

vituperates against the clumsy zeal of the maids: “Those blockheads stuck the apricots right against the cold roast pork!” Still, she condescends to offer me a gloved paw, and I surmise that she’s smiling at me with a deep-sea diver’s grace. Maggie, barely awake, slowly becomes conscious of the outside world and smiles in English. We know all that she’s hiding under her long overcoat, a bathing outfit right out of a vaudeville routine (the shrimp-fishing scene). The Silent One, who speaks not a word, smokes energetically.

8:45 A.M.—On the flat road that twists unnecessarily and hides, around each bend, a peasant and his cart, Marthe, at the wheel, brakes a bit suddenly and grumbles in her diving suit.

8:50 A.M.—Sharp turn, peasant and cart. Lurch to the left. Marthe yells, “Cuckold!”

9:00 A.M.—Sharp turn: in the middle of the road, a little boy and his wheelbarrow full of manure. Lurch to the right. Marthe just brushes the kid and yells, “Cuckold!” Already? Poor kid.

9:20 A.M.—The sea, to the left, between the rounded dunes. And that sea is even farther out than it was yesterday evening. My companions assure me that while I was dozing it rose right up to that fringe of pink shells, but I don’t believe it for a minute.

9:30 A.M.—The Shacks! Three or four black coffins made of tarred planks stain the dune, the dune of a sand so pure here, so delicately mammillated by the wind, that it makes you think of snow, of Norway, of lands where winter never ends.

Without moving, yet rolled,
The fine sand hollows out an alcove
Where, despite the cries of the mauve
Seagull, one can hide, and the dune molds
A bed in its charming folds,

murmurs The Silent One, a modest poet. Marthe, excited, leans over the wheel and... sinks two of the car’s tires. Faster than a little bulldog, she jumps out, gauges the damage, and calmly declares: “This spot is good, anyway. Farther up the road I couldn’t turn.”

We arrive at the end of the earth. The dune, completely naked, shelters between its rounded knees the black

shacks, and in front of us lies the desert that deceives and fortifies, the desert under a white sun, its gilding washed out by the mist of hot days.

10:00 A.M.—“Papuan Tribe Conjuring the Spirit of the Bitter Waters”—that’s the caption I’ll write on the back of the snapshot that Maggie just took. The “natives,” with heads like wet seals, in the water up to their waists, strike the sea with long poles, howling rhythmically. They beat the fish into a net stretched across an elongated lake, a huge arm of the sea abandoned here by the tide’s neglect. Brill are swarming there, and bay shrimp, and flounder, and sand dabs. Marthe flings herself out and digs around the moving sand banks like a good ratter. I imitate her, first taking tentative steps, because all my skin bristles to feel passing between my ankles something flat, alive, and shiny.

“Get it, get it! Good God! Can’t you see it?”

“What?”

“A sand dab, a sand dab, right there!”

There? Yes, a flat plate, covered in mother-of-pearl, that flashes and escapes between two waves. Heroically I search the sea bottom, down on all fours, flat on my belly, dragging along on my knees. A quick yelp: Marthe cries out in triumph and her streaming arm raises the flat plate that writhes and lashes. I’ll die of jealousy if I come back empty-handed. Where is The Silent One? The coward, he’s fishing with a shrimp net. And Maggie? She’s fine, she’s swimming, only worried about her figure and her suit of raspberry silk. I’m only competing against Marthe—Marthe and her cap of red hair stuck to her head, Marthe knotted up in a huge blue jersey, a little sailor with a round behind. The creatures, the creatures, I can sense them, they’re mocking me. A large sand eel in mother-of-pearl flashes from the soft sand, draws in the air a sparkling monogram with its serpent’s tail, and dives back down.

11:00 A.M.—The Papuan tribe has finished its conjuring. The Spirit of the Bitter Waters, responsive to ritual howling, has filled their nets to the brim with flat fish. On the sand, still held captive in the tarred mesh, the beautiful, suffering plaice, with their very moving bellies; the insipid flounder; the brill indelibly spattered with blood. But I only want the prey hunted down by my own flayed hands, between my knees scraped by sand and sharp shells. The brill, I know it now, it’s a big canary that nosedives between my ankles drawn together and gets jammed there—

SEFLA JOSEPH

Beach House, 2014
Acrylic on Canvas, 60 x 90 in



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