

Excerpt from *Max (Six Women, Six Loves, One Century)* by Max Orths
Translated from German by Lucy Jones
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A jungle. Damp leaves, bushes even, on the uneven ground. Putrid, musty air. The screeches of birds and monkeys. Snarling – a jaguar perhaps? A snapping noise as you felt your way forwards. On the ceiling, twelve hundred coal sacks. The animal noises were coming from a tape recorder. Everything was taking place in the Galerie Beaux-Arts, a Parisian exhibition in rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. Organised by André and Paul. Sixteen display mannequins formed the guard of honour. A black sack hung over Hans Arp's mannequin. Her name was *Butterfly*. Max had dressed a *Merry Widow*. With purple panties. Inside the purple panties was a flashing light bulb. André Breton had insisted on removing the light bulb. There had been a violent argument between him and Max. But today André was not there. And there were no lights on today. Today the gallery was in pitch darkness. Today it was pointless to stand in front of the pictures; today the pictures could only be imagined. Today and here, it wasn't about the exhibits; today it was all about the people, and one person in particular – a woman. Yes, today it was hellishly dark. Today you only had your sense of touch to rely on. The general public was not allowed to enter. This was a private function. It had all been devised by Max and Marcel Duchamp. Marcel, for artistic reasons: what an act of rebellion! An exhibition in which *you can't see a thing!* Not a single picture! Max, by contrast, had his personal reasons.

“Wish me luck,” said Max.

“Chop-chop!”

“Is everyone inside?”

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“Everyone,” said Marcel.

“And Marie-Berthe?”

“Gone.”

“To Lourdes?”

“To Lourdes.”

“Then let the games begin.”

Et voila. L'entrée. Max entered the room last. From the light into darkness. His eyes, he thought, first had to get used to the dark. But he was wrong. They didn't get used to anything. The decorators had done a good job. The blackness completely blocked everything out. Endlessly. There was nothing for the eye to fix on. Marcel had switched off the tapes with the animal cries. There wasn't a sound, except for the minimal noises the friends made: tired steps, sometimes stifled cries. When two people met. Or bumped into each other. Now and again, whispering. “Only the trace of a softly breathed whisper is allowed!” Duchamp had said. Max closed his eyelids. If you didn't try in the first place to recognise something like a seeing person, your other senses would be more acute. Of this he was convinced. And off he went. It was more difficult than he had imagined. To rely on nothing but your hands. And sense of hearing. He would have preferred to drop onto all fours and crawl like a turtle. Max groped his way along the wall. Here a frame. Max touched the picture gingerly. Carefully. Had no idea what exactly was

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hanging there. Onwards. Then he banged his knee on a coal-stove artwork that was standing in the room. He turned to his right: there, one of the four beds. Onwards. A revolving door. Max passed it to his left. Steps over brittle wood. The twigs under his feet snapped. Max slipped. Damp leaves. His hand splashed into the small pond that had been laid out in the middle. Finally a nearby sound. Another visitor. That felt good. No longer alone and lost in the dark. Who was it? Max stretched out his hands. Touching, picking, stroking: a man with a moustache, aha.

“Salvador?” Max asked.

“Hmm,” the man whispered. “Max?”

“How did you recognise me?” Max whispered back.

“You’re as thin as a skeleton.” And both groped their way on.

Max lurched into Leonor Fini and Meret Oppenheim, two of his ex-affairs, who had linked arms out of fear of the darkness, and who now took Max in a pincer movement from the front. One bit him on the ear, the other pinched him so painfully in his behind that Max cried out, tore away and threw himself onto the ground to belly-crawl out of the danger zone. The brief flash of a grenade, which exploded next to him; soil that tasted like a decaying horse. Onwards. Max ran into a pair of women’s shoes, made his way slowly up, hand over hand: short legs, skirt, a little chubby.

“Lou?” he whispered.

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“Max?”

They embraced.

“Have you seen Leonora?”

“Seen?”

“Heard, I mean.”

“No.”

“And Jimmy?”

“There’s no news.” Onwards.

Here.

Someone else.

A man.

“Hans?”

“Max?”

Hans Arp and Max Ernst embraced briefly.

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“I can see you,” whispered Max.

“In the pitch darkness?” Hans asked.

“In the pitch darkness, everything is shown with its full force and reality.”

“Oh,” Hans whispered. “And how do I look?”

“The very picture of health!”

“Well, that’s very fitting,” replied Arp. “Because you, my dear fellow, look like wilting death.”

Max chuckled.

“I have a huge surprise for you,” breathed Hans. “Go find it yourself. Just now, it was here beside me on my left. Follow the sharp wheezing.”

Max groped to the left, and did indeed hear a wheezing and a grumbling sound that reminded him of a bear he’d once seen with Jimmy at the zoo. Finally he made contact with the creature and ran his hands over it thoroughly: it was fat and round and sweaty. Max smiled as he whispered in the woman’s ear: “Mutter Ey! Finally, a woman in the room who I haven’t slept with!”

“Oh, my little Max,” said Mother Ey. “For my part, I am open to everything, even if I am over seventy.”

Max laughed inwardly and continued on. He had to find her eventually: Leonora. Maybe if he relied on his nose more. He

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no longer let himself be distracted and stopped using his hands. Whoever else crossed his path, Max cast them aside. It became quieter and quieter all around him, the further he advanced into the gallery. Into the jungle of the gallery. He inhaled the air through his nostrils like a horse. And then he did in fact pick up her scent. He detected her smell before he heard her breathing. Or was he imagining it? A smell of earth, bread, flour dust, a hint of vanilla, beer, gasoline, fresh mushrooms, butter and cherry? And curd soap. But those were all just words, a poor substitute for that scent, not smell. Her breath came quickly. She must be agitated. She was squatting there, leaning against the wall on the floor. Max sank to his knees. He held out his hand. Put a curl of her hair behind her ear.

Leonora pushed his hand away.

And hit him in the face with the other. As hard as she could.

Max groaned.

“I just had to sort things out,” he said.

“Fonfon had me peeling potatoes every day.”

“The thing with Marie-Berthe.”

“Yesterday I saw a purple pig on the train.”

“But it’s over now. For good. I was just afraid that Marie-Berthe would do someth...”

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“I sang for the whole journey. For ten whole hours. All the way to Paris. I sang in my head. To the outside world, I was quiet.”

“I want to go back with you, Leonora, to the south of Fran...”

“Our attic room is full of spiders, snails and beetles. I cook them every day into a lumpy mash, but there are more and more of them, though I eat like a camel.”

“I know what you’ve been through...”

“You have no idea of the mud between my toes.”

“I have two pictures. Of yours. From rue Jacob. I wanted to surprise you, Leonora. I hung your two pictures here. In the exhibition.”

“I’ve grown my nails.”

“And the stories that you sent me. I have never ... “

“Save yourself the soap. I’m not shaving these days.”

“I showed the stories to a publisher. He’s going to print them. Both of them. This autumn.”

“If you had really read my stories, you’d have boarded the train immediately. To me. Back to me. Instead of sending me a telegram.”

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“Come with your clothes to Paris.” Wasn’t that funny?

“Not in the least.”

“Can we start over again?”

“Here,” said Leonora. “Do you feel that? My hand? My wrist?” Leonora paused, then whispered, “No more handcuffs. I’m now someone without you. I am a dark green pear that has been squeezed out. But there is still a lot of pulp, enough to lure the wasps. But be careful no one stings you, little Max. Otherwise a huge badger will come and flatten you in the end.”

Jimmy arrived in Paris just in time. A couple of Germans tipped his luggage out at the border crossing and trampled through his underwear with their freshly polished boots. Jimmy got away with no more than a fright. And in June 1938, his parents said goodbye to their son. A US visa had finally arrived for him. Max, Lou, Leonora and all their friends from Man Ray to Hans Arp sat in a coffee shop at the station, drinking, smoking and waiting for the boat train that would bring Jimmy to Le Havre. There the MS Manhattan had laid anchor, its destination: New York. Marie-Berthe also turned up. Jimmy had always liked her. A few months ago, Marie-Berthe had not just slipped him a sex mag that he shredded into tatters as if entranced, but she had also sent a woman up to his room who was a specialist in defloration of all kinds. Jimmy went to Marie-Berthe and embraced her.

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Marie-Berthe wept, said she wanted to pray for him, made a sign of the cross on his forehead, but quickly ran away before Jimmy could say anything.

The train arrived.

Max handed Lou a handkerchief. And Leonora stood behind them.

She knew: Now it's my turn. Mine and mine alone.

"On 15 August 1938," according to the land register entry, "Leonora Mary Carrington, born in Clayton Green Chorley (England), living in rue Jacob number 12 in the sixth arrondissement in Paris, bought a house with various ancillary buildings and 260 acres of land in Les Alliberts near Saint-Martin-d'Ardeche for 2,000 anciens francs." Leonora had probably received the money from her mother, who had never wanted to break off contact with her daughter and was secretly in love with the beauty of her son-in-law, Max Ernst, and so was in a good position to understand her daughter. The house purchased was the same small winegrower's house that Max and Leonora had coveted during their summer stay the year before in the hope of living there. A vegetable garden and the pastiche of a vineyard were part of the lands belonging to the house. First, it had to be renovated. And while Chamberlain, Daladier, Hitler and Mussolini signed the treaty which allowed Germany to occupy Czechoslovakia in Bohemia and Moravia, Max and Leonora were sweeping away the cobwebs and examining the old things that had accumulated in the house: nails, keys, hooks, wires, shards, old tools. Max collected them all and did not throw anything away. Even the most dented rod could be used for art. It was an old 17th-century house which had been empty for so long that its condition was worse than

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bad. At least the location promised some peace and quiet. The village was ten minutes away. The house was small and narrow; the kitchen had a crumbling marble floor and a filthy sink. But on the upper floor, a large window had been built into the wall, creating a loggia. It offered a magnificent view of Aiguèze, the nearest village, where their friend Jacques lived, the abbot, with his hunting dog, Talacasse.

Renovating the house was one thing; building a nest was another. It took an artistic transformation. Soon, masks and heads peered out from everywhere; hands, faces, ghosts, sirens and dwarves, cement reliefs, gruesome sculptures on the walls and in niches, a sea god and mermaid figures, which only caused the neighbours to shake their heads. They did not yet know that three of these sculptures would be auctioned fifty years later for three million Swiss francs. There were plenty of paintings in the interior, and a mosaic of bats inlaid into the floor: the old cottage gradually resembled a magician's house. It was as if Max and Leonora were trying to conjure up demonic guards to protect themselves against the stalking Marie-Berthe, who now knew where the two lived. And against Leonora's angry parents. Against quarrels with surrealist friends. And the slowly darkening shadows cast by the changes in Germany and Europe. They built their own world out of stone and cement, using paint and words, their bodies and the things they talked about in their own, slightly quirky sentences, the breath of a secret language which stirred their hearts and let them get carried away. Meaning was not important. When Max and Leonora had had a drink at Fonfon's in the evening, the way back from the village up to their house was a real balancing act. They clung to one another. They staggered. Laughing. Squawking. Babbling nonsense. The stars had dressed up for them. The stumbling couple mostly kept

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their torches turned off. Max did not want to see the black-haired spiders, who crawled along the shore pebbles at night, snuggling up to the leftover warmth from the sun. As a child, Max had once put on his jacket and noticed a shadow on his shoulder. His father Philip had wiped away the shadow with his hand: a fat, brown spider had fallen to the ground, and had scabbled away as quick as a flash. Since then, Max had hated spiders. “Sometimes, when I paint,” he said to Leonora, “I see the spider on my shoulder. But only out of the corner of my eye.”

Max became hooked on Leonora. All through the summer, they often went down to the Ardèche naked. They wore their bathing suits on their heads and fooled around. Before they got into the ice-cold water, they put on their bathing things. Leonora liked to splash about topless. She liked the way her skin went taut and prickled when her nipples became hard. She liked to pose when Max took photographs, always with her beloved post-swim cigarette in her hand. When she got out of the chilly water, she needed something that glowed. Her other hand lay on her lower belly. The winemakers and farmers watched the strange couple. They didn't feel at ease. What they might have thought: *Don't they have anything to do? I mean, how do these eccentrics make a living in the end? OK, they write, they paint, but that doesn't make any real money. For that, they'd have to sell pictures too.*

And yet the winemakers from the surrounding area helped Max and Leonora to cultivate their tiny vineyard. These artists with their unsteady hands: the vintners simply could not stand back and watch. They showed them how to prune the vines, helped them collect snails and spray poison. “Calmness,” said the winemakers, “calmness is a winegrower's first duty.”

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When everything had been prepared, the winemakers left their houses every morning and looked up at the sky to see what the weather was doing. They shook their heads and said, “No, not yet.” Three days would pass. “No, not yet.” Seven days. “No, not yet.” Ten, twelve days would be spent watching the weather, shaking their heads, doing nothing. That seemed to be the winemaker’s most important work. Doing nothing. Waiting. Biding time. Evaluating. Assessing. Reading the signs. Interpreting. Predicting. Prophesising. These winegrowers are alchemists, thought Leonora. But then, suddenly, when the last rays of sun had seeped into the vines, they said “Now!” And then everything happened very fast. At the fastest imaginable speed.

At the end of the year, the highly renowned, fabulously wealthy heir and art collector Peggy Guggenheim came to Paris. Max learned that she was interested in his art. So he travelled with Leonora to the flat in rue Jacob in Paris, which served as a storage room. When Peggy entered the studio, the first thing she noticed was the young, beautiful Englishwoman. Peggy hadn’t been bargaining on this. She was disappointed to meet a young woman at Max’s place. She would have preferred to be alone with him. Peggy was never only interested in a painter’s pictures, but also in the painter himself. She made no effort to hide her disappointment. Her twofold interest turned to defiance: Peggy didn’t buy a single picture from Max, but she did buy one from Leonora. “You two,” said Peggy at the end of her visit with a touch of spite, “remind me of Nelly and her grandfather in Charles Dickens’ *Old Curiosity Shop*.” And then she disappeared.

Max was happy for Leonora, who had sold her painting for a good price, which motivated her. Back in Saint-Martin, she

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went back to the easel and continued painting her chimaeras and horsefish. When the couple managed to sell a couple of paintings, they were able to scrape by. Here in the south of France, they could do whatever they wanted. If Max wanted to spend the whole day playing belote with the old men in front of Fonfon's bar, then he did. And Max became a very good belote player. He didn't spend much time thinking any more. Just took everything as it came. Leonora was there next to him, with him, carved – as he wrote in the foreword to Leonora's book, *House of Fear* – “from the wood of her intensive life, her secrets, her poetry. She read nothing, but drank everything.” While Leonora was eager to learn from Max's techniques, attitudes, composition and colours over the next few months, Max learned from Leonora's physical cleverness and innocent perversion. He learned from her attempts to convert fire, from her obsessiveness, but above all, from her open gaze, which was still unharmed and unscarred by any experience, convention, censorship or tradition. When Leonora wasn't painting, she was writing. The couple would often receive visitors from Paris, who wanted to see with their own eyes the idyll into which the artists had fled. Leonora took over as cook. She presented tinted sago grains to her guests as caviar. And at night, she cut a few hairs from her friends' heads and mixed them into the food the next day, “so that everyone eats a little part of each other,” she said to Max. Leonora wore robes trimmed with lace and frills in an ironic gesture and a pretence of unapproachability. She wrote existential horror stories full of black humour. And one time, when they were feeling particularly irrepressible, they tipped a portion of wet cement onto the garden floor and Max pressed his palms into it, and Leonora her bare feet. Both watched each other as they did it, unable to believe that such a thing existed. Into the late summer of 1939 in the south of France, Max and Leonora celebrated themselves: their bodies,

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their work and the stunning nature around them: the precipitously steep cliffs and vast vineyards of the Ardèche as well as the breathtaking stalactite caves of Aven d'Orgnac and Aven Marzal, which were very close by. Max and Leonora often stood there, spellbound, holding hands and simply looking, listening and breathing.

And Max painted a picture during this time.

He called it *Ein wenig Ruhe* (A Moment of Calm).

On 1 September 1939, he completed the painting. At least the first version.

And then, it suddenly vanished, the moment of calm.

The picture was finished at last. *Ein wenig Ruhe* (A Moment of Calm), at long last. Max liked his inner compulsion to finish things. Without ever being able to do it. He did not know whether it was a strength or a weakness. There was always something to do. Max had learned that from his mother. *Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today*. Because the next day arrives with new pains and troubles. You'll only finish, Max thought, when there is nothing left to go in the cage. Into the ribcage:

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breathing and so on. This would be a nice moment to close your eyes. The picture was very large, uncharacteristic of his work. It hung in a crescent-shaped niche opposite the entrance on the first floor. There was a restlessness in the patterned woods: a fear of everything that was currently going on in the world. In contrast, a colourful bird and a motionless, smiling, yin-and-yang snail, hovering over the chaos: his uplifting time with Leonora? Max hated such explanations. But they sometimes even happened to him too. Attempts at interpretation were attempted murders. Who had said that again? Max put on his sandals and went outside. The summer heat was slowly subsiding, but the earth's crust had soaked up so much sun that Leonora would be able to walk barefoot for a while to come. Max stopped, looked at the flies for a while, and did nothing. Simply nothing.

A few days later, Max slouched down to Fonfon's on his own. When he entered the bar, all eyes turned to face him. The talking stopped. Fonfon beckoned Max towards her. "Come, come," she said. "Where have you been for the last few days? Don't let them spit in your soup. You can't help being German. Listen. Go straight to the hotel. To Malada. There's a message hanging for you there. You have to read it yourself, have to see for yourself, have to know yourself whether to report yourself. Come back later. But go now!"

Max had no idea what was going on. He left the bar. The Hotel des Touristes, the first inn in the village, was always sparkling clean, unlike Fonfon's place. The owner, Madame Malada, jumped up immediately when Max entered the dining room. There wasn't much going on for the time of day. Max was puzzled. "So the artist deigns to set foot in our humble abode instead of Fonfon's hut, as is his wont?" said Madame Malada, chopping up her sentence with meaningless breaks. She was a little too

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fat, but the attempt to conceal her corpulence with tight clothes failed miserably and only made matters worse. Malada wore her hair unfashionably long and tightly tied back. When a strand loosened from her plait, her hand twitched and put it back again. She gave the impression that she would have preferred to cut the stubborn strand off. Under her black blouse, she wore a high-necked white undershirt, which reminded Max of a priest's collar. Her skirt ended chastely below her knee, and her shoes shone as if they were polished three times a day. Yet Madame Malada had put on make-up that was much too provocative. Max had the impression that she wanted to hide her face.

"Take a look," said Madame Malada. "These kinds of things are hanging everywhere now." And she poked her index finger in Max's direction while focusing on the door behind his back. Max turned around. A red poster. An attack. A bulletin. He stepped closer and read. And then he read again. And he felt cold. And he didn't know what to do. In response to Madame Malada's look and her three scattered guests, he merely raised his hands and said, "I am not interested."

"What? Not interested?"

"I have been living in France for eighteen years," said Max. "I feel like a Frenchman. I speak like a Frenchman. I dream in French. I have nothing to do with the Nazis. I have always despised them. I'm... "

"Do you have French citizenship?"

"No."

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“Why not? If you have lived here for eighteen years?”

“Someone was against it.”

“Who?”

“The father of my ex-wife, Marie-Berthe.”

In order to avoid further conversation, Max left the hotel and went back to his house without looking in on Fonfon again. He came up behind Leonora, who was still painting. “If you disturb me,” she said without turning around, “I’ll stick the brush in your eye.”

I finished my picture, he would have liked to say to Leonora, a few days ago, I finished it and now I have time on my hands. But it was very difficult to accommodate two sets of inspiration at the same time. So he went to bed. So early. There was no chance of sleep. He would just lie there and think. And breathe. Calm down. The monotonous metronome of the heart. Instead of sheep jumping over gates, he counted heartbeats in his chest. One, two, three, the strokes of the hammer hitting the chisel; four, five, six, the beating of timpani in Richard Strauß; seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, the beating of pegs that you tied to the vines; forty, fifty, sixty, the hammering of fists on a gate; one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, the hammering of people who want to come in at all costs. Max sat up with a start. Darkness. This hammering had nothing to do with his heartbeat. These beats were not on the inside. They were actually coming from the gate.

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Max switched on the light. Beside him lay Leonora. She, too, woke up.

“What’s the matter?” she whispered.

“They have come,” said Max.

“Who has come?” Leonora cried. “Who?”

Max got out of bed. Shouts were intermingled with the hammering. Max ran down the outdoor staircase, crossed the courtyard and opened the door, bare-chested. Two policemen were standing there. “May we come in?” one asked. His voice sounded quiet, peaceful, unflappable, like the almost dried-up, flat Ardèche after a period without rain. Max let the two men in. The policemen looked around. Leonora stood up on the stairs with a throw wrapped around her and bare legs.

He was sorry, said the policeman, but on the radio and due to the bulletins, it was common knowledge, anyway: all German male nationals had to go to the internment camps.

“What on earth for?” Leonora cried.

“Precautionary measures,” said the policeman. “We are at war. Every German man between seventeen and fifty-five who lives in France is under arrest. For the time being. There might be informers among them, spies. The security of our country is in danger.”

“But my husband is an artist!” Leonora cried.

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“My husband?” Max asked softly and turned towards Leonora, causing him a small stab of pain in his neck.

“He has no interest in politics whatsoever,” said Leonora, ignoring his question, but thought briefly to herself: My husband? Why did I say that?

“I understand that you are upset”, said the police officer. “But please consider our position too.”

“He is a proven anti-fascist!” shouted Leonora.

The policeman fell briefly silent. Then he pointed to the stairs and asked if he could come up. When Max hesitated, the policeman slowly added that he was going to settle the matter in the best way possible, that he was a policeman by vocation, that he cared deeply about every citizen, no matter what his persuasion, that he detested the methods of the German Gestapo, and that therefore he would be grateful if the two of them would come a little in his direction. Max looked at Leonora questioningly; she shrugged, and Max climbed up the stairs in front of the policeman.

“That’s what I thought,” the policeman said when he saw the loggia and looked out at the nearby village. “Do you see that?” he asked Max and Leonora. “The village down there. You know why no one lives there?”

A ghost village, Fonfon had whispered, a ghost village without souls, lost, haunted and deserted.

“All the men of the village died in the First World War,” said the policeman. “And I mean, everyone. My father, too. And my three uncles.”

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Max and Leonora silently looked out.

“And we do not want something like that to happen again. Do you understand that? That is why we are taking precautions. We have not had good experiences. With the Germans.”

Max looked at the policeman for a long time. Then he said, “I’m sorry that I didn’t report to you. I’ll grab a few things. Where are we going?”

My dear friend, it is now II. November 1939, St. Martin’s Day. I can’t go on, I’m going to the dogs, I need your help. I am writing to you without knowing whether this letter will ever reach you. Perhaps I can smuggle it out. In September they brought me to the camp in Largentière. When the commander saw one of my paintings, he hissed: “You have no right! You have no right to paint such pictures!” Now we are in Les Milles. We live like dust on earth. Remember, man, thou art dust, and thou shalt return to the dust. It’s due to the surroundings, a brick factory in Les Milles, a former brick factory near Aue-en-Provence. They brought us here in October. I am number 298. Luckily there are black market traders. So we have access to cigarettes. They took our money. We can pick it up in rations, every fourteen days, but only in small amounts and after queuing for ages. Imagine, we have 77 centimetres space. Lion Feuchtwanger measured it. With a ruler. In the room where we are supposed to

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sleep, we lie side by side, sole to sole and head to head. There is someone lying to your left, to your right, above and below you. Unless you have a place at the edge or in the corner. And then you defend it claw and tooth. Then you can stretch out your hand and touch the porous wall and stroke it or scratch it. Sometimes I lie down in the old kiln: it's a real coffin. Although it was once an oven, it's colder there than anywhere else. I lie on my back, reach my hands upwards and feel the concrete ceiling over me, imagining that I am lying under a layer of earth. Then you're glad of the umpteen human bodies around you, because although they spit, wheeze, snore and stink, they are still alive. Do you know Bellmer? The painter? Hans Bellmer? We get on very well. It's a comfort in these times. The red brick-dust creeps into each and every hole of my old body. I have realised how old I am. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror of a dull window, and I saw creases on my forehead, craters, trenches of death, age is a battle, only the trenches of my creases turn red from the brick dust, we ourselves go to ruins, become ruined human beings, and when a wind kicks up, everything gets even worse, and now the coldness is slowly muddling in with the red. We have a lot of time in the evenings. There are cabaret artists and actors in here too. Do you know the architects Konrad Wachsmann and Werner Zippert? One of them, a Rome Prize winner. The other, the architect of Berlin's Tempelhof airport. Under his leadership, we have built four real latrines; a real fiddle, I tell you. No wonder Tempelhof airport opened so much later than planned. In any case, the ugly holes in the earth into which we used to defecate have disappeared. Hans Bellmer. He painted a portrait. Of me. Did I say that already? And in it, my face is made up of heavy, red briquettes, bricks, bricks, bricks. We ourselves are red on the inside, not only from the dust, but also from the bromine, which is mixed into our food. There is nothing we can do; you have to

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eat bromine along with your food if you do not want to starve, but the bromine dissolves. It not only dissolves our desires and our urges, but also our perception, our joy of life. Red bromine, red chaos, dust, lice, fleas and bedbugs turn red when we kill them. I remember our time in the war. You also cracked lice back then. The French louse, the German louse. They are no different when they're cracked. French heads, the German heads, they both spill out the same brain mass. Are we back there again? Won't it ever stop? I paint-draw. In my every free second. I have no canvases or whatever. I draw with a few pens bought on the black market. I paint on the bottoms of cheese boxes. After every meal, I beg for the men's boxes, because the bottoms of the cheese boxes are chalky white. How beautiful white is. The mother of colours. Without white we would be lost. Without white no birth. White stands for encouragement and incentive. A cue. White has to be loved, even if it makes you tremble. Here, in Les Milles, I must hurry, because if I wait too long, white is impaled by the red which covers everything and disfigures every painting before I have even begun. So I never think when I paint and draw, I start straight away, and I always draw the same thing: I draw Leonora – her head, hair, eyes, and whatever shines behind them, something that I don't know, something unapproachable that I would like to know. It has to do with the madness, I know. I'm afraid of it, I have never told anyone that. I just draw to offset the bromine, to get to my anger, my pain, my desire again. Everything is obscured. I draw to avoid hunger, I draw while the others take their minds off things down in the catacombs, playing cards, dice, lounging around on the rubble which they have piled to make furniture. They rent their newspapers for two francs and stand next to the reader so that the rental time of two minutes is not exceeded by one second. And people chew on rumours like gum, blowing them up, then they

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all burst at some point. I draw. This constant walking and shuffling of the sleepless drives me insane, and when it's windy, the dust is like dragon's breath. If only I could see Leonora. Sometimes a few women walk past the camp, always some distance away. Then the men throng upstairs to the windows, jostling, until they can catch a glimpse of their beloved, no, I haven't seen Leonora, she is not among them. You look forward to your coffee in the morning. But the coffee tastes like the onion soup you spooned down the day before. From the same bowl. And everything tastes of bromide. And I write to ward it off, to ward off the annihilation of desire, I write myself into high spirits and a frenzy, but I know that I'm only pretending because actually, I'm numbed, a *Loplop* in shackles who knows he's going to nosedive because his wings won't open. How is your poetry coming along? Shall I tell you where the word *Loplop* comes from? I know now, I know! I haven't told anyone yet. Oh no, this letter isn't the right place. I'll tell you later. I'm going to withdraw from the others. I'm glad I have my black cape. They call me *The Knight of Sad Countenance*. I call myself *The Knight of Gruesome Violence*. But there are some that I feel drawn to. Hardekopf, a young poet, with whom I discuss Gide, Malraux, Maupassant, Zola. Malraux. Malraux! Do you remember, dear Paul, we, Gala and I, in Saigon? And we had no idea that Malraux was so close by, incarcerated, as I am now. How many things do you think we don't know? Especially now, at the very second that I'm writing to you? What's happening at the same time? Who is dying and being born, who is having a brilliant idea? While I sit here, transforming red morsels into writing, our Gala is in New York buying a new lipstick and someone is inventing a bomb that marks the end of humanity. What do we know after all? We only see our own horizon. We are only men who rush to the windows when their women appear on a dusty road. We are only men who call

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out to women things which they can never understand, because the distance is far too great. We are just men, Paul. Without everything. I love you, yours, Max.