Yell in English since adolescence, to remind her of her ambitions as a singer, of her wide lion's jaw or her piercing soprano, is still shaken by that thought, by the detailed, chilling memories she replays in her head with a lover's sensibility. It's as if, since Mioute appeared in her life, she's been living an opera, sung in endless rounds, simultaneously playing out all the scenes where he appears.

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She's here, it is again and always now, ten o'clock when she goes down into the metro on a muggy May night. She's on her way back from shopping, nervous from having emptied her wallet, but happy with the free lipstick that she got by purchasing a moisturizer, and especially with the black satin slip bought on sale that she will wear as a summer dress. On the platform she walks towards a noisy group of teenagers, attracted by their dark effervescence. Amidst the tedium of the station, they huddle together and seem unwilling to move unless in formation, protective of their complicity. Heads bent with mistrust, they are nevertheless animated in a continuous and loose bustle, seething with shoves and insults.

One by one they cast a glance in her direction, more concerned with their surroundings than they let on. Their baggy clothes, oversized hooded jackets and jeans, with the crotch hanging between the knees and legs overflowing onto the ground, stretch their silhouettes in all directions, distorting them like shadows. But all Arièle sees there is false listlessness, pretensions of carelessness or indifference, as shown by the occasional sharpness of their stares, the reticence or the defiance worn on their fresh faces, still exuding childishness.

Momentarily distracted, perhaps by her skin-tight black clothes and her long legs, by the whiteness of her somewhat thick and slightly bared waist, flashes of flesh pierced by a hollow navel, they must think her to be much too old for them, even if their curiosity isn't extinguished altogether. She stops as near to them as she can without making them nervous, brushes against the ruckus of their voices that erupt loudly, voices too deep that must always catch them off guard, as disproportionate as those enormous feet below their bodies.

The voice, she muses, sometimes the budding of youth and a harbinger of virility, sometimes a gushing fountain tasting of earth or deep sea, other times a fermenting wine. Waiting in the metro does that to her, causes her to seek out images that have nothing to do with anything and draw her back into herself. Without warning, these images unlock reality as if by breaking in, little doors banging against her senses.

During a sudden silence heavier and more motionless than a blatant scheme, the boys remind her of basketball players who, at the beginning and end of games, grab each other by the waist and gather in a huddle, giants who pray to the god of jump shots, dribbling and speed. Ever since the figure of a magnificent black athlete in blue jersey and shorts was wrapped around her building and the window of her bedroom, thrusting himself toward the sky and pivoting like a dancer with powerful and muscular grace, she is born again every morning from this hero's rib, nestled just beneath his thorax. She also browses the sports pages where he may appear in tremendous effort or gliding toward the basket, his picture accompanied by a piece about another indiscretion – drunk driving or a bar fight. Sometimes, she even leaves the television on during basketball games to watch, distractedly, the tall players with bare shoulders, the quick fakes, the explosive hits, the wild leaps, the trash talking, unable to forget where most of them come from, the pride of the projects. On the lookout for her player, she envies them especially, these survivors or those rescued by the spotlight, for their fits of sulkiness, the volcano of their childhood bursting out in violent pouts.

Without worrying, nor feeling herself targeted, Arièle imagines the boys ready to scatter and carry out a scheme, a silly little plot that will make them laugh later on, until she hears the screech of the coming train. Turning to face the headlights shining from the tunnel, she is seized by one of those fits of dizziness born in her left ear, at least according to the doctors. She is late getting into the car, each step even less sure than it would be at the bottom of a pool, her head feeling detached from her neck with vertigo. After entering through the same door as the boys, who threw themselves in a bunch on the two long opposing benches, she takes a seat among them, instead of distancing herself out of respect for their group. At first, in a forced calm, they hold themselves back from acting out, then one of the braver ones makes a crack as if her presence didn't disturb him, setting the tone.

Her lightheadedness past, Arièle observes them at leisure, with an air of neutrality, just a normal metro rider. As she openly listens to their energetic exchanges, soon unable to resist their impudence and to hide the smile creeping over her face, they also begin to address her indirectly, on the lookout for any hint of amusement.

The first one who spoke in front of her, a boy with stringy brown hair, seems now fully aware of her inclinations as a spectator and satisfied with her slightest reaction. He likes the fact that she has taken an interest in them and that she dares trying to appeal to them, that much is clear. Probably stronger than he looks, he could turn his lack of experience into a powerful asset, a counter-argument. At the risk of not having the group's approval and even of upsetting some of them, he lets it slip that they are going to the Rip. It's two stops away, she should come too. There's no alcohol there, he warns her. Just a juice bar and a DJ.

He's got some nerve, this guy, and he's not joking around. His straightforward invitation wasn't even an attempt to seduce her, he could care less if he's rejected, but his friends stop and stare, grinning incredulously. She intrigues them more than ever now and they savor the tension in the air, uncertain of how the night will end.

Arièle is flattered, even if, as always, she was won over beforehand. Just as she tosses her head back, laughing to herself, a new wave of dizziness overtakes her. Oh! Sharp movements like that must be avoided; as if she had only that to do, to think of her ear. But the car suddenly breaks apart, spins around her, comes back together, the flying pieces settle down again, the walls realign themselves, and send the boy back to his seat, his arms planted on either side of him. Arièle pauses to let him figure out that she's more delighted than surprised and, not wanting to spoil anything, she gently shakes her head no. If only he sensed just how moved she is, struck speechless by his attitude, so much bolder than hers, by his body still without too much experience and too many lies, his body that has all the rights of a man, despite his age.

The little tornado passes, the wind dies without changing anything in the boys' behavior, not towards her or among themselves. They must know and understand each other without speaking, Arièle thinks to herself, they must circle around the city with the grace of a flock of birds. What's more, she begins to find their behavior likeable, with the concerns of well-raised, well-educated kids, sweet rebels without real fears, even when they speak of knives and zip guns. Perhaps they know what fear is, perhaps they're used to cold stares of raging hatred that reduce life to nothingness, but for the moment they simply imitate the behavior of kids from the tough neighborhoods, if not more specifically from the black ghettos, setting themselves apart without feeling that they're in danger.

Feigning nonchalance, they all stand up at the very last minute when the car doors slide open, as if the most lethargic one would win a prize. They leap from the car, purposely making a ruckus with disruptive shouts of "okay, guys!" and some even take the time to grab on to a pole and swing around it before landing on the platform.

The brown-haired boy stands facing Arièle. Suspended amid a thousand repressed impulses, he's going with the flow. She knows full well that it's now or never; even so, he doesn't owe her such respect.

"Last call?" he offers in English to sound more casual.

With his tall body towering over her, as playful as he is a player, he ignores the pressing need to leave the car. But Arièle does not answer, will not answer. She lingers in the pleasure of her refusal, her face raised towards him.

His jacket is open over a t-shirt that shows a strong neck, a hairless jaw.

"So that's a no?" he says, shaking his head. Then, walking on air, he leaps up to narrowly slip through the doors' sharp edges, with exact precision, despite his oversized clothes.

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As the train leaves again, Arièle turns back to see the gang scale a staircase—large, vague shapes on comically shortened legs, with huge puffed up sneakers on. Not far behind, the brown-haired boy runs up to his friends, without rushing too much, in wide, relaxed steps. He's probably already thinking about the girls at the Rip, they too bundled in dark hoodies or checkered shirts, their hips and breasts concealed, but their hands sporting silver rings, their lips crimson.

Out of habit, Arièle sits back down at the end of her empty bench, where only one person can sit next to her. At that same instant she is surprised to notice a boy who didn't leave with the others, surely younger by a few years, his hair shaggy from being combed by hand, his face tired. Sitting at an angle, one knee folded and a sneaker resting on the seat, its untied lace dangling, he focuses on the dizzying blur of the tunnel with a frozen stare; or maybe he is hypnotized by the graffiti scratched into the window, the only permanent graffiti left. First Arièle thinks they forgot him here, but then she decides that he wasn't one of them.

In his men's leather jacket looking like a soft armor on him, with its large cuffs rolled-up to his knuckles, his faded red t-shirt with a gaping collar, his necklace made of knots in a string, his fingernails black with filth, and the dejected look of one cast aside, he travels on his own.

Alone with him, Arièle feels comfortable enough to take off one of her boots scorching her sockless feet. She is not near her stop, and she is too excited to give into the usual dullness, the somnolence. Before long, this boy with puffy eyes as if lined with cushions of blue water and too little to hang around in the metro so late, strikes her as one of those children, hardened too early, and too shrewd, lacking innocence. And so he joins the tall brown-haired boy whose presence is still palpable, making a scene resurface from the previous year in which Sami, a handsome seventeen-year old Iranian who kissed her at length one night in a noisy, crowded bar, will reign forever.

She sees herself running off again, her heart in a flutter and in danger, throwing herself into the deserted street, laughing out loud from drunkenness and luck, from her frivolousness that hadn't harmed anyone but had been so beneficial to her, for the determined youth had displayed discreet treasures of passion to seduce her, with all the spirit he had in his gut.

Arièle closes her eyes, once again desirable in her own mind. This memory comes back to her not so much because of that child with thick hair like the feathers of a raven, who puts on the airs of a man, but rather because of the atmosphere of playful desire that lingers in the train. Oh, that tall brown-haired boy, let's hope they take good care of him at the Rip.

At the first connection to the west, where three lines meet, the train is slow to depart again. As the doors begin to close, a sudden jolt of panic stirs the child who hurries to stop them with a brooding and stubborn energy. Determined not to miss his stop, he tears himself from the sliding bite of the doors, which, in the end, release their grip on him entirely and remain open for another moment. It's then that Arièle notices that he left something behind, a colorful duffel bag or a schoolboy's backpack covered in stickers; she hardly has time to get a good look, she's already calling out for him to wait as she pounces on the shapeless object, which weighs almost nothing and seems empty.

Instantly a great wave engulfs the floor, but Arièle still lunges toward the exit, among a blossom of shattered panels as if in the middle of a giant kaleidoscope, keeping her neck as straight and rigid as possible. On the brink of nausea, one hand on her ailing ear, she prepares to run after the kid to return his bag, when she realizes that she's only wearing one shoe.

"Wait! You forgot something!" she yells while turning back to grab her boot, as frantic as if the train car were really about to explode, rattled by having to act quickly.

Meanwhile the doors hiss and close in a muffled thud, so that Arièle bumps into the panes of glass, her shoe and shopping bag in one hand, and the cold backpack pressed against her chest. A second before, she saw the boy leap over one of the turnstiles to exit the station, agile despite his short height, maybe used to jumping over them to get in without paying; now, she can't guess where he went.

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Arièle collapses on the bench. The kid's bag is a backpack after all, covered with peeling stickers, leather, with holes in the bottom, a shapeless bag probably filled with little nothings. Disappointed in letting the boy get away from her, Arièle tells herself that she'll still try to give him back his belongings if she finds his address. The bag is old, so filthy that she doesn't even want to undo the buckle and open the flap, especially since this kid is a total stranger, as if that made his filth more off-putting...

From the grubby bottom of the bag, she takes out a plastic wallet with worn-out pockets, a keychain with a black dog charm, a walkman with a tangled cord, an unlabeled, blank cassette, half a bar of chocolate, a felt-tip pen, and some coins. Among a bunch of crumpled papers, she finds a pale and faded grocery list, directions signed “your mother”—as if written before leaving, scribbled lines grouped together in stanzas, and about twenty dollars. Arièle thought that she had gotten hold of a school bag, but there’s nothing school-related in it. An expired metro card, dirty with sticky gray stains, is stuck to a library card with a barcode and an illegible signature. Underneath, a small card softened by time provides a last name. The exact address and first name are faint, disintegrated in the folds of the tattered cardstock; the house number is invisible, but the street transports Arièle to the outskirts of the city. The bag seems to belong to a Chalioux kid on Darmon Street.

Lifting her head, certain she’s missed her stop, Arièle doesn’t know where she has ended up. She should have gotten off after the boy, right at the following stop, but she let herself be distracted by her Good Samaritan’s intentions, by her investigation. Patiently, she rearranges her purchases and packs the satin slip on top of the makeup, then slides her new possession into the shopping bag. She’ll see what she can do with it, but for now, she’d rather not have to touch it again.

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*Les Rouleurs*, chapter 1, “Les souplesses d’une nuée d’oiseaux”.

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(Inédit)