Literary history has not known what to make of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, nee Marie Felicite Josephe Desbordes. Born in 1786 at Douai in Flanders, she has been forgotten, rediscovered, and forgotten again. Shortly after her death Jules Janin remarked that she had already been forgotten. "Forgotten by whom, I ask you?" said Baudelaire. "By those who, feeling nothing, remember nothing." He said, "No poet was ever more natural; none was ever less artificial. No one has been able to imitate that charm, for it is entirely original and naive."

If scholars have not known what to make of her works, they have been understood by poets. Her poetry is visionary, as Rimbaud's would be. It is Mallarme's language that does not refer but is. Her poetry has the living immediacy of a lyric by Verlaine. Desbordes-Valmore's "Dans la Rue," a realistic description of the aftermath of a massacre in Lyon, must surely have been read by Rimbaud before he wrote the poem he titled "Le Mal."

Rimbaud brought her poetry to the attention of Verlaine. Proust, by way of Montesquieu, discovered her poems and borrowed the name Albertine for his novel. His reveries about "young girls in blossom" evoke the wonderful opening lines of Desbordes-Valmore's "Intermittent Dream of a Sad Night":

Land of our fathers where at eventide
Across the fields like waves young women glide!

Yves Bonnefoy in his edition of Desbordes-Valmore's poems suggests a reason for their neglect. In France poetry is still being read from the point of view of Romanticism, which remains "the greatest example of poetry that is profoundly masculine," impendous to the breakthrough her poetry represents, rejecting illusion and "the pretensions of the Me that are typical of Romanticism."

Desbordes-Valmore would look back at her childhood as idyllic. The people were attached to
simple things and led uneventful lives. There were four children. Their father painted cabinets and made church ornaments. But Joseph Desbordes lost his clientele in the Revolution—the Terror came even to Douai and the church porch was destroyed. The Desbordes family was reduced to poverty.

In her autobiographical novel, The Studio of a Painter, Desbordes-Valmore tells how a swallows' nest is broken and the mother takes refuge on a neighboring roof. The father of the four young birds flies plaintively around her, then returns and takes the children one by one and throws them in the courtyard where they die. Marceline adds, "a short time after, I took ship with my mother, only my mother—to America--where no one was expecting us." The mother, Catherine Desbordes, decided to go to Guadeloupe where she had a cousin who was a rich planter. Apparently she was planning not to return. Her oldest daughter, Marceline, now fifteen, did not want to be separated from her. They spent a few months putting together enough money for the journey. They had a long, rough crossing, and arrived in Guadeloupe to find that there was an epidemic of yellow fever and that the rich cousin had just died. In a fortnight Catherine Desbordes, too, died of the fever. Her daughter managed to survive for eight months in the strange country where she knew no one. Sainte-Beuve says that she endured "frightful sufferings."

Marceline returned to her father's house in Douai. She had had some experience of acting and was engaged by the local theater, then by the theater in Rouen. She succeeded rapidly and acted often in Paris. She was also writing poems that were published in song books and almanacs.

In 1808 Marceline met Henri de Latouche. He was the editor of Andre Chénier's poems and had adopted Romantic attitudes. He was the kind of poseur who would be satirized by Flaubert in Madame Bovary as the clerk Leon. To impress Emma, Leon says that he likes to lie with a book by a wood and watch the sunset. He says that he adores the sea and mountain scenery. And Emma is . . . impressed. In Desbordes-Valmore's poems Latouche appears as "Oliver," who did not reciprocate her love. He came and went—in her poems one can almost hear him saying, "I won't be tied down." And yet she loved him . . . he was charming. Two years after their meeting she had a child by Latouche, a boy who died at the age of five.

Latouche would be a formative influence. She would be disillusioned, not with romance but the fake versions of feeling that Romanticism provided. Her experience of Latouche gave her poetry about love its realism. To love can be painful . . . love and sorrow at the loss of love are inseparable. But there is another side to this—as she says in "Intermittent Dream of a Sad Night," if love brings sorrow, sorrow brings with it the memory of love. The love restored in memory may be lifted to an overview that is religion, philosophy, or art. It is a consoling thought, and I do not think anyone else has stated it so succinctly. Proust says as much, but he is not succinct.
The man with whom Marceline made her life was very different from Latouche. Prosper Lanchantin, known as "Valmore," was an actor, a man of the theater, "without any mystery," Yves Bonnefoy remarks, "and even without much charm." As an actor he was sometimes whistled and Marceline had to reassure him.

She would speak in letters of "the friendship of marriage." This does not mean that it was a "loveless marriage"—it just wasn't a Bovarist's idea of love. She and her husband shared the hardships of a life in the theater, moving from place to place and not having a home of their own. There were days when money was lacking, and there were children to be cared for. There were days when Marceline was too pressed to write and her talent seemed to be going to waste. But her poems reflect a capacity for love that grew stronger with the passing of time.

In 1819, two years after they were married, she published her first book of poems, Elegies, Marie et Romances. The forms and style of her early poems are conventional—she is limited by what is expected of women. The religion she expresses is the Christianity that advises women to be resigned. But there are flashes of poetry in her descriptions of ordinary things. "My soul," she writes, "still like a bird skimmed the days as they passed."

Her strength is in the mature poems, where she speaks of a life close to nature. The central impulse is love of the father whose house she left as a girl to begin her terrible journey. The fields and woods of Douai were an extension of her father's life. She writes about the place of her birth as though it were a living thing. The sensual or erotic passages are not merely personal, they do not announce a "secret of the flesh." They are fused with the cry of a bird, the sound of a brook, "the gifts of life that men and women share and that ceaselessly the dream abandons but love renews."

Dans la rue

par un jour funèbre de Lyon

Dans la rue

La femme

Nous n'avons plus d'argent pour enterrer nos morts.
Le prêtre est là, marquant le pris
des funérailles;
Et les corps étendus, troués par les
mitrailles,
Atteendent un linceul, une croix,
un remords.

Le meurtre se fait roi. Le
vainqueur siffle et passe.
Ou va-t-il? Au Trésor, toucher le
prix du sang.
Il en a bien versé... mais sa main
n'est pas lasse;
Elle a, sans le combattre, égorgé le
passant.

Dieu l'a vu. Dieu cueillait comme
des fleurs froissées
Les femmes, les enfants qui
s'envolaient aux cieux.
Les homes... les voila dans le sang
jusqu'aux yeux.
L'air n'a pu balayer tant d'âmes
courroucées.
Elles ne veulent pas quitter leurs members morts.
Le prêtre es là, marquant le prix des funérailles;
Et les corps étendus, troués par les mitrailles,
Attendent un linceul, une croix, un remords.

Les vivants n'osent plus se hazarder à vivre.
Sentinelle soldée au milieu du chemin,
La mort est un soldat qui vise et quie délivre
Le témoin révolté qui parlerait demain. . .

Des femmes

Prenons nos rubans noirs,
pleurons toutes nos larmes;
On nous a défendu d'emporter nos meurtris.
Ils n'ont fait qu'un monceau de leurs pales debris:
Dieu! bénissez-les tous; ils étaient tous sans armes!

In the street
on a day of funerals at Lyon

The woman

We have run out of money to bury our dead.
The priest is there, figuring what the price will be,
And the corpses stretched out, holed by artillery,
Want a shroud, a cross, remorseful words to be said.

Murder is king. The victor whistles as he goes
To the Treasury, to be paid for blood he shed.
He has shed plenty, but his hand is not tired
From fighting. There was no fighting at all, God knows.

God picked up each soul like a perishing flower.
Women and children went flying up to the skies,
And men...there they are, in blood up to their eyes.
Angry souls, too many to be borne by the air.

They don't want to leave their members behind, the dead.
The priest is there, figuring what the price will be,
And the corpses stretched out, holed by artillery,
Want a shroud, a cross, remorseful words to be said.

Those who are still alive do not know where to go.
A paid sentinel in the middle of the way,
Death is a soldier who aims and they take away
The rebel who would stand witness tomorrow.

Women
Let us take our black ribbons, and wear one on the arm. 
It has been forbidden to take the pale remains 
Of our murdered. They have heaped them on the stones. 
God bless them all! They were all of them unarmed. 

Les roses de Saadi 

J'ai voulu ce matin te rapporter des roses; 
Mais j'en avais tant pris dans mes ceintures closes 
Que les noeuds trop serré n'ont pu les contenir. 

Les noeuds ont éclaté. Les roses envolées 
Dans le vent, á la mer s'en sont toutes allées. 
Elles ont suivi l'eau pour ne plus revenir. 

La vague en a paru rouge et comme enflammée. 
Ce soir, ma robe encore en est toute embaumée... 
Respires-en sur moi 'l'odorant souvenir. 

The roses of Saadi
The knots burst. All the roses took wing,
The air was filled with roses flying,
Carried by the wind, into the sea.

The waves are red, as though they are burning.
My dress still has the scent of the morning,
Remembering roses. Smell them on me.

I wanted to bring you roses this morning.
There were so many I wanted to bring,
The knots at my waist could not hold so many.
N'écris pas ces doux mots que je n'ose plus lire:
Il semble que ta voix les pand sur mon cœur;
Que je los vois brûler à travers ton sourire;
Il semble qu'un baiser les empreint sur mon Coeur.
    N'écris pas!
The beloved one's picture in the handwritten word.

Do not write!

Do not write those gentle words that I dare not see,
It seems that your voice is spreading them on my heart,
Across your smile, on fire, they appear to me,
It seems that a kiss is printing them on my heart.

Do not write!

La couronne effeuillée

J'irai, j'irai porter ma couronne effeuillée
Au jardin de mon père où revit toute fleur;
J'y répandrai longtemps mon âme agenouillée:
Mon père a des secrets pour vaincre la douleur.

J'irai, J'irai lui dire, au moins avec mes larmes:
«Regardez, j'ai souffert. . . » il me regardera,
Et sous mes jours changés, sous mes pâleurs sans charmes,
Parce qu'il est mon père il me reconnaîtra.

Il dira: «C'est donc vous, chère âme désolée!
La terre manqué-t-elle à vos pas égarés?
Chère âme, je suis Dieu: ne soyez plus trouble;
Voici votre maison, voici mon
Coeur, entrez!»

O clémence! ô douceur! ô saint refuge! ô père!
Votre enfant qui pleurait vous l'avez entendu!
Je vous obtiens déjà puisque je vous espère
Et que vous possédez tout ce que j'ai perdu.

Vous ne rejetez pas la fleur qui n'est plus belle,
Ce crime de la terre au ciel est pardonné.
Vous ne maudirez pas votre enfant infidèle,
Non d'avoir rien vendu, mais d'avoir tout donné.

Withered laurel

I shall go, I shall take my withered laurel
To his garden where the flower lives again.
I shall pour my soul out to him as I kneel:
My father has secret ways of
healing pain.

I shall go, I shall tell him at least with tears,
"Look, I have suffered." And he will see.
Under my changed days and the pallor of years, Because he is my father he will know me.

He will say, "There you are at last, dear sadness!
Do you still yearn for the earth you used to roam?
Dear soul, I am your God. Now be at peace:
Here is my heart, come in! Here is your home!"

O mercy! Sweetness! Holy refuge!
Father,
You listened to your daughter when she wept!
I hoped for you and so already have you,
And everything that I have lost you kept.

You will not reject what is not beautiful:
Heaven pardons what the world
holds criminal.
You will not damn your child who was unfaithful,
Not for having nothing, but for giving all.

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