

# THE SHEPHERD'S WAGON

*(Proust's favorite poem)*

## LETTER TO EVE

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If your heart, groaning under the weight of our life  
Scrabbles and struggles like a wounded eagle  
Carrying on its wing, shackled like mine,  
A whole world (deadly, crushing and frozen);  
If it beats only to bleed from its undying wound,  
If it no longer looks at love, its constant star,  
Shining for it alone on the hazy horizon;

If your soul in chains, as mine is,  
Tires of its chains and its bitter bread  
Drops its oar out of grief on the slave ship,  
Bends its pale head and weeps into the sea  
And while searching for an unsuspected route through  
the waves  
Shudders to see on its naked shoulder  
The law of society seared with a brand;

If your body trembles from secret passions,

If it bridles, timid and fluttering, under invasive stares,  
If it seeks to hide its beauty in deep, dark places  
In order to throw off the insulting stalker;  
If your lips go dry from poisonous lies,  
If your beautiful face blushes from the dreams  
Of a randy stranger who ogles you and eavesdrops on  
you;

Then leave bravely, leave behind all the towns;  
Stain your feet no longer with the dust of the road,  
From the height of the mind's eye, view the servile cities  
As murderous sites of human enslavement.

The great woodlands and fields are vast sanctuaries  
As open and free as the sea circling somber islands.  
Walk through the fields with a flower in your hand.

Nature awaits you in austere silence; the grass  
Greets your feet with its cloud of evening shadows  
And the sigh of adieu from the sun to the earth  
Makes the gracious lilies sway like censers.  
The forest has veiled its darkening columns,  
The mountain recedes, and the willow has draped  
Its pristine vestments over the pale waters.

Your friend, dusk, drops to sleep in the valley,  
On the emerald grass, on the lawn of gold,

Below the bending rushes of the faraway spring  
And the dream-filled woods that glimmer along the  
horizon;  
Dusk sways as it flees through the wild grapes,  
Flings its grey cloak onto the riverbank  
And (as darkness falls) sets the prison door ajar with  
night flowers.

On my mountain there's dense heather  
That hunters' tracks can hardly penetrate.  
The hedge's head lifts higher than our brows  
And guards both herdsman and stranger at night;  
Come here to keep love and your divine fall out of sight;  
If the grass is parted, or isn't tall enough,  
I'll roll the Shepherd's Wagon here for you.

With its four smooth wheels, it takes its time,  
Its roof no higher than your eyes and your brow;  
Your coral lips and the hue of your cheeks  
Tint the carriage at night and its silent axles.  
The threshold is scented, the alcove spacious and dark.  
And here in the shadows, amid the flowers, we'll find  
A silent bed as our hair flows together.

We'll go, if you like, to the snow lands  
Where the star of love devours us and glitters,

To those the wind buffets, those besieged by the sea,  
And those where the black pole lies cursed beneath the  
ice.

We'll follow the wandering byways of chance.

What does the day mean to me? What does this world  
mean?

I'll say they're lovely when your eyes will have told me  
so.

May God guide the tumultuous steam to its goal  
On the iron rails that cross the hills,  
May an Angel stand over its clangorous forge  
When it goes underground or rattles the bridges  
And, while fiery fangs devour its boilers,  
It pierces through cities and jumps rivers  
Faster than a stag in the fury of its leaps.

Yes, if the blue-eyed Angel doesn't watch over its route  
And sweep forward, wielding his broad sword in  
defence,

If he hasn't kept count of the shifts of the brake, if he  
doesn't attend

To each turn of the wheels on its triumphant course,  
If he doesn't mind the steam and keep raking the coals;  
It will always take only a child's pebble on the track  
To blow the magic firebox up to smithereens.

Man has mounted too soon onto this bull that smokes,  
Blows and bellows. No one knows yet  
What storms this brutish, blind beast bears within.  
Yet the carefree traveller trusts it with his treasure;  
He casts his aged father and his children as hostages  
Into the fiery belly of the Carthaginian bull  
That spits them out as ashes, at the feet of Mammon.

But we have to triumph over time and space,  
Succeed or die. The merchants are envious of the gold  
Raining down from the coals of the engine passing by;  
The present moment and ambition are our universe.  
Everyone has said: "Let's go!" —but no one is the master  
Of the roaring dragon some genius brought to life;  
We've been deceived by something stronger than us all.

Ah, well! May everything be free to move about,  
May the big concerns launch stocks on wings of fire,  
As long as the seller's roads are open still  
To noble goods and meet the passions' needs.  
May Commerce, its caduceus raised high, be blessed,  
If Love, tormented by an anxious thought,  
Can cross two countries in a single day,

But, unless a friend in danger for his life

Enlists us with a cry devoid of hope,  
Or France's bugle summons us to the glories  
Of combat, to the battles for knowledge;  
Unless, on her deathbed, a mother in tears  
No longer wants to lay those sad, sweet eyes—  
Never to be seen again—on her beloved brood,

Let's avoid these rails without charm. — A trip  
On their iron lines flies by just as fast  
As an arrow, shot through empty space,  
Whistles through the air from bow to mark.  
Flung into the distance, a human being  
Neither breathes nor sees in all of nature anything  
But a choking cloud of smoke split by lightning.

You'll never hear the smart clip-clop of a horse  
Prance off pavement hot as fire;  
Farewell to leisurely trips, to hearing distant sounds,  
To the passerby's laugh, to axle repairs,  
Unexpected detours around all kinds of slopes,  
A friend encountered, the hours flown by,  
The hope of arriving, late, in a wild locale.

Distance and time have been defeated. Science  
Draws a bleak, straight road around the earth.

The World has shrunk through our experience  
And the Equator's nothing more than a ring that's too  
tight.  
Nothing's left to chance. Each passenger will glide in  
line,  
In the only seat assigned to them at the start,  
Immersed in cold and quiet calculation.

Reverie—in love and at peace—will never see  
Its pure foot shackled there, without horror;  
Because it needs to cast a long look  
At every visible object, such as a river in flood;  
May it question all things with anxiety  
And, delving into divine mysteries,  
Stride, stop and stride with its collar lifted.

—Alfred de Vigny, 1844  
(translated by Edmund White  
and Paul Eprile)