

"The Argentine Adolfo Bioy Casares is an urban comedian, a parodist who turns fantasy and science fiction inside out to expose the banality of our scientific, intellectual, and especially erotic pretensions. Bioy makes us laugh at our foibles with an affectionate yet elegant touch. . . . Behind his post-Kafka, pre-Woody Allen sense of nonsense is a metaphysical vision, particularly of life's brevity and the slippery terrain of love."

—SUZANNE JILL LEVINE

Jorge Luis Borges declared *The Invention of Morel* a masterpiece of plotting, comparable to *The Turn of the Screw*. This fantastic exploration of virtual realities also bears comparison with the sharpest work of Philip K. Dick. It is both a story of suspense and a bizarre romance, in which every detail is at once crystal clear and deeply mysterious.

Inspired by Bioy Casares's fascination with the movie star Louise Brooks, *The Invention of Morel* has gone on to find such admirers as Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, and Octavio Paz. As the model for Alain Resnais and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Last Year in Marienbad*, this classic of modern Latin American literature also changed the history of film.

"*The Invention of Morel* may be described, without exaggeration, as a perfect novel. . . . Bioy Casares's theme is not cosmic, but metaphysical: the body is imaginary, and we bow to the tyranny of a phantom. Love is a privileged perception, the most complete and total perception not only of the unreality of the world but of our own unreality: not only do we traverse a realm of shadows, we ourselves are shadows."

—OCTAVIO PAZ

Cover photograph: Louise Brooks, publicity still, 1927
Cover design: Katy Homans

US \$12.95 / CAN \$16.95 / £7.99 UK

ISBN 978-1-59017-057-1



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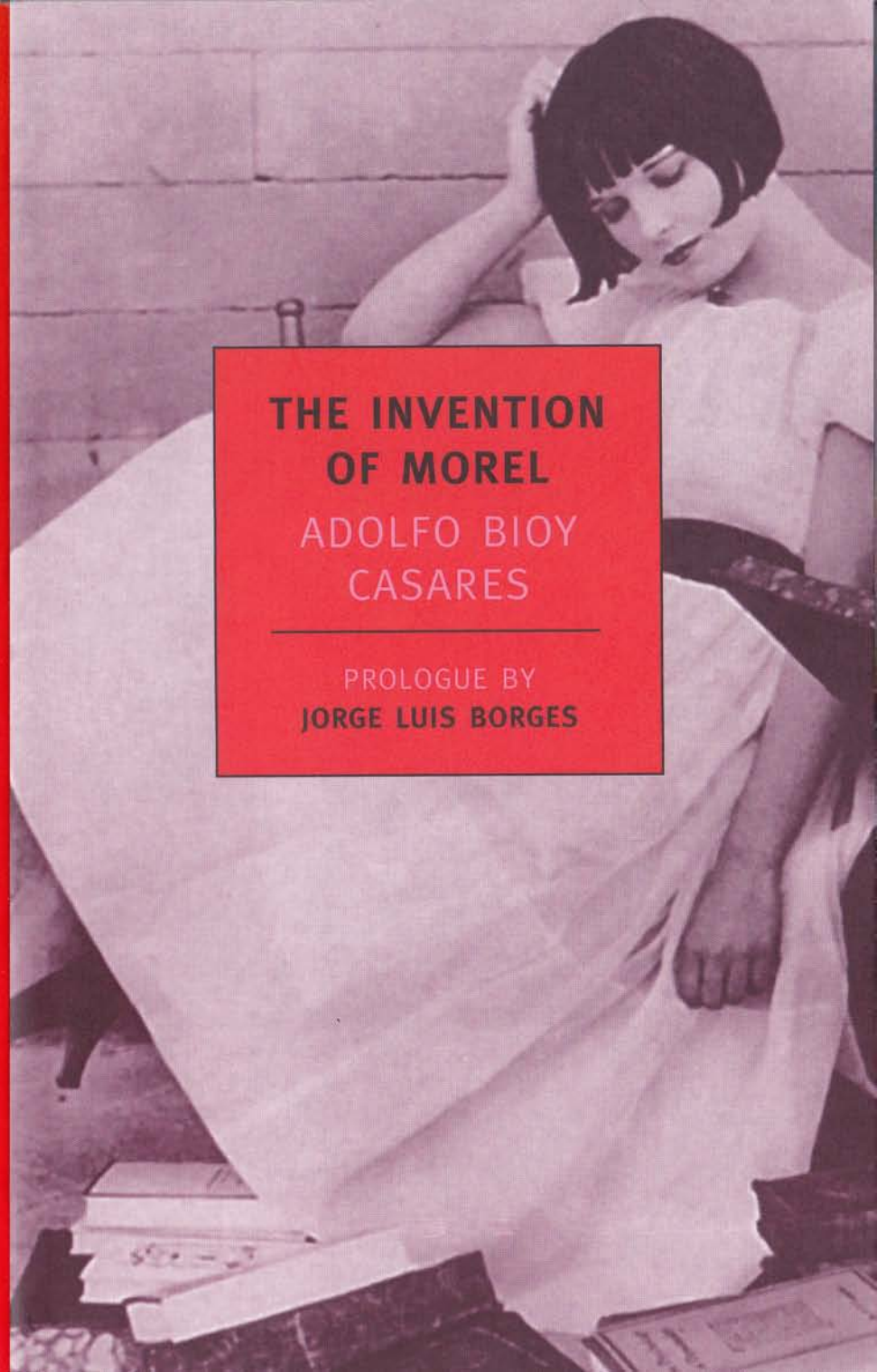
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CLASSICS

FICTION

THE INVENTION OF MOREL

ADOLFO BIOY CASARES

PROLOGUE BY
JORGE LUIS BORGES



THE INVENTION OF MOREL

TODAY, on this island, a miracle happened: summer came ahead of time. I moved my bed out by the swimming pool, but then, because it was impossible to sleep, I stayed in the water for a long time. The heat was so intense that after I had been out of the pool for only two or three minutes I was already bathed in perspiration again. As day was breaking, I awoke to the sound of a phonograph record. Afraid to go back to the museum to get my things, I ran away down through the ravine. Now I am in the lowlands at the southern part of the island, where the aquatic plants grow, where mosquitoes torment me, where I find myself waist-deep in dirty streams of sea water. And, what is worse, I realize that there was no need to run away at all. Those people did not come here ready bathed in perspiration again. As day was breaking, I awoke to the sound of a phonograph record. Afraid to go back to the museum to get my things, I ran away down through the ravine. Now I am in the lowlands at the southern part of the island, where the aquatic plants grow, where mosquitoes torment me, where I find myself waist-deep in dirty streams of sea water. And, what is worse, I realize that there was no need to run away at all. Those people did not come here on my account; I believe they did not even see me. But here I am, without provisions, trapped in the smallest, least habitable part of the island—the marshes that the sea floods once each week.

I am writing this to leave a record of the adverse miracle. If I am not drowned or killed trying to escape in the next few days, I hope to write two books. I shall entitle them *Apology for Survivors* and *Tribute to Malthus*. My books will expose the men who violate the sanctity of forests and deserts; I intend to show that the world is an implacable hell for fugi-

page; yesterday I had no inkling of what was going to happen. There are so many things to do on this lonely island! The trees that grow here have such hard wood! And when I see a bird in flight I realize the vastness of the open spaces all around me!

An Italian rugseller in Calcutta told me about this place. He said (in his own language): "There is only one possible place for a fugitive like you—it is an uninhabited island, but a human being cannot live there. Around 1924 a group of white men built a museum, a chapel, and a swimming pool on the island. The work was completed, and then abandoned."

I interrupted him; I wanted to know how to reach it; the rug merchant went on talking: "Chinese pirates do not go there, and the white ship of the Rockefeller Institute never calls at the island, because it is known to be the focal point of a mysterious disease, a fatal disease that attacks the outside of the body and then works inward. The nails drop off the fingers and toes; the hair falls out. The skin and the corneas of the eyes die, and the body lives on for one week, or two at the most. The crew of a ship that had stopped there were skinless, hairless, without nails on their fingers or toes—all dead, of course—when they were found by the Japanese cruiser *Namura*. The horrified Japanese sank their ship."

But my life was so unbearable that I decided to go there anyway. The Italian tried to dissuade me; but in the end I managed to obtain his help.

Last night, for the hundredth time, I slept in this deserted place. As I looked at the buildings, I thought of what a laborious task it must have been to bring so many stones here. It would have been easy enough—and far more practical—to build an outdoor oven. When I was finally able to sleep, it was very late. The music and the shouting woke me up a few hours later. I have not slept soundly since my escape; I am sure that if a ship, a plane, or any other form of transportation had arrived, I would have heard it. And yet suddenly, unac-

countably, on this oppressive summerlike night, the grassy hillside has become crowded with people who dance, stroll up and down, and swim in the pool, as if this were a summer resort like Los Teques or Marienbad.

From the marshlands with their churning waters I can see the top of the hill, and the people who have taken up residence in the museum. I suppose someone might attribute their mysterious appearance to the effect of last night's heat on my brain. But there are no hallucinations or imaginings here: I know these people are real—at least as real as I am.

The fact that their clothes are from another era indicates that they are a group of eccentrics; but I have known many people who use such devices to capture the magic of the past.

I watch them unwaveringly, constantly, with the eyes of a man who has been condemned to death. They are dancing on the grassy hillside as I write, unmindful of the snakes at their feet. They are my unconscious enemies who, as they corner me against the sea in the disease-infested marshes, deprive me of everything I need, everything I must have if I am to go on living. The sound of their very loud phonograph—"Tea for Two" and "Valencia" are their favorite records—seems now to be permanently superimposed on the wind and the sea.

Perhaps watching them is a dangerous pastime: like every group of civilized men they no doubt have a network of consular establishments and a file of fingerprints that can send me, after the necessary ceremonies or conferences have been held, to jail.

But I am exaggerating. I actually find a certain fascination in watching these odious intruders—it has been so long since I have seen anyone. But there are times when I must stop.

First of all, I have so much work to do. This place could

kill even a seasoned islander. And I have not been here long; I have no tools to work with.

Secondly, there is always the danger that they may see me watching them, or that they may find me if they come down to this part of the island; so I must build some sort of shelter to hide in.

And, finally, it is very difficult for me to see them. They are at the top of the hill, while I am far below. From here they look like a race of giants—I can see them better when they approach the ravine.

Living on these sandbanks is dreadful at a time like this. A few days ago the tide was higher than any I have seen since I came to the island.

When it grows dark I make a bed of branches covered with leaves. I am never surprised to wake up and find that I am in the water. The tide comes in around seven o'clock in the morning, sometimes earlier. But once a week there are tides that can put an end to everything. I count the days by making gashes in a tree trunk; a mistake would fill my lungs with water.

I have the uncomfortable sensation that this paper is changing into a will. If I must resign myself to that, I shall try to make statements that can be verified so that no one, knowing that I was accused of duplicity, will doubt that they condemned me unjustly. I shall adopt the motto of Leonardo—*Ostinato rigore*—as my own, and endeavor to live up to it.

I believe that this island is called Villings, and belongs to the archipelago of the Ellice Islands.¹ More details can be obtained from the rug merchant, Dalmacio Ombrellieri (21 Hyderabad Street, Ramkrishnapur, Calcutta). He fed me for

1. Doubtful. He mentions a hill and several kinds of trees. The Ellice, or Lagoon, Islands are flat. The coconut is the only tree that grows in their coral sands. (Editor's Note.)

several days while I hid in one of his Persian rugs, and then he put me in the hold of a ship bound for Rabaul. (But I do not wish to compromise him in any way, for I am naturally very grateful to him.) My book *Apology for Survivors* will enshrine Ombrellieri in the memory of men—the probable location of heaven—as a kind person who helped a poor devil escape from an unjust sentence.

In Rabaul, a card from the rug merchant put me in contact with a member of Sicily's best-known society. By the moon's metallic gleam (I could smell the stench of the fish canneries), he gave me instructions and a stolen boat. I rowed frantically, and arrived, incredibly, at my destination (for I did not understand the compass; I had lost my bearings; I had no hat and I was ill, haunted by hallucinations). The boat ran aground on the sands at the eastern side of the island (the coral reefs must have been submerged). I stayed in the boat for more than a day, reliving that horrible experience, forgetting that I had arrived at my journey's end.

The island vegetation is abundant. Spring, summer, autumn, and winter plants, grasses, and flowers overtake each other with urgency, with more urgency to be born than to die, each one invading the time and the place of the others in a tangled mass. But the trees seem to be diseased; although their trunks have vigorous new shoots, their upper branches are dry. I find two explanations for this: either the grass is sapping the strength from the soil or else the roots of the trees have reached stone (the fact that the young trees are in good condition seems to confirm the second theory). The trees on the hill have grown so hard that it is impossible to cut them; nor can anything be done with those on the bank: the slightest pressure destroys them, and all that is left is a sticky sawdust, some spongy splinters.

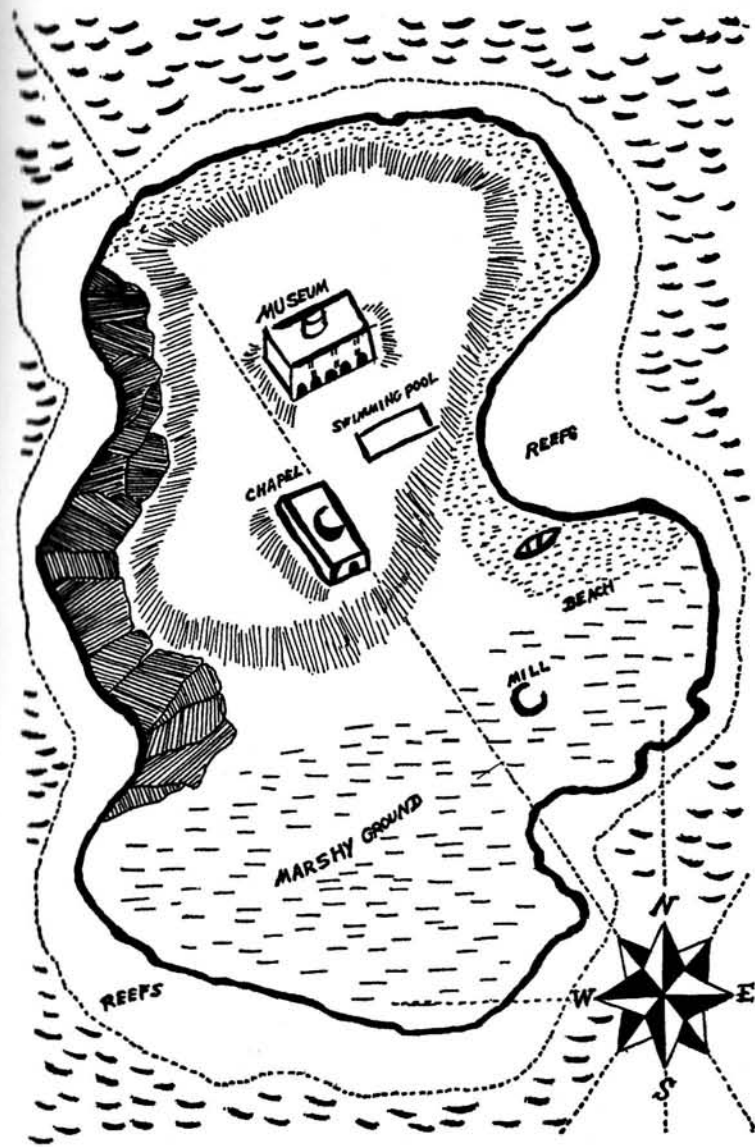
The island has four grassy ravines; there are large boulders in the ravine on the western side. The museum, the chapel, and the swimming pool are up on the hill. The buildings are modern, angular, unadorned, built of unpolished stone, which is somewhat incongruous with the architectural style.

The chapel is flat, rectangular—it looks like a long box. The swimming pool appears to be well built, but as it is at ground level it is always filled with snakes, frogs, and aquatic insects. The museum is a large building, three stories high, without a visible roof; it has a covered porch in front and another smaller one in the rear, and a cylindrical tower.

The museum was open when I arrived; I moved in at once. I do not know why the Italian referred to it as a museum. It could be a fine hotel for about fifty people, or a sanatorium.

In one room there is a large but incomplete collection of books, consisting of novels, poetry, drama. The only exception was a small volume (*Bélicor, Travaux: Le Moulin Perse, Paris, 1737*), which I found on a green-marble shelf and promptly tucked away into a pocket of these now threadbare trousers. I wanted to read it because I was intrigued by the name *Bélicor*, and I wondered whether the *Moulin Perse* would help me understand the mill I saw in the lowlands of this island. I examined the shelves in vain, hoping to find some books that would be useful for a research project I began before the trial. (I believe we lose immortality because we have not conquered our opposition to death; we keep insisting on the primary, rudimentary idea: that the whole body should be kept alive. We should seek to preserve only the part that has to do with consciousness.)

The large room, a kind of assembly hall, has walls of rose-colored marble, with greenish streaks that resemble sunken columns. The windows, with their panes of blue glass, would reach the top floor of the house where I was born. Four alabaster urns (six men could hide in each one) irradiate electric light. The books improve the room somewhat. One door



opens onto the hall; another opens onto the round room; another, the smallest one, is concealed by a screen and opens onto a spiral staircase. The principal staircase is at the end of the hall; it is elegantly carpeted. There are some wicker chairs in the room, and the walls are lined with books.

The dining room measures approximately forty feet by fifty. There are three mahogany columns at each side, and each group of columns supports a stand with a figure of a seated divinity that appears to be Indian or Egyptian, of ocher terracotta. Each god is three times larger than a man, and is garlanded by dark plaster leaves. Below them there are large panels with drawings by Foujita, which present a discordant aspect (because of their humility).

The floor of the circular room is an aquarium. Invisible glass boxes in the water incase the electric lights that provide the only illumination for that windowless room. I recall the place with disgust. Hundreds of dead fish were floating on the water when I arrived, and removing them was an obnoxious task. Now, after letting the water run for days and days, I can still smell the odor of dead fish when I am in the room (it reminds me of the beaches in my country, where huge quantities of fish, dead and alive, emerge from the water to contaminate the air, and receive a hasty burial at the hands of the outraged populace). The lighted floor and the black-lacquer columns around it give one the impression of walking magically on top of a pool in the midst of a forest. This room adjoins the large room, or assembly hall, and a small green room with a piano, a phonograph, and a screen of mirrors, which has twenty panels or more.

The rooms are modern, pretentious, unpleasant. There are fifteen suites. Clearing mine out completely made only a slight improvement. There were no more paintings by Picasso, or smoked crystal, or books inscribed by famous people, but still I felt wretched and uncomfortable.

On two occasions I made discoveries in the basement. The first time I was looking for food—the provisions in the storeroom were growing scarce—and I found the power plant. Walking through the basement, I noticed that the skylight I had seen outside, with thick panes of glass and iron grating, partly hidden by the branches of a cedar tree, was not visible from the inside. As if I were involved in an argument with someone who insisted that the skylight was not real, that I had dreamed it, I went outside to see whether it was really there.

It was. I returned to the basement and after some difficulty I got my bearings and found, from the inside, the place that corresponded to the skylight's position. I looked for cracks, secret doors. The search was to no avail, for the wall was smooth and very solid. I thought that the wall must surely conceal a hidden treasure; but when I decided to break the wall to see what was behind it I was motivated by the hope of finding, not machine guns and munitions, but the food I needed so desperately.

I removed an iron bolt from the door, and with increasing weariness, I used it to make a small opening in the wall: a blue light appeared. I worked with a kind of frenzy and soon I made a hole large enough to crawl through. My first reaction was not disappointment at finding no food, or relief at recognizing a water pump and a generator, but ecstatic, prolonged amazement: the walls, the ceiling, the floor were of blue tile and even the air itself (in that room where the only contact with the outside world was a high skylight obscured by the branches of a tree) had the deep azure transparency of a waterfall's foam.

I know very little about motors, but even so I was not long in getting them started. Now when the rain water is all gone I can turn on the pump. It surprises me that the machines are

relatively uncomplicated and in good condition and, especially, that I knew what to do with them. But I was not completely successful and I have come to feel, more and more, that perhaps I may never be. For I have not yet been able to discover the purpose of the green motors, in the same room, or the reason for the mill wheel I saw in the lowlands at the southern tip of the island (it is connected to the basement by an iron pipeline, and if it were not so far from the coast I should imagine it had something to do with the tides; could it possibly charge the storage batteries of the power plant?). My ineptitude makes me very frugal; I turn on the motors only when it is absolutely necessary to do so.

But once I had every light in the museum burning all night long. That was the second time I made discoveries in the basement.

I was ill. I hoped that I might find a medicine cabinet somewhere in the museum. There was nothing upstairs, so I went down to the basement and—that night I forgot my sickness, I forgot the horrible, nightmarish existence I was leading. I discovered a secret door, a stairway, a second basement. I entered a many-sided room, like those bomb shelters I have seen in movies. The walls were covered with strips of a material that resembled cork, and with slabs of marble, arranged symmetrically. I took a step: through stone arches I saw the same room duplicated eight times in eight directions as if it were reflected in mirrors. Then I heard the sound of many footsteps—they were all around me, upstairs, downstairs, all through the museum. I took another step: the sounds faded away, as if they had been muffled. (It reminded me of the way a snowstorm on the cold highlands of my Venezuela deadens all the noises within earshot.)

I went upstairs, back to the silence, the lonely sound of the sea, the quiet movement of the centipedes. I dreaded an invasion of ghosts or, less likely, an invasion of the police. I stood behind a curtain for hours, perhaps minutes, irked by

the hiding place I had chosen (I could be seen from the outside; and if I wanted to escape from someone in the room I would have to open a window). Then, mustering my courage, I searched the house, but I was still uneasy, for there was no mistake about it: I had clearly heard myself surrounded by moving footsteps all through the building, at different levels.

Early the next morning I went down to the basement again. The same footsteps seemed to surround me again, some close, others farther away. But this time I understood them. Annoyed, I continued to explore the second basement, intermittently escorted by the diligent swarm of echoes, many dimensions of the same echo. There are nine identical rooms in the second basement, and five others in a lower basement. They appear to be bomb shelters. Who built this place in 1924 or thereabouts? And why did they abandon it? What sort of bombings were they afraid of? And why should men who could plan such a well-constructed building make a shelter like this, which tries one's mental equilibrium: when I sigh, for example, I can hear the echoes of a sigh, both near and faraway, for two or three minutes afterward. And when there are no echoes, the silence is as horrible as that heavy weight that keeps you from running away in dreams.

From my description the attentive reader can obtain a list of more or less startling objects, situations, facts; the most startling of all, of course, is the sudden arrival of the people who are up on the hill as I write. Are these people connected in some way with the ones who lived here in 1924? Did these visitors build the museum, the chapel, the swimming pool? I find it difficult to believe that one of them ever stopped listening to "Tea for Two" or "Valencia" long enough to design this building, which abounds in echoes, but which is bombproof.

One of these people, a woman, sits on the rocks to watch the sunset every afternoon. She wears a bright scarf over her dark curls; she sits with her hands clasped on one knee;

her skin is burnished by prenatal suns; her eyes, her black hair, her bosom make her look like one of the Spanish or gypsy girls in those paintings I detest.

(Although I have been making entries in this diary at regular intervals, I have not had a chance to work on the books that I hope to write as a kind of justification for my shadowy life on this earth. And yet these lines will serve as a precaution, for they will stay the same even if my ideas change. But I must not forget what I now know is true: for my own safety, I must renounce—once and for all—any help from my fellow men.)

I had nothing to hope for. That was not so horrible—and the acceptance of that fact brought me peace of mind. But now the woman has changed all that. And hope is the one thing I must fear.

She watches the sunset every afternoon, from my hiding place I watch her. Yesterday, and again today, I discovered that my nights and days wait for this hour. The woman, with a gypsy's sensuality and a large, bright-colored scarf on her head, is a ridiculous figure. But still I feel (perhaps I only half believe this) that if she looked at me for a moment, spoke to me only once, I would derive from those simple acts the sort of stimulus a man obtains from friends, from relatives, and, most of all, from the woman he loves.

This hope (although it is against my better judgment) must have been whetted by the people who have kept me away from her: the fishermen and the bearded tennis player. Finding her with the latter today annoyed me; of course I am not jealous. But I was not able to see her yesterday either. As I was on my way to the rocks, the people who were fishing there made it impossible for me to come any closer. They did not speak to me, because I ran away before they saw me.

I tried to elude them from above—impossible. Their friends were up there, watching them fish. The sun had already set when I returned: the lonely rocks bore witness to the night.

Perhaps I am leading myself into a blunder that will have dire consequences; perhaps this woman, tempered by so many late afternoon suns, will betray me to the police.

I may be misjudging her; but I cannot forget the power of the law. Those who are in a position to sentence others impose penalties that make us value liberty above all things.

Now, harassed by dirt and whiskers I cannot eradicate, feeling inordinately the weight of my years, I long for the benign presence of this woman, who is undoubtedly beautiful.

I am certain that the greatest difficulty of all will be to survive her first impression of me. But surely she will not judge me by my appearance alone.

There were three large floods in the past two weeks. Yesterday I almost drowned. The water catches me off guard. I studied the marks on the tree, and calculated the tide for today. But if I had been asleep early this morning I would be dead now. The water rose swiftly with that unusual intensity it has once a week. I cannot account for these surprises; they may be due to mistakes in my calculations, or to a temporary change in the schedule of the high tides. If the tides are always subject to such variations, life in this area will be even more precarious. But I shall survive it. After all, I have been through so much already!

I was sick, in pain, feverish, for a long time; very busy trying not to die of hunger; unable to write (and hating my fellow men).

When I arrived at the island, I found some provisions in the storeroom of the museum. In a very old, charred oven I made an inedible bread of flour, salt, and water. Before very long I was eating flour out of the sack (with sips of water). I used everything that was there, including some spoiled lamb tongues. I used up the matches, allowing myself just three a