

The Measure of All Things

by

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DESCRIPTION

The search for the meter found more than the meter.

CHARACTERS

- PIERRE-FRANÇOIS-ANDRÉ-MÉCHAIN
- JEAN-BAPTISTE-JOSEPH DELAMBRE
- BARBE-THÉRÈSE MÉCHAIN
- THE FRENCH REVOLUTION/THE SPANIARDS/THE SAVANTS OF EUROPE/THE STARS
-- flexible crowd numbers. One of them will play NAPOLEON BONAPARTE.

THE ACADEMY

- DOUBLING: two will play DEZAUCHE and the BARON in Scenes 1 and 7; all will play the Exhumed Kings in Scene 3; one will play TRANCHOT in Scene 4
- TALLEYRAND
- CONDORCET
- LALANDE
- BORDA
- LAPLACE

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SCENE 1

September 20, 1804. Early morning. A sickroom in Castellón de la Plana, near Valencia, Spain.

PIERRE-FRANÇOIS-ANDRÉ-MÉCHAIN in the sickbed, propped up, sleeping. A.-M. DEZAUCHE is by his bedside, writing in a journal. BARON DE LA PUEBLA enters. DEZAUCHE rises.

DEZAUCHE: Baron --

BARON: Good morning.

DEZAUCHE: Morning, yes --

BARON: And?

DEZAUCHE: Not well, Baron -- not doing well --

BARON: No, I can see that. It seems this kind of fever either leaves you alone after it touches you or it rips you apart.

DEZAUCHE: I am not willing to guess.

BARON: But you're not a doctor, either, are you.

DEZAUCHE: Baron, I mean no disrespect, but I don't have to be a physician to see what's in front of me.

BARON: Proves nothing. Eyes -- not always reliable. Has he been bled?

DEZAUCHE: The leeches sing him thanks.

BARON: There's a distrust in your voice.

DEZAUCHE: I don't trust butchery.

BARON: So, I've hired butchers?

DEZAUCHE: These "cures" -- bleeding, blistering -- like the Inquisition --

BARON: You're free to say whatever you want here, but I'd still be careful --

DEZAUCHE: I'm sorry -- it's been a long night.

BARON: For everybody.

BARON points to the journal.

BARON: What are you --

DEZAUCHE: I'm cleaning up the calculations. Whether he lives or dies --

BARON: The calculations will live on.

DEZAUCHE: Yes, always.

BARON: If they're right, that is.

DEZAUCHE: Why would you think --

BARON: Have you ever known anything humans have done that has been done without mistakes?

DEZAUCHE: The triangulations have been very precise. He is a very precise man --

BARON: But accurate?

DEZAUCHE: It's the same --

BARON: I can be very precise and still be dead wrong: "I've cut the board twice now and it's still too short."

DEZAUCHE: Not the time for mock[ery] --

BARON: On the other hand, for truth --

MÉCHAIN: My venerable host is right.

DEZAUCHE: Oh, good good -- you're awake -- don't speak -- you need to --

MÉCHAIN: Don't speak? -- don't speak? -- what've I got to lose? I've been not-speaking for days -- at last a clear moment -- I'm dying -- isn't that the truth?

BARON: All are dying, Pierre -- the only difference is the rates.

MÉCHAIN: Fast track for me. Slippery. Downhill. Don't speak -- don't speak --

Transition. MÉCHAIN throws off the covers, gets out of bed. The rest of the scene goes away.

MÉCHAIN: What a miserable way to end a life -- my life -- fevered and shitting myself in Spain -- and the doctors! Bleeding me, the Spanish fly blistering my neck. I'm French and dying in Spain. I've discovered eleven comets, and my eyes are crusted shut with rheum. I'm a scientist, priest of precision, and a mistake -- an error -- is killing me off.

MÉCHAIN changes out of his sick clothes into the uniform of the Academy of Sciences. As he does so, the FRENCH REVOLUTION enters, singing as much of "La Marseillaise" as they can get through.

FRENCH REVOLUTION:

Allons enfants de la Patrie
Le jour de gloire est arrivé.
Contre nous, de la tyrannie,
L'étandard sanglant est levé,
l'étandard sanglant est levé,
Entendez-vous, dans la compagnes.
Mugir ces farouches soldats
Ils viennent jusque dans nos bras
Egorger vos fils,
vos compagnes.

Aux armes citoyens!
Formez vos bataillons,
Marchons, marchons!

Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons.

[Let us go, children of the fatherland
Our day of Glory has arrived.
Against us stands tyranny,
The bloody flag is raised,
The bloody flag is raised.
Do you hear in the countryside
The roar of these savage soldiers
They come right into our arms
To cut the throats of your sons,
your country.

To arms, citizens!
Form up your battalions
Let us march, Let us march!
That their impure blood
Should water our fields]

*As MÉCHAIN dresses, the FRENCH REVOLUTION circles as it sings, and it sings
louder and louder and louder.*

MÉCHAIN: (*shouting*) Beginnings. Everything is marked by its beginnings -- hark the
"beginnings" -- in songs and blood -- the perfection of mankind and the terrorism of
perfection. Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité -- the ideal turning the world upside down with
mankind perfecting itself right into the guillotine and Napoleon. Our progress -- our
progressing madness.

*Cacophony. Dressed, MÉCHAIN holds up a platinum bar, one meter in length. It
shines. The FRENCH REVOLUTION falls silent. MÉCHAIN shows it around.*

MÉCHAIN: Behold -- the measure of all things. Behold the meter. The meter. One ten-millionth
of the arc that knifes through Dunkerque to Barcelona from the equator to the pole.
Measured. Precise. Extracted out of Nature's equations. Made to link humanity in one
shared measure, one shared thought. To get rid of greed and deception, grind away
difference. The dream of re-planting the Garden of Eden on earth. Life without error. The
Meter!

*With effort, MÉCHAIN bends the bar. Then he swings the bar against the air, and a
giant cathedral bell sounds. He continues to strike the air, and the bell rings out.
MÉCHAIN throws the bar away as the bells continue to ring. The FRENCH
REVOLUTION stares at it, then moves to encircle it.*

MÉCHAIN: Beginnings. Everything is always scarred from its beginnings.

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SCENE 2

The FRENCH REVOLUTION scatters and begins the swirling CACOPHONY OF MEASURES. Each REVOLUTIONIST holds a physical measure of some sort, a multitude of different sizes: rulers, mugs, bushels, baskets, barrels, etc. As they swirl, they shout some of the names of the thousands of measures used in the Ancien Régime of France: dry, wet, length, weight. What matters most is the decibel level of the CACOPHONY.

FRENCH REVOLUTION:

CLOTH

Elle

Pik

Braccio

Palmi

Canne

Vara

Archine

Rasi

LENGTHS

Pied

Pas

Brasse

Ruthe

Codo

Pouce

Ligne

Toise

WEIGHT

Livre

Pound

Rottolo

DRY MEASURE

Setier

Medimno

Sac

Rasiere

Boisseau

Tonneau

Quartiere

Bichet

Anée

Emine

Charge

WET MEASURE

Metrete

Velte

Queue

Quartaut

Barrique

Viertel

Pintgen

Millerole

Escandeaux

Baral

Quarte

As the FRENCH REVOLUTION parades its measures, the SAVANTS gather: TALLEYRAND, CONDORCET, LALANDE, BORDA, LAPLACE. Joining them are MÉCHAIN and JEAN-BAPTISTE-JOSEPH DELAMBRE, but they stand apart, one on each side. They watch the rabble do its rabble-thing. Then, excluding MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE, the SAVANTS make a single gesture -- a clap, a snap of the fingers, a dance move -- and the FRENCH REVOLUTION falls silent, then melts away.

A meeting of the ACADEMY OF SCIENCES.

CONDORCET: You see the problem.

BORDA: And hear it. And smell it.

LALANDE: What problem?

BORDA: Lalande doesn't see a [problem] --

LALANDE: I'll ask it again -- shrug my shoulders to show my lack of [concern] --

BORDA: No need -- I heard you -- we all heard you -- it's always very hard not to hear you --

LALANDE: Good.

BORDA: You can do this --

BORDA shrugs his shoulders.

BORDA: -- all you want, but that doesn't mean there isn't a [problem] --

LALANDE: But, really, my friend --

LALANDE shrugs his shoulders.

LALANDE: -- what's the problem?

BORDA shrugs his shoulders up and down repeatedly.

BORDA: What's the problem, what's the problem --

LALANDE imitates him to comic effect. For a moment they duel by shrugging shoulders.

LALANDE: So what if the people measure things according to the measures of their lives --

BORDA: No modern nation --

LALANDE: Is that the term of choice now, that what we are?

BORDA: Either we are modern --

LALANDE: Or what?

BORDA: Or we die.

LALANDE: So drastic!

CONDORCET: Lalande --

BORDA: The king still hangs around -- the king's dogs still have claws and fangs --

LALANDE gnarls his fingers like claws. Even BORDA has to smile.

LALANDE: All right - all right -- so let's declare ourselves "modern" --

LALANDE makes a "magic" gesture.

LALANDE: Or at least on the way to becoming so -- will that do? --

LAPLACE: Can we move this [along] --

LALANDE: "Speed" is also modern --

LAPLACE: "Speed" means "you not being boring" --

LALANDE: So then let's assume the king will not linger forever -- "speed" him away --

LAPLACE: His mind at work --

LALANDE: And I still don't see the problem. This whole pissing contest about "proper weights and measures" can be easily solved -- (to TALLEYRAND) -- isn't that why you had him -- (indicating CONDORCET) -- throw the best minds together like this?

BORDA: (*murmuring*) More like scorpions in a bottle --

LALANDE: (*to BORDA*) Ah, ah -- now, if you all just take my suggestion --

TALLEYRAND: Why should we?

LALANDE: Because, Monsieur Talleyrand, our beloved minister, it's the most efficient -- make the rest of the country use the weights and measures we use in Paris [to] --

TALLEYRAND: Efficient -- that's your argument --

LALANDE: It's "modern" -- (*to BORDA*) -- isn't it -- efficiency --

TALLEYRAND: It's too small.

LAPLACE: It hath been spoken.

LALANDE: Too small? What's too [small] --

TALLEYRAND: Your "logic" -- it's too small -- too -- cramped --

CONDORCET: The people need --

BORDA: The nation --

LAPLACE: (*half-mocking*) The universe --

CONDORCET: The people need something bigger, grander --

LAPLACE: Oh yes --

LALANDE: And you know this [how] --

CONDORCET: Yes, something for a nation --

TALLEYRAND: The universe we'll tackle later --

LALANDE: But how? The people -- in whose name -- might we want to listen to them -- a little --

LAPLACE: The people speak -- without end -- and spit and mash their vowels -- they're called a mob for a [reason] --

LALANDE: Oh my --

LAPLACE: What?

LALANDE: Oh my, oh my --

BORDA: What is it?

LALANDE: Laplace, our modern national universalist physicist --

LAPLACE: Get on with [it] --

LALANDE: -- has had a revelation.

LAPLACE: What?!

LALANDE: The people are not like his zoo of well-mannered planets and stars --

LAPLACE: Which at least obey simple [laws] --

LALANDE: -- but the people, our newly minted citizens -- our nationals -- fraternité! -- they don't fol[low] --

LAPLACE: In fact, they do follow -- what are their superstitions or faiths but a dirty physics -- crippled --

CONDORCET: Look, gentlemen --

BORDA: -- which is why he has us here --

LALANDE: We who are suffering selfless in the service of the new world order --

BORDA: There is now a given chance --

LALANDE: At least admire the alliteration --

BORDA: *(to TALLEYRAND)* Could you move this along?

LALANDE: -- everything we do being done for them -- which means to them -- the mob, the rabble --

CONDORCET: *(to LALANDE)* -- but can we --

LALANDE: It seems I have farted. Therefore, I'll stop.

CONDORCET: Yes --

LALANDE: I didn't really -- it was a figure of [speech] --

CONDORCET: I mean, you're right about the people --

LALANDE: I do try to keep my bowels updated --

LAPLACE: You said you would [stop] --

CONDORCET: Point taken --

LALANDE: *(to LAPLACE)* Consider me stopped --

CONDORCET: But there are other considerations in play here.

LALANDE: Things only we savants can know --

LAPLACE: I have worked hard --

LALANDE: -- we specialized savants --

LAPLACE: -- to bring myself to [where] --

BORDA: Your bowels may gleam, but your sarcasm stinks.

LAPLACE: Look, enough --

LALANDE: *(indicating TALLEYRAND)* He now has us fighting among ourselves to make us even sharper than the rapiers we already are!

TALLEYRAND: I can speak for myself.

LALANDE: Then I beg you to do so before there's unmetaphoric blood on the floor.

BORDA: He so loves the people --

LALANDE: Then tell me why my proposal to apply the measurements we use in Paris to everybody else everywhere else in France is such a bad idea.

TALLEYRAND: Because -- as I said -- it's too small. Too small-minded. Too convenient. Which is not something I would've expected from you.

LAPLACE: I do believe we are seeing something as rare as the lining up of the planets --

BORDA: He is made silent!

CONDORCET: So let me jump in while your vocal cords regroup. The Paris measures -- the idea of -- is that all we've come to after cutting the aristocrats out of the picture and even making the king dance to a separate tune? He's right -- too small.

BORDA: Too human.

LAPLACE: Too imperfect.

TALLEYRAND: Only the earth will do.

LALANDE: Only the earth will do what?

CONDORCET: As a measure.

LALANDE: Why?

TALLEYRAND: Things human beings decide come and go with the human beings who decide them. No one decides the earth.

CONDORCET: Fixed.

LALANDE: "Fixed" is a bull after you chop off its balls --

BORDA: Is that what happened [to you] --

LALANDE: I can't believe that --

LAPLACE: What is your problem? The earth belongs to everyone, so why not [use] --

LALANDE: You talk about the earth like it's an angel -- fixed, unchanging -- talk about dirty superstitions --

BORDA: Angels can't be measured --

LALANDE: And belonging to everyone? -- have you looked into land deeds lately --

BORDA: Maybe we should use the length of your tongue -- except it won't stop wagging long enough --

LALANDE: I'll let you compute with my penis, which at my age doesn't get that much [use] --

TALLEYRAND: *(to CONDORCET)* I always thought these meetings were high-toned, you know, atmospheric in their intellectual reach --

CONDORCET: This makes the point: the earth doesn't argue, insult, backstab, or piss on anybody's shoes --

LALANDE: I guess that rules out my cock setting the measure of the universe -- damn!

Everyone falls silent. The FRENCH REVOLUTION begins seeping back onto the stage, carrying its measures, infiltrating -- not a danger, at least not yet.

TALLEYRAND: Now that we've been appraised of the length of our esteemed Lalande's member --

LALANDE: Just make it up --

TALLEYRAND: -- I think we have all the information we need to move on --

LALANDE: Just make up any damn number --

TALLEYRAND: This is what we are going to do, and so all of you -- by choice, of course -- but you are also expected to do your citizen's duty. This is a new age -- for man --

LALANDE: And woman --

TALLEYRAND: And citizen -- we will re-shape everything, bring the kingdom of God onto earth -

LAPLACE: Sans church and priest --

TALLEYRAND: Days, hours, minutes, weights, measures -- everything. Everything!

A globe descends, illuminated. Or is cast as an image on a backdrop.

CONDORCET: The very thing we stand on will become the very thing that stands for everything that measures us. One universal people -- one universal standard --

LALANDE: Made by the Frogs for the Limeys and the Dagos and the slant-eyes in the east -- that will go over without a pro[test] --

CONDORCET takes a pointer or a laser pointer.

CONDORCET: I'm not listening to you -- the earth -- the earth --

CONDORCET turns to the FRENCH REVOLUTION as he points out the earth and sings his RHAPSODY TO SCIENCE. They stop to listen. There may even be cheesy heroic music in the background.

CONDORCET: We will make the earth yours! Yours! You who have never owned shall own! And science will bring this abundance to you -- not religion, not kings, but a modern science -- its logic a scalpel to castrate the dead weight of history, its rationality smoothing out your lives to make your spirits more efficient -- a pound will be the same pound everywhere, a pint a pint, all exchange clear and honest --

CONDORCET grows increasingly ecstatic. The other SAVANTS, except for LALANDE, rush into the crowd to take an instantaneous poll as CONDORCET speaks -- possibly even with microphones.

CONDORCET: -- but no, those names will be not be good enough! They stink of history! A new name, clean, razor-edged, new-born -- the meter, yes! From the Greeks, the first scientists -- the meter -- to measure -- and it shall be taken from the earth itself, which we, as scientists, will measure for you! --

LAPLACE: What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST: Don't know -- don't know my numbers --

BORDA: What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST: Would destroy the fabric of ancient --

TALLEYRAND: What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST: Anything that would allow me to get a little more --

BORDA: What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST: "Meter" sounds like a part of a pig --

LAPLACE: What do you think of --

FRENCH REVOLUTIONIST: I think a New Age of Man has dawned.

All the SAVANTS crowd around the last respondent and raise his or her hand high, as if that person had just won the final round of a fight.

OTHER FRENCH REVOLUTIONISTS: Hey, what about [me] --

SAVANTS: This is the one for whom we create the new world order! The rest of you can go --

CONDORCET finishes his RHAPSODY focused on that single person.

CONDORCET: Do not worry -- we know all of what you need and give it you as our duty! It is our promise to your future!

The tide of the FRENCH REVOLUTION ebbs again. CONDORCET comes back to earth post-coital.

LALANDE: Ah, yes, we savants always know best --

TALLEYRAND indicates for DELAMBRE and MÉCHAIN to enter.

TALLEYRAND: We have bought ourselves some time. Gentlemen, I assume you all know Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Delambre and Pierre-François-André Méchain and their astronomical work.

LAPLACE: (to MÉCHAIN) Comets, isn't it?

MÉCHAIN: Half a dozen so far, I think, but I think people find my navigation tables are far more useful.

BORDA: (to DELAMBRE) And I hear your calculations are continually superb.

DELAMBRE: "Continually" is important -- there is always room for improvements.

TALLEYRAND: Good -- we are done with the customary congratulations -- are you both ready to take on the commission for the glory of France and the meter?

DELAMBRE and MÉCHAIN turn away from the SAVANTS, who disappear. The globe becomes the Cassini map of France. They take off their jackets and roll up their sleeves as they pore over the map. They use measuring instruments -- calipers, compasses, rulers, etc.

DELAMBRE: France.

MÉCHAIN: We the French.

DELAMBRE: Citizen.

MÉCHAIN: The nation.

They look at each other.

DELAMBRE: All these changes --

MÉCHAIN: There are always changes --

DELAMBRE: Perhaps more difficult for you --

MÉCHAIN looks back at the map.

MÉCHAIN: Why?

DELAMBRE: You have more invested --

MÉCHAIN: I'm not ancient --

DELAMBRE: I only meant that with your seniority at the Academy --

MÉCHAIN: Cassini measured the meridian fifty years ago -- neither of us was born -- why do you think they want us to [measure] --

DELAMBRE: I didn't mean "ancient" --

MÉCHAIN: I'm also not a secret royalist -- hungering for Louis or whoever's ass is parked on the throne -- are you?

DELAMBRE: No, of course not --

MÉCHAIN peers at the map.

MÉCHAIN: Good -- it must be Cassini's tools -- they were not as precise --

DELAMBRE: It's just that --

MÉCHAIN: *(to himself)* If we extend the meridian to Barcelona -- *(to DELAMBRE)* Just that what? Give it out so that we don't waste any more time on this.

DELAMBRE: Maybe I speak out of my own fears, then --

MÉCHAIN: Why should doing new science make you afraid?

DELAMBRE: It's not doing the [science] --

MÉCHAIN: Then --

DELAMBRE: It's all the "not-science" around the science --

MÉCHAIN goes back to the maps.

MÉCHAIN: All the "not-science" --

DELAMBRE: To go spending money to measure the world when that world is at war -- how do you explain that [to] --

MÉCHAIN: It's simple: leave the commission if you're afraid.

DELAMBRE: I didn't say I was afraid --

MÉCHAIN: You did say "fears."

DELAMBRE: "Apprehensions," then -- "reservations," if that is [better] --

MÉCHAIN: Call 'em what you want, I don't care. Who doesn't have them? But I won't drag my ass and machines and crew and reputation from Barcelona over the goddamn Pyrénées to meet my counterpart from the north at Rodez unless I know -- unless I am assured -- that my counterpart is ready to die to get the right numbers. Eh?

They study the maps.

MÉCHAIN: That was not harsh.

DELAMBRE: I was considering it your benchmark latitude measurement -- of me.

MÉCHAIN: If getting it right -- precise -- precise -- is not worth dying for, then what is?

They study the maps.

DELAMBRE: Dying for --

MÉCHAIN: Does that make a problem for you?

DELAMBRE: Perhaps just a matter of emphasis --

MÉCHAIN: Is there a problem with me?

DELAMBRE: Here's my emphasis -- I think getting it right is important because getting it right -- precise -- is worth living for. I. Like. Living. And I'm not afraid.

MÉCHAIN: You've said that already about your intrepid soul. As for your emphasis about "living" -- I have measured it as over-rated.

DELAMBRE: I want to say “How would your wife and family respond to that?” but I think, don’t you, that it would be impolite to ask something so personal when we are, at this point, conjoined by the professional mode of being.

MÉCHAIN: Except that you just asked it.

DELAMBRE: Why, yes I did -- I can be so gauche sometimes -- one of the faults of living, I suppose.

They look at each other.

MÉCHAIN: What hot air is to the Montgolfiers’ balloon? You know --

MÉCHAIN makes a gesture of uplift.

MÉCHAIN: That is my Thérèse to me.

Just at this moment THÉRÈSE enters, pushing a cart with tea and biscuits.

THÉRÈSE: Even astronomers have bodies that must be refreshed --

THÉRÈSE hands out cups, takes one herself.

THÉRÈSE: Since they are not quite as celestial as they may think they are --

DELAMBRE: Madame Méchain --

THÉRÈSE: Though I am quite celestial, right? *(to DELAMBRE)* He tells me I am all the time, but sometimes he can forget. You must be Delambre.

DELAMBRE: I apologize for not --

THÉRÈSE: He actually likes you --

DELAMBRE: Really?

THÉRÈSE: Has followed your work in the Academy -- something about planets, right?

DELAMBRE: Not very [interesting] --

MÉCHAIN: He has mapped the transit of Mercury and the orbit of Uranus --

THÉRÈSE: That was it!

DELAMBRE: You heard about it?

THÉRÈSE: By reading about it.

MÉCHAIN: Now I’m trying to get him to focus on this world.

MÉCHAIN hands back his cup.

MÉCHAIN: That was a very welcome distraction. Are you done?

DELAMBRE slurps down his tea, hands back the cup.

THÉRÈSE: You've made him gulp it down like a fish. The taskmaster.

MÉCHAIN: It improves my digestion -- we have work to do.

DELAMBRE: It's fine --

THÉRÈSE: I hope you treat Cassini with more respect.

MÉCHAIN: He did the best that 1740 would let him do -- but he could only do it --

THÉRÈSE: To within fifteen seconds --

DELAMBRE: You know this?

THÉRÈSE: I've studied Cassini's triangulations -- I've seen his sextant --

MÉCHAIN: That sounds more dirty than it is --

THÉRÈSE: It needed a cleaning --

MÉCHAIN: We can do it to within one second -- if we can get back to work.

THÉRÈSE: I am a good actress -- I take my cue and away I go!

But THÉRÈSE does not move away. MÉCHAIN notices.

MÉCHAIN: What?

THÉRÈSE: Is this a proper way to treat a celestial body?

MÉCHAIN grabs a ball of string, cuts a length from it. He hands one end to DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN: The problem with all triangulation is determining, with exactitude --

MÉCHAIN gestures to THÉRÈSE to hold up a single finger, which she does.

MÉCHAIN: -- the exact angles, which in turn requires anchors placed --

MÉCHAIN moves her finger closer to her cheek, hooks the string around it. He indicates to DELAMBRE to hold up a finger on his other hand, which he does. MÉCHAIN hooks the string around that finger and hands the second end to DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN: -- with clear lines of sight and level planes for calculation.

MÉCHAIN moves her finger back and forth, changing the angles of the triangle, until he gets it set "right," right next to her cheek.

MÉCHAIN: Ah, that looks fine, doesn't it?

DELAMBRE: I believe it is as close to perfect as is humanly possible.

MÉCHAIN: All that is left, then, is the calculation.

MÉCHAIN kisses THÉRÈSE on the cheek.

MÉCHAIN: From the angles the sides are determined --

THÉRÈSE: -- from the sides the length of the meridian --

MÉCHAIN: -- from the meridian the meter, and from the meter the new world order. Simple, simple, so simple.

THÉRÈSE pulls the string out of DELAMBRE's hands and wraps it around her own.

THÉRÈSE: And I will settle for something much less cosmic -- which, in fact, I have already been given and don't need to find. And, thus, I leave happy.

MÉCHAIN: Good -- now we can get down to the real business at hand -- (*joking*) -- the business of men!

THÉRÈSE: While I, in all my maiden simplicity, keep hearth and home together and wash out the sweaty neckclothes.

They kiss. THÉRÈSE exits. MÉCHAIN watches her.

DELAMBRE: I see what you mean.

MÉCHAIN: (*in jest*) I have no idea what you're talking about.

MÉCHAIN gestures for DELAMBRE to come to him.

MÉCHAIN: Let's review what Cassini did, shall we? Since I assume it'll be you following the meridian down from the north, apprehensions and lust for life and all included in your kit?

DELAMBRE: You have every reason to believe that about me.

MÉCHAIN: Are you married?

DELAMBRE: No.

MÉCHAIN tosses him the ball of string.

MÉCHAIN: You are now.

MÉCHAIN takes a piece of chalk, marks an "X" on the floor.

MÉCHAIN: Here is Delambre, at Evaux -- he takes in a little of the hot mineral baths there, but soon --

MÉCHAIN points into the distance.

MÉCHAIN: He needs to triangulate his way to Puy Violent before the spring and summer are over. What's the big problem?

DELAMBRE pushes in boxes, a chair, etc.

DELAMBRE: The Massif Central, of course.

MÉCHAIN: At least you know your geography.

DELAMBRE: And from Evaux, I have no clear line of sight --

MÉCHAIN: Because --

DELAMBRE: Well, for one --

DELAMBRE piles on another chair or a box.

DELAMBRE: I've got the Puy de Dôme in my face.

MÉCHAIN: So of course you give up, go back to the baths at Evaux to rest your weary savant ass --

DELAMBRE looks around, sees one of the tall ladders, pulls it to Evaux.

MÉCHAIN: -- and spend the rest, and the money, of the revolution --

DELAMBRE: You must have the wrong savant's ass in mind, my dear Méchain --

DELAMBRE climbs the ladder. MÉCHAIN tosses away the ball of string, picks up a length of rope.

DELAMBRE: -- because I'm the kind that pushes my weary savant's ass to new heights --

Holding onto one end, MÉCHAIN tosses DELAMBRE the rest of the rope. DELAMBRE catches it.

DELAMBRE: -- until I can spy the triple towers of the church at Herment --

MÉCHAIN grabs the other ladder, pulls it over, climbs it, holding onto the rope.

MÉCHAIN: And from there?

DELAMBRE: That makes you Bort-les-Orgues.

MÉCHAIN: But you've only got the one measurement, savant, one side of the triangle -- what next?

DELAMBRE hooks the rope around the top of the ladder, then tosses the rope to the ground. He climbs down, pulls in a third ladder and places it.

DELAMBRE: I go to Salers -- here we have Salers --

DELAMBRE grabs the rope.

DELAMBRE: -- so that I can then go climb Puy Violent -- you can be me for the moment --

DELAMBRE tosses his rope up to MÉCHAIN, then grabs its length and climbs the ladder at "Salers."

DELAMBRE: Pull it tight -- tight -- from there --

MÉCHAIN: Angle, angle, angle --

DELAMBRE: Savant already knows the length of at least one side --

MÉCHAIN: Easy to calculate the length of the other two --

DELAMBRE: And any attached triangles --

MÉCHAIN: And so on until the world submits to the calculations.

DELAMBRE: That's how this savant's unrelenting, but not unhandsome, ass would do it.

MÉCHAIN climbs down his ladder.

MÉCHAIN: The sparking and sparkling cleanliness of logic.

MÉCHAIN picks up a glass of water and sips from it. DELAMBRE climbs down, moves his ladder, joins him.

MÉCHAIN: But the earth is not made so [neatly] --

MÉCHAIN tosses the water onto DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN: Heavy rains on Puy Violent --

MÉCHAIN refills the glass, tosses the contents on DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN: Very heavy rains --

DELAMBRE, looking around, sees a dish of chalk powder. He grabs a pinchful and tosses it over MÉCHAIN.

DELAMBRE: Not to mention the haze and fog --

MÉCHAIN pushes a chair against DELAMBRE's shin.

MÉCHAIN: The aches and pains of the body --

DELAMBRE pushes it back, hard.

DELAMBRE: The curvature of the earth --

MÉCHAIN moves in close and does the trick of pointing to DELAMBRE's chest -- when DELAMBRE looks down, MÉCHAIN pops him in the nose.

MÉCHAIN: The refraction of light -- boop --

DELAMBRE grabs the bellows, blows air over MÉCHAIN.

DELAMBRE: The wrack of storms --

DELAMBRE makes thunder-and-lightning sounds.

DELAMBRE: Kerrrr -- shzzzz --

MÉCHAIN spins the Franklin electrostatic machine, adding in sparks and crackling.

MÉCHAIN: Kerrr -- shzzzz --

DELAMBRE grabs a leather strop and loops it over MÉCHAIN's head to go around his belly. He vibrates the strop so that it shakes MÉCHAIN's body.

MÉCHAIN spins inside the strop and pulls the ends of it out of DELAMBRE's hands. He snaps it at DELAMBRE, driving him back.

MÉCHAIN: Insect bites -- branches whacking you in the eye --

DELAMBRE grabs a tray, fends off MÉCHAIN.

DELAMBRE: Rotten-toothed villagers who think you're the devil come [to] --

MÉCHAIN: Taking a shit with nothing to clean yourself --

DELAMBRE: Hunger and thirst --

MÉCHAIN: Homesickness --

MÉCHAIN stops. DELAMBRE stops. They look at the triangle of rope attached to the ladders.

MÉCHAIN: That's what they think, don't they? That the numbers will solve everything, dissolve -

DELAMBRE: The world's ideal.

MÉCHAIN: As if numbers don't lie. As if people with numbers don't lie.

MÉCHAIN throws the strop onto the table, takes a chair, straddles it as he sits.

DELAMBRE: You're having second thoughts. Aren't you.

MÉCHAIN: Yes. And third thoughts. And beyond. All in prime numbers.

Unseen by either of them, THÉRÈSE enters. She sits, watches, listens.

MÉCHAIN: What do you make of things these days?

DELAMBRE takes a chair, sits.

DELAMBRE: "Things" --

MÉCHAIN: Things --

DELAMBRE: "Things." Do you mean our mission -- the meter -- all things that begin with "M" -- or "things," as "in general" -- [or]

MÉCHAIN: Don't bullshit --

DELAMBRE: I was [just] --

MÉCHAIN: You don't do it well, I don't take it well --

DELAMBRE: I apologize --

MÉCHAIN: The world -- the state of the world -- that we have been commanded to transform into numbers --

DELAMBRE: That world --

MÉCHAIN: That world --

DELAMBRE: Ah, that world --

MÉCHAIN: I asked your thoughts --

DELAMBRE: My thoughts are beside the point.

MÉCHAIN: You don't joke well, and you don't lie well. I know your history --

DELAMBRE: And I know yours --

MÉCHAIN: So, then you know that the two of us have worked very hard, up through poverty and chance and a lot of shit --

DELAMBRE: With luck --

MÉCHAIN: -- to earn our way -- of course luck! -- don't belittle what I'm saying -- and now -- these "things" --

DELAMBRE says nothing.

MÉCHAIN: It's safe to talk here -- I can't vouch for Paris, but in my own [house] --

Still DELAMBRE says nothing. MÉCHAIN starts to get out of his chair.

MÉCHAIN: Maybe I was wrong --

DELAMBRE: Don't -- sit --

MÉCHAIN: Only if you trust me when I [say] --

DELAMBRE: Please -- sit -- of course I trust you -- this is not easy --

MÉCHAIN: But you feel --

DELAMBRE: I feel, yes, the threat --

DELAMBRE laughs.

MÉCHAIN: What?

DELAMBRE: It brings to my mind a circus -- no, this, this is closer: clowns with knives --

MÉCHAIN: Murder in their eyes --

DELAMBRE: Bloody greasepaint --

MÉCHAIN: In today, out tomorrow -- out yesterday, in today -- or liquidated --

DELAMBRE: I also think of Louis' menagerie --

MÉCHAIN: Don't get me started on my own list [of] --

MÉCHAIN gets out of his chair, acts out his next words.

MÉCHAIN: Clowns for you? This is my image -- a cleaning lady -- she wears the tri-color and comes into a room called King Louis and France and -- rag in one hand, broom in the other, pushing the water bucket along with her foot -- she is told to sweep it all away, erase every trace of everything old --

DELAMBRE: Swoosh-swish --

MÉCHAIN: -- and so we get the month named Brumaire instead of November and 100-minute hours and 400-degree circles --

DELAMBRE: Not to mention the always-there, never-going-away actors of war, famine, pestilence, and death --

MÉCHAIN jumps back into his chair and pulls back on it like a horse's reins.

MÉCHAIN: The four horsemen -- (*sound of horse*) Eeeeeeeee -- apocalypse!

MÉCHAIN lets the chair slam down. He jumps up, goes to the ladders, pulls them so that the rope is tighter.

MÉCHAIN: This project -- this mission -- if we get it right -- if we really make something solid that outlasts the petty niggling -- the bloody thirst -- the -- unreliability -- of everything -- everyone -- else --

DELAMBRE: It would not be bad for an epitaph.

MÉCHAIN: From the one who wants to live! Something solid -- ideal --

DELAMBRE: You can be fierce when you want to be --

MÉCHAIN: Do you agree with me?

THÉRÈSE rises, enters the scene.

THÉRÈSE: Oh, he is so fierce! My gallant number-cruncher!

DELAMBRE rises. THÉRÈSE points to the triangle of rope.

THÉRÈSE: Did you reach Rodez with your triangles? And why is your shirt wet?

DELAMBRE: A fierce climb -- up Puy Violent.

THÉRÈSE: (*to MÉCHAIN*) And you -- chalk --

MÉCHAIN rises.

MÉCHAIN: Church towers at Herment -- very dusty --

THÉRÈSE moves the ladders so that the rope tightens even more.

THÉRÈSE: Can't say much for your observation platforms -- sloppy, sloppy -- those angles! -- better -- that cleaning lady you were gabbing about -- you need her along to keep your head out of the clouds and your numbers pin-sharp.

THÉRÈSE steps back, surveys her work.

THÉRÈSE: There -- the meter. The. Meter. Done.

THÉRÈSE turns to MÉCHAIN.

THÉRÈSE: Now you don't have to leave. Your wife. Your children -- does he? -- and leave us to the clowns --

MÉCHAIN: You were -- sitting -- there for that long.

THÉRÈSE: I know you -- I live in the world, I'm not wrapped in cotton --

MÉCHAIN: No you're [not] --

THÉRÈSE: -- you think I want you away with "things" as bone-crushing as they are right now?

DELAMBRE: I should leave --

THÉRÈSE: No -- no! -- all this has to be part of your calculations -- the Great Calculations! -- yours and his -- the figuring -- though, heavens forbid and the gods of rationality shiver, not anything the Academy would fold into its equations because such "things" -- my things -- are female and uterine and not up to the high masculine standards of The Number --

THÉRÈSE goes to the ladders and pushes them hard -- perhaps almost knocks them over.

THÉRÈSE: -- that cock of the walk -- the primality of the phallus as the big hard Number One fucking the --

MÉCHAIN: Thérèse --

THÉRÈSE: I see that shock has entered the room --

THÉRÈSE stops.

THÉRÈSE: You will kill yourself -- wipe yourself out -- for something you can't even hold in your hand -- excuse me --

THÉRÈSE exits.

DELAMBRE: There --

MÉCHAIN: Don't --

DELAMBRE: -- there are others who [could] --

MÉCHAIN: Fuck off --

DELAMBRE: Legendre, for instance --

MÉCHAIN: I said fuck [off] --

DELAMBRE: It's just that --

MÉCHAIN: I will fix things in my own goddamn house --

MÉCHAIN goes to the ladders, corrects them.

MÉCHAIN: I will fix --

DELAMBRE gives him a hand. MÉCHAIN pushes him away, finishes.

MÉCHAIN: No poetic crap about figuring "the heart" into the "calculation" --

DELAMBRE: Your family --

MÉCHAIN: None of that "the heart has its reasons" Pascal bull[shit] --

The two men fall silent.

MÉCHAIN: I need -- I need --

MÉCHAIN reviews the ladders.

MÉCHAIN: So, you have reached Rodez -- but you, the younger, have the easy part -- to me they give the Pyrénées -- from Bar-the-lon-a [with the lisp] north -- c'mon, don't wallow --

DELAMBRE: Obviously --

MÉCHAIN: Yes?

DELAMBRE: -- the higher altitudes go to the man with the altitudinous intellect --

MÉCHAIN: Ah-ha -- I love her, you know -- my family -- but there are --

DELAMBRE: The heart does have its reasons -- just admit it --

MÉCHAIN: Here's one: one ten-millionth of the distance from equator to pole -- fixed -- for all people for all time --

DELAMBRE: Well, then, let's go hunt down the meter.

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SCENE 3

September 1792: the main square of Saint-Denis, ancestral burial grounds for French monarchs.

Upstage, as if in sarcophagi, stand five corpses of the French kings, looking very much like corpses.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION gathers around DELAMBRE, who is surrounded by various instrument cases and unsealed documents. The REVOLUTION is armed and not in a good mood. [NOTE: FR stands for any member of the crowd.]

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Who the fuck again did you say you were?

DELAMBRE: The National Convention has --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Whose fucking conviction?

DELAMBRE: Convention -- actually, yours -- in your [name] --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Not my fucking conviction --

DELAMBRE: Conven[tion]--

FRENCH REVOLUTION: And what the fuck did you say you were doing?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: With all this fucking equipment?

DELAMBRE: Measuring [the] --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: And that takes climbing up in the fucking towers?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: How do we know that you're not one of the fucking enemy --

DELAMBRE: As I said, I have pa[pers] --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: How do we know you're not --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: -- one of those fucking Prussian fucks --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Who are fucking us up along the fucking border --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Why aren't you fucking telling us what we want to know?

DELAMBRE: What do you want me to say? I mean, what the fuck do you want me to say?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Explain yourself again.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: What again is all this shit?

DELAMBRE: Is your mayor ar[ound] --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: You talk to us -- he answers to us --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: So you have to talk to us --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Because we are fucking citizens now --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Citizens!

The FRENCH REVOLUTION roars its approval. DELAMBRE shrugs.

DELAMBRE: I'm here to measure the earth. That's right. It's called geodesy. These are the things I measure it with.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: And once more, why would anyone in their right or left fucking minds -

-

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Or up or down --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: -- want to do this?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Right now, with the scumbag Prussians marching --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: To cut our balls off --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: -- and put the king back on the throne --

DELAMBRE: Please don't touch --

One of the people takes out what looks like a telescope.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: How do we know that you're not looking through this because the king has paid you?

ALL: Tell us what we fucking want to know!

DELAMBRE: (*calmly*) I will fucking tell you something that you want to fucking know, even though you don't know you fucking want to know it yet.

This stumps the crowd for a moment. DELAMBRE walks up to the person holding the telescope and gently eases it from his hands.

DELAMBRE: I need this back from the citizen.

DELAMBRE replaces it in its case.

DELAMBRE: Who here has the balls to learn something new? Eh? Anyone? Who's been to Paris?

One raises his hand.

DELAMBRE: Ah, good. When you were there, did you have a pint of beer?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: I did.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: He sucked down more than one, the pig! I was with --

DELAMBRE: One is fine, one is all I need. Ever raise a pint here in Saint-Denis?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Boy, he sucks it down just like --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Shut the fuck up. Yeah, I do.

DELAMBRE: Same pint?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Get more here in the fucking pint than in Paris.

DELAMBRE: But they're both pints. Am I right?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Yeah -- so?

DELAMBRE: Let's say I wanted to trade you a pint of Saint-Denis bière de garde for a Paris pint of lager -- how would you do it so each of us would get a good deal? Huh? Ah, got your tongue. *(to crowd)* Any bakers around?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Here.

DELAMBRE: Sell by the pound?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: 'Course.

DELAMBRE: Iron-worker? You -- good. *(to crowd)* Whose pound is heavier -- baker or ironmonger? C'mon, you all know this.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: The smith's.

DELAMBRE: Right -- but they're both called pounds. How'd the baker's get lighter? I leave you to ponder that. Cloth-sellers?

A couple raise their hands.

DELAMBRE: Come here. How big is an aune?

One stretches out one of his arms.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: They got the iron bar stuck in the wall inside the basilica that shows it.

DELAMBRE tows the man out of the crowd.

DELAMBRE: In my father's shop, my father used one aune to buy wholesale --

DELAMBRE shortens the arm.

DELAMBRE: -- a shorter aune to sell retail, and in the village around Amiens --

DELAMBRE moves the arm around.

DELAMBRE: -- thirteen different aunes -- one two three -- So let's say we want to sell cloth to each other -- I've got some great cambric, you have some excellent wool. But your Saint-Denis aune is different than my father's Amiens aune. What do you we do? What would you do? *(to the crowd)* What would be fair?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: I ain't going to Paris, so why [bother] --

DELAMBRE: But Paris is coming to you. Paris is coming to you -- the world is coming to you. And my job is to measure the world that, like it or not, is coming down your road. Look --

DELAMBRE wades into the crowd and pulls out enough people to make a circle.

DELAMBRE: Behold, the world!

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Fucking right, we are!

DELAMBRE: You, sir, are the north pole. Put a tri-color on his head -- excellent. You, madam, are at the equator. Another tri-color for the citizen! From one tri-color to the other -- from you to here -- something called the meridian, the French meridian -- it runs through Dunkerque --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Where the hell is Dunkerque?

DELAMBRE: -- through Paris -- up north -- all the way down to Perpignan.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Where the hell is --

DELAMBRE: South of here. I have been asked -- nay, I have been commanded -- by the National Convention in Paris -- by the Revolution! -- in your name! --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Long live our fucking name!

DELAMBRE: -- to measure -- yes! -- this French meridian to get a number -- a special number -- a transforming number -- do you follow what I'm saying?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Go on --

DELAMBRE: A number that will turn your pint and the Paris pint into the same pint, your pound and his pound into the same pound so that no matter where you go in France, we can do business and not get cheated, which you can't do because of -- so many --

Silence in the crowd.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: That's why you're fucking doing this?

DELAMBRE: I can see that you -- and you, and you -- so many of you -- you're going to go break your asses against the Prussians coming down from the north. Why? For what? For the king?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Fuck that -- he's toast.

DELAMBRE: For the abbé or the lord up in the castle --

FRENCH REVOLUTION: We threw those fuckers to the pigs!

DELAMBRE: Then why? Why? For what?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: For the revolution, you asshole.

DELAMBRE: Exactly! For country, for patrie, for the nation, for being a citizen!--

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité -- all that shit!

DELAMBRE: And not just for you but for the whole world! This transforming number? This number that will turn that into this, not just for us but for all mankind -- a pound here will be the same pound in China, and then we can exchange everything -- beer, understanding, knowledge, peace, a length of your best wool. To the French meridian!

The REVOLUTION does not know what to make of this. Finally.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: You're saying that we will get all this from one fucking number?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Must be some fucking amazing number.

DELAMBRE: It will be -- if you let me go find it.

The REVOLUTION thinks. Then.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Let him go find his stupid fucking number. I got a better idea.

Gives an upraised middle finger.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Louis, this is your number -- a fuck to you and all your ancestors. We're gonna kill you, he knows that, so let's go kill all the fucking kings to make sure Louis's got company!

With a roar, the FRENCH REVOLUTION turns to the French kings upstage. As they do, DELAMBRE begins hauling off his equipment.

With the proper SOUND EFFECTS, the REVOLUTION pries open the coffins and drags the corpses forward and piles them up. DELAMBRE is working hard to be inconspicuous and efficient at the same time.

The REVOLUTION is none too gentle. One corpse is thrown down.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Here's Henry! Did you see the lead in those fucking coffins?

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Tons of it -- good Saint-Denis tons!

Another corpse goes.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Pop goes the Sun King. What a fucking stench!

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Lead good for cannonballs.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Here's Francois the first.

FRENCH REVOLUTION: Here's a coupla more -- who gives a fuck about names?

They set the corpses on fire. By now DELAMBRE has his equipment out of harm's way. The REVOLUTION is bathed in the greasy light of the end of French royalty. DELAMBRE watches them watching the fire. The SOUND of a guillotine, and a head wearing a crown comes rolling out.

* * * * *

SCENE 4

MÉCHAIN in Barcelona, winter of 1793, on the roof of the Fontana de Oro. His right arm is in a sling, and physically he is in pain.

Evening, cold. Star-filled sky. TRANCHOT, his assistant, beats his arms to warm himself. There are several benches or stools around.

TRANCHOT: It won't be long now.

MÉCHAIN says nothing.

TRANCHOT: Though, to be honest, I don't know why you need more latitude measurements -- you've already got your numbers from Mont-Jouy, already sent them off to Paris -- we've been at this for two months already --

MÉCHAIN: Because, Tranchot, I have nothing else to do.

TRANCHOT: That isn't your fault.

MÉCHAIN: I know it's not my fault! I give all thanks to the glorious revolution --

TRANCHOT: Don't --

MÉCHAIN: -- in France for --

TRANCHOT: Yes, it's too bad that things of great pitch and moment --

MÉCHAIN: Slaughters, you mean --

TRANCHOT: -- couldn't wait until you fin[ished] --

MÉCHAIN: Tranchot, we are buried in Barcelona because no one in France can control France
-- heads -- everywhere --

They fall into silence.

TRANCHOT: Let me at least bring out some mulled wine --

MÉCHAIN: You've read what I've read --

TRANCHOT: A "no" to the wine, then --

MÉCHAIN: Robespierre --

TRANCHOT: Let's not --

MÉCHAIN: -- a man to make any man sick to his stomach --

TRANCHOT: Enough, please?

They fall into silence, but TRANCHOT can't help himself.

TRANCHOT: The Revolution does have its enemies -- weasels in the henhouse --

MÉCHAIN: You're right, it's certainly a barnyard --

TRANCHOT: Let's not -- let me get some [wine] --

MÉCHAIN: I don't want wine --

TRANCHOT: The Spanish wine is good --

MÉCHAIN: I don't want --

TRANCHOT: -- even if the Spaniards are bastards for starting this [war] --

MÉCHAIN: (*mocking*) "Spain started this war" --

TRANCHOT: They're afraid, they are, the Spanish, afraid, that's why --

MÉCHAIN: Of butchers? In tricolor? Chopping off a king's head -- such a brave act!

TRANCHOT: You would have spared him?

MÉCHAIN: It's being called the Terror --

TRANCHOT: I know what it's being called --

MÉCHAIN: I had no love for Louis -- for the claptrap --

TRANCHOT: But --

MÉCHAIN: He supported science -- that's all that matters to me -- ever matters to me -- killing him got us the Terror and this war us buried [here] -- so huzzah!

TRANCHOT: And no warm wine.

They wait in the cold.

TRANCHOT: One other thing --

MÉCHAIN: What?

TRANCHOT: Your arm -- you really should rest it --

MÉCHAIN: The arm is what it is --

TRANCHOT: And that "it" is not much --

MÉCHAIN: That's not for you to say --

TRANCHOT: You can't even tighten the screws, can you? I have to do it for you --

MÉCHAIN: If you're suffering, Tranchot, go to your wine --

TRANCHOT: -- and how precise do you think [that] --

MÉCHAIN: Stop blabbering, will you? It shows you don't understand.

TRANCHOT: I understand cold, I understand pain --

MÉCHAIN: But not --

TRANCHOT: Not what? Not what?

MÉCHAIN: This -- this is the anchor of all of it --

TRANCHOT: Any first-year grunt at the Observatory can plot a latitude --

MÉCHAIN: But not like we can do it if we want to -- the most precise in 4,000 years --

TRANCHOT: That's what's keeping [you] --

MÉCHAIN: Why wouldn't you want that?

TRANCHOT: It's not that I wouldn't --

MÉCHAIN: So, what's the problem?

TRANCHOT: I don't see the "why" of doing it if the figures you got at Mont-Jouy are good enough --

MÉCHAIN: "Good enough" is not good enough for me.

TRANCHOT: Which makes me wonder if anything would be good [enough] --

MÉCHAIN: Maybe a new assistant --

TRANCHOT: Not a chance -- if nature is God's handiwork --

MÉCHAIN: Please --

TRANCHOT: -- it's pretty slapped-together -- jury-rigged -- just look at our bodies, you one-armed, clavicle-broken, and me with my aching joints --

MÉCHAIN: I'm fine --

TRANCHOT: Doubted -- so why do you think you can do any better than nature when maybe "better"'s not even a condition out there to be met? It's not like nature worries about being precise --

MÉCHAIN: I do -- it's what I do --

TRANCHOT: To the nth --

MÉCHAIN: -- it's what I am --

TRANCHOT: You can't be a "precise" -- you can't be an adject[ive] --

MÉCHAIN: And that's why you think good enough is good enough --

TRANCHOT: If what "works" works --

MÉCHAIN: That's not why we have intellect -- we have it to go one better, two better, a thousand better -- it's glorious -- we should get [ready] --

TRANCHOT: And my perfecting intellect reminds me that there is "good enough" mulled wine and chorizo downstairs -- at war with Spain, perhaps -- (*mocking*) Hijos de puta! But, I admit, they have taken care [of us] --

MÉCHAIN: Here's why -- you want a "why"? Here's a "why."

TRANCHOT: Why?

MÉCHAIN: I miss my wife and children -- I miss -- my right arm is mashed from the accident -- my ribs, my collarbone -- military death in the mountains -- heads lopped off -- but then --

MÉCHAIN points overhead.

MÉCHAIN: Polaris and Thuban and Kochab and Mizar sliding along on their numbers -- why not give myself over? Give myself away?

TRANCHOT: Polaris and friends are cold -- "precise" is cold --

MÉCHAIN: They rise -- indifferent and regular -- but I can bring them home to me by their numbers -- I can bring everything, eventually, home by the numbers --

TRANCHOT: It's what you do -- it's what you are --

MÉCHAIN: Without family they're family --

TRANCHOT: And brother Polaris is rising and the wine will have to wait --

MÉCHAIN: It will. Arm or no arm, I will not be replaced on this mission, I will leave everybody with nothing to question about what I've done --

Shift to MÉCHAIN in his workspace. His coat is off, his arm is out of the sling, his body healed, his manner energized.

Around him hang large sheets of brown kraft paper covered in calculations. A roll of kraft paper to one side, with what looks like a squeeze bucket and a mop-sized paintbrush or calligraphy brush.

A cup of wine on a table.

MÉCHAIN: -- and it's come down to a simple matter -- simple, simpler, simplest -- comparing numbers to numbers and extracting the answer --

MÉCHAIN drinks from the wine -- he now clearly loves the taste and the act of drinking. He shakes out his body, like a fighter preparing to get into the ring. He pulls down various papers as he speaks and drinks.

MÉCHAIN: All right, I've got the latitude data from Mont-Jouy -- I've already sent it to the king-killers in Paris, so they know I've been working and working hard and they can't bump me from the mission --

Another paper.

MÉCHAIN: The latitude data from the Fontana de Oro -- all-hail to that bastard Tranchot for his help!

Another paper.

MÉCHAIN: I know the distances between the two from our triangulations -- all-hail again to the bastard --

MÉCHAIN arranges the large sheets of paper on the floor. He rolls out a sheet of kraft paper, tears it off, slides the bucket and mop over.

MÉCHAIN: Now -- the dessert of it all, the pièce, the coup. Delambre, up north -- you prick, you already have your latitude done -- but it will not be as precise as mine, it can never be as precise as mine, because no one observes, records, computes, understands like me --

MÉCHAIN swirls the mop in the bucket.

MÉCHAIN: The southern anchor of the meridian -- my calculations -- my latitude -- with it, the definitive French meridian --

MÉCHAIN squeezes out the liquid.

MÉCHAIN: From this, the definitive world meridian -- and then the definitive meter -- no more approximations, guesses, conjectures, suppositions, lies anymore, the numbers will not lie --

With the mop MÉCHAIN begins to set out his formulas. He is quite fastidious about this, wetting and squeezing as needed, until he gets to the answer. He freezes. He stares.

MÉCHAIN grabs the roll of kraft paper, rolls another length, rips it off. He re-does the calculations with much less care. He freezes. He stares.

MÉCHAIN does it a third time. He freezes. He stares.

MÉCHAIN: That can't --

MÉCHAIN drops the mop. He pulls out the previous sheets with the figures on them, reviews them, looks at the other results of his calculations.

MÉCHAIN: Wrong -- wrong -- but which? Which ones? Which are wrong? Which are -- Mont-Jouy? The Fontana? Maybe I've --

MÉCHAIN reviews the scroll of his calculations.

MÉCHAIN: -- put down -- the -- wrong -- the wrong -- they're not -- wrong --

MÉCHAIN speaks to the audience.

MÉCHAIN: It's really -- it's really a simple matter -- simple --

MÉCHAIN holds up one sheet.

MÉCHAIN: The latitude at Mont-Jouy --

MÉCHAIN holds up another sheet.

MÉCHAIN: The latitude -- at Fontana de Oro -- my arm crushed -- I still did all the work --

MÉCHAIN holds up a third sheet.

MÉCHAIN: The triangulations -- Mont-Jouy here, Fontana there, the lighthouse there to anchor the two -- simple -- one-point-one miles between the two -- a one-point-one mile arc -- really, it's tiny -- small --

MÉCHAIN returns to the roll of calculations.

MÉCHAIN: But but but but -- it can't --

MÉCHAIN turns back to the audience.

MÉCHAIN: Mont-Jouy -- 41 degrees, 21 minutes, 45-point-one-zero seconds -- yes, I got it that fine -- Fontana -- 41 degrees, 22 minutes, 47-point-nine-one seconds -- fine fine fine fine -- according to the simple requirements of -- take one from the other -- that's all it takes - - simple, simple --

MÉCHAIN is stunned.

MÉCHAIN: 3-point-2 seconds. Not 3-point-2 seconds to be folded into 600-mile arc from Dunkerque to Mont-Jouy -- that would be --

MÉCHAIN figures.

MÉCHAIN: One one-hundredth percent. Small, close to nothing. Nothing. But over one-point-one miles -- that's --

MÉCHAIN figures.

MÉCHAIN: Five-point-four percent -- I'm off by three or four hundred feet -- which one is wrong? which one has proven me wrong? Which one, which one, which one, which one -- I've got to go back, I've got to re-do --

THE SPANIARDS arrive, oozing in. They rough up MÉCHAIN and his calculations.

MÉCHAIN: -- everything -- don't -- please -- and I've already sent -- to Paris -- they'll use the Mont-Jouy figures -- don't --

SPANIARD: The bastard Frog is still here --

MÉCHAIN: You have to, you have to let me go back -- check over --

SPANIARD: Your goddamned revolutionary armies --

MÉCHAIN: I don't control the armies -- please --

SPANIARD: They want to make Catalonia a "sister republic" --

MÉCHAIN: Please -- please --

SPANIARD: Goddamn atheists trucking in their filth --

MÉCHAIN: Please -- just a little more time --

SPANIARD: It would be a smart thing for a smart man to get his smart ass out of Spain while he's still got his smarts in one piece in one place in his body --

By this time, MÉCHAIN is in no position to argue.

MÉCHAIN: I'll go. I'll go!

THE SPANIARDS leave.

MÉCHAIN: I'll go -- where?

MÉCHAIN picks through his calculations, now trampled by THE SPANIARDS.

MÉCHAIN: It's all wrong -- it's all wrong -- the figures they have in Paris -- the meter will be --

MÉCHAIN pulls the paper into himself, almost as if he were shrouding himself.

MÉCHAIN: The truth can eat your heart --

Several bursts of lightning and thunder. Smoke. Wind. The cries of ravens.

INTERMISSION

SCENE 5

Several bursts of lightning and thunder. Smoke. Wind. Luminescent STARS float through the darkness [can be carried by actors on long poles]. Perhaps there is also

a music of the spheres. MÉCHAIN appears, smeared with his calculations. He watches the STARS -- a moment of quiet fascination.

MÉCHAIN: I have given my life to digging out your truths. And I now have no idea what that means, has meant, will mean.

MÉCHAIN reaches upward and, in a pulling motion, draws the darkness over him. The STARS continue to move in their stately flotations.

* * * * *

SCENE 6

BORDA, LALANDE, LAPLACE, DELAMBRE. NAPOLEON to one side. In the background, the SAVANTS OF EUROPE. During the scene, they dance a stately dance.

LAPLACE: Where the hell -- *(a glance at NAPOLEON)* Where. Is. Méchain?

DELAMBRE: Carcassone, I think -- it's not [clear] --

LAPLACE: You don't know precisely?

DELAMBRE: It's not clear --

LAPLACE: You are supposed to --

DELAMBRE: His wife received a letter --

NAPOLEON clears his throat. LAPLACE looks worried. He waggles his fingers for the letter. DELAMBRE does not give him the letter.

LAPLACE: Give it to me.

DELAMBRE: It's quite pers[onal] --

LAPLACE: Do I need to remind you --

NAPOLEON clears his throat.

LAPLACE: Do I need to remind you?

DELAMBRE fishes the letter from his coat, hands it over.

DELAMBRE: It should be [read] --

LAPLACE: Don't tell me [how to] --

LAPLACE skims the letter.

LAPLACE: Where the hell is he?

LALANDE: As usual, our Laplace is being broad-minded and courteous and respect[ful] --

LAPLACE: Shut up --

DELAMBRE: It should be read with some -- discretion --

LALANDE: Because he means, where is Méchain in some spiritual sense?

LAPLACE: I don't mean that at all.

LALANDE: Ah, well --

LAPLACE: I want to know his geography. Where the hell is Pradelles? What is this shit he writes?

BORDA: May I?

LAPLACE tosses the letter.

LAPLACE: Tell me again why we're paying [him] --

BORDA reads, exchanges a glance with DELAMBRE. LAPLACE indicates the SAVANTS OF EUROPE.

LAPLACE: I asked these gentlemen --

BORDA: Ever the self-promoter -- (to DELAMBRE) This doesn't sound [good] --

LAPLACE: -- to come put their stamp on the meter --

SAVANTS: The International Fraternity of Science!

LAPLACE: (to BORDA) And why not?

BORDA: If the meter is extracted from nature -- the French meridian standing in for all meridians! -- eh? -- who needs them to put a stamp on it as right?

NAPOLEAN clears his throat. LAPLACE fawns.

LAPLACE: My dear General -- I'm sorry --

NAPOLEON: My dear instructor -- I'm not --

LAPLACE: Please meet the newest member of the Academy of Sciences -- a former pupil of mine, I might add -- Napoleon Bonaparte.

BORDA, DELAMBRE, and LALANDE look at each other, then at LAPLACE.

LALANDE: What about Lenoir's candidacy?

SAVANTS: When The Money supports Science, Science must support The Money!

LAPLACE: (*hissing*) His turn will come! (*to NAPOLEON*) What have you brought us back from Italy?

NAPOLEON: Other than Italy itself?

LAPLACE laughs over-hard. The others offer reluctant smiles. NAPOLEON unfolds a large piece of paper and hands it to LAPLACE.

SAVANTS: Who will dare say this Emperor is naked?

LAPLACE: We have come to expect everything from you --

NAPOLEON: It's a new geometric proof --

LAPLACE: -- except a lesson in mathematics -- look at that!

LAPLACE hands the paper to BORDA, who glances at it and hands it on to the others.

NAPOLEON: I hope this proves the bona fides of Bonaparte.

LAPLACE: Very good! (*to the others*) Very good, don't you think --

DELAMBRE folds the paper and hands it back to BONAPARTE.

DELAMBRE: Your bona fides are quite in order, General.

SAVANTS: Sucking-up is the Better Part of Wisdom.

NAPOLEON: Delambre, right? And where is your cher maître these days?

DELAMBRE: General?

NAPOLEON: Méchain --

DELAMBRE: Ah --

NAPOLEON: -- the south to your north, the plumb line to your zenith --

DELAMBRE: He was forced to go through Italy to get back from Spain --

NAPOLEON: Roundabout --

BORDA: There was a war [going] --

LAPLACE: Méchain has stuck himself in Pradelles --

NAPOLEON: A little scut-town in the south, isn't it --

DELAMBRE: He's starting the southern triangles, to link up to what he did in Spain -- under great pressure, I might add --

BORDA: There was a war [going] --

LAPLACE: We know that!

SAVANTS: Savants can be so sauvage.

DELAMBRE: Méchain did his duty well, General, under [great] --

LAPLACE: As he should be expected [to] --

BORDA: There was a war going on -- (to LAPLACE) -- ha! -- (to NAPOLEON) -- which Monsieur Laplace luckily missed --

NAPOLEON: But you have already reached Rodez?

DELAMBRE: I had the easier part --

NAPOLEON: And you've gotten things ready to measure the baseline, the northern [baseline] --

DELAMBRE: Near Melun, yes --

NAPOLEON: And your friend's southern baseline -- Perpignan --

DELAMBRE: You are well-informed --

LAPLACE: He is Napoleon --

DELAMBRE: I have every faith Méchain will complete [the] --

NAPOLEON: Faith? Science and faith?

SAVANTS: The time has come. The time is now.

DELAMBRE: When it comes to friends, yes, faith, of course --

NAPOLEON: (to LAPLACE) I want this conference done. I want it to run on time. I want this Méchain to hand over every scrap to him --

NAPOLEON indicates DELAMBRE.

NAPOLEON: -- like a doctor handing over a newborn -- and if this doesn't happen, I will do away with what needs doing away with. Understood, my teacher?

LAPLACE: As you always were, and are, clear and direct.

NAPOLEON: And I guess that that now makes me the teacher, eh?

LAPLACE: I am glad to be your pupil. We are all glad --

NAPOLEON turns and leaves, taking the SAVANTS OF EUROPE with him. LAPLACE gives DELAMBRE a warning look, follows. BORDA hands back MÉCHAIN's letter to DELAMBRE.

BORDA: "I must return to Barcelona"? What does --

DELAMBRE: An obsession, apparently --

BORDA: About?

DELAMBRE: About -- hmmm -- well, it seems --

BORDA: Spain has always been an infec[tion] --

DELAMBRE: His latitude measurements, at Barcelona --

BORDA: That letter -- it's embarrassing --

DELAMBRE: And you've never felt unsure?

BORDA: Not to the point of --

DELAMBRE: He thinks --

BORDA: It doesn't matter what he thinks. Or feels. Laplace didn't bring in General Cock-of-the-Walk there because he thought [it would] --

DELAMBRE: I understand --

MÉCHAIN appears.

BORDA: The knives are back -- and they'll be stuck in backs [unless] -- and Méchain has no more latitude -- Laplace has run him out of latitude -- you are his keeper -- you are -- say no, but you are. Appointed by fate. So much money, so much time has been plunged into this -- you are his keeper --

MÉCHAIN: Will you argue --

DELAMBRE: It's not me he needs --

MÉCHAIN: -- for me to return? Otherwise, shame --

BORDA: Then find --

MÉCHAIN: I will soon cease to exist --

BORDA: -- what he needs.

MÉCHAIN: Either I will soon recover the strength and energy I should never have lost, or I will soon cease to exist.

BORDA: I don't care if we get him back. I do, but I don't -- what's a body? -- we need his data. Right now, his numbers --

DELAMBRE: I will find what he needs.

BORDA: As you usually do with everything.

THÉRÈSE appears, wearing a shawl, carrying a small bag.

THÉRÈSE: You called?

BORDA: He called.

DELAMBRE: I called.

THÉRÈSE: I came.

BORDA: And I'm going.

BORDA leaves.

THÉRÈSE: May I?

DELAMBRE hands her the letter. MÉCHAIN brings her a chair, and she sits. MÉCHAIN sits on the floor and watches her.

THÉRÈSE: We have children -- sons -- the younger will hardly remember -- six years he's been gone --

DELAMBRE: I wouldn't have asked you --

THÉRÈSE: I haven't said I'd go.

MÉCHAIN brings DELAMBRE a chair. DELAMBRE sits. The lights change. STARS float overhead.

DELAMBRE: Of course -- I can't force you --

THÉRÈSE: Do you think I don't want to go?

DELAMBRE: I don't know what to think about a situation I don't know anything about --

THÉRÈSE: Ever the calculator --

DELAMBRE: Sometimes I wish your husband --

THÉRÈSE: So do I. So do I. "Either I will soon recover the strength and energy I should never have lost, or I will soon cease to exist."⁷ It's -- somewhat -- pathetic, isn't it.

DELAMBRE: Something gnaws at him --

THÉRÈSE: I've already sent him a letter. Telling him I am coming. Did you think -- I am not waiting around for a reply, which, knowing him, would be all about why I shouldn't --

DELAMBRE: I get letters sometimes ten pages long -- both sides -- in a very small hand -- if he worked as hard on his work as he does on --

THÉRÈSE holds up a hand to stop him. She turns to MÉCHAIN and speaks directly to him. DELAMBRE disappears. They walk together under the STARS.

THÉRÈSE: I have told him emphatically not to accommodate me by proposing a rendezvous in a town appropriate to a lady. I will not waste even a quarter-hour of his time, because he does not have the time to waste. I have told him that I will gladly meet him on the mountain-top, sleep in a tent or a stable, and live on cheese and milk; that with him, I will be content anywhere.

THÉRÈSE moves away from him.

THÉRÈSE: Six years. You haven't, in six years --

MÉCHAIN: Paris, I know, just down that road -- a week --

THÉRÈSE: A week away --

MÉCHAIN: I know --

THÉRÈSE: Six years, and you haven't --

MÉCHAIN: I know -- so they've sent the wife to collect the husband --

THÉRÈSE: None of them know --

MÉCHAIN: Just like them, to work against me [like] --

THÉRÈSE: Oh, yes, they're all against you --

MÉCHAIN: Delambre is going to do the southern baseline -- that's my baseline, mine to do --

THÉRÈSE: Except you aren't doing it. Except that you aren't doing anything. The triangles.
Their measurements. The whole world in Paris waits for you.

MÉCHAIN: And I hate the whole world! And Paris! All of what's happened -- all of the --

THÉRÈSE: The what?

MÉCHAIN: The things I have seen -- suff[ered] --

THÉRÈSE: Suffered -- please!

MÉCHAIN: You don't know!

THÉRÈSE: You still have your head -- not like Condorcet or Lavoisier -- not that much is going
on in it at the [moment] --

MÉCHAIN: Stop that!

THÉRÈSE: Maybe it should go -- it's not getting much [use] --

MÉCHAIN: You don't know anything!

THÉRÈSE: And whose fault is that? Pray tell, my sweet husband, whose fault is that for the last
six years?

MÉCHAIN: It's not mine!

The STARS move away from MÉCHAIN.

MÉCHAIN: No, don't go --

The STARS disappear.

MÉCHAIN: Fault?

THÉRÈSE: Fault.

MÉCHAIN: Not mine, not [mine] -- they -- they are out to get me, you know, bury me -- Borda,
Lalande, Laplace -- the savants! -- that Delambre --

THÉRÈSE: I asked you whose fault.

MÉCHAIN: Delambre --

THÉRÈSE: Don't a[void] --

MÉCHAIN: -- the darling --

THÉRÈSE: Who gets his work in on time -- Husband? Whose f[ault] --

MÉCHAIN: Stealing my thunder -- the baseline -- the southern base[line] -- whipping through his stations -- showing off! --

THÉRÈSE: And whose fault --

MÉCHAIN: Tranchot -- he's another one -- in Sp[ain] -- in Sp[ain] -- in Bar[celona] -- he sabo[taged] --

THÉRÈSE: Tranchot is not your problem -- Delambre praises [him] --

MÉCHAIN: See? See? Together, they are, like that! And darling Delambre didn't have to put up with Sp[ain] -- with Sp[ain] --

THÉRÈSE: What?

MÉCHAIN: With Sp[ain] -- with Sp[ain] -- aaahhh!

MÉCHAIN lets loose. THÉRÈSE motions for the STARS to appear, and they do. THÉRÈSE lays a light hand on MÉCHAIN. He notices the STARS. He calms himself. THÉRÈSE, her hand still on him, moves him, and together they move with the motions of the STARS.

THÉRÈSE: This is the only thing that has ever --

MÉCHAIN: Not the only -- but yes --

THÉRÈSE stops MÉCHAIN, turns him to face her.

THÉRÈSE: Fault. Say it.

MÉCHAIN: Sp --

THÉRÈSE: Say it.

MÉCHAIN: Sp --

THÉRÈSE: Say it.

MÉCHAIN: Spain.

THÉRÈSE: Spain. And?

MÉCHAIN turns to the audience.

MÉCHAIN: And I told her. Everything. The mistake I had made. The mistake that had made me.

MÉCHAIN turns back to THÉRÈSE. He pulls away from her.

THÉRÈSE: And that's it? The "thing"?

MÉCHAIN: It means the whole --

THÉRÈSE goes to her bag. She takes out a ball of string.

MÉCHAIN: What are you [doing] --

THÉRÈSE: This error in Barcelona -- who's to say it's your fault?

MÉCHAIN: Who else --

THÉRÈSE: Take this and listen to me. Don't -- stop whining! -- listen!

THÉRÈSE hands him one end of the string.

THÉRÈSE: The mistake could be in your instruments --

MÉCHAIN: Never never -- I kept them calibrated, always --

THÉRÈSE: Always? Every second? Did you take them to bed with you?

THÉRÈSE loops the string around a hook in the wall.

A hook descends from the fly-space. THÉRÈSE loops it around that hook, which pulls the string upward. She unrolls it as it rises until she comes back to MÉCHAIN.

MÉCHAIN: No -- who could keep it [every] --

THÉRÈSE: Hold it tight!

MÉCHAIN: I'm holding -- no one could --

THÉRÈSE: Or maybe this mistake -- if that's what it is --

MÉCHAIN: It is!

THÉRÈSE: I'm sure you think it is -- maybe it's coiled up in the formulas, or the correction tables, or the clock for the transit, or fly's shit in your eye, or the plumb line -- here, take this -- hold it -- or your pants were too tight that [night] --

THÉRÈSE hands him the ball of string.

MÉCHAIN: It's none of that -- don't be foolish --

THÉRÈSE: It's not me crying in my beer in the scurvy French countryside --

THÉRÈSE gestures to the STARS.

THÉRÈSE: Go.

MÉCHAIN: No!

THÉRÈSE: Yes go.

MÉCHAIN: No!

THÉRÈSE: Go!

MÉCHAIN: No!

The STARS exit. The light of dawn appears. Birdsong.

THÉRÈSE: Darkness be gone, banished -- pfft.

MÉCHAIN: What have you [done] --

THÉRÈSE: All this on your shoulders, eh --

MÉCHAIN: You've taken --

THÉRÈSE: The measuring of the whole earth depending upon the brains and soul and sure hands of Pierre-François-André-Méchain -- hands that by the way haven't touched me in -- but never mind -- we're here to plead the case of Méchain -- Méchain -- without whom the world could not spin --

MÉCHAIN: Why am I holding --

THÉRÈSE: Hold it. The great Pierre-François-André-Méchain, who gets thrown off the road by a pebble in his shoe.

THÉRÈSE sighs along one side of the triangle.

THÉRÈSE: Here is the poop, husband, the skinny, the scuttlebutt --

THÉRÈSE plucks the string.

THÉRÈSE: If you don't finish your triangles --

THÉRÈSE cocks her ear to the string.

THÉRÈSE: Ah, the sound of the earth is an A --

THÉRÈSE plucks again.

THÉRÈSE: If you don't finish and hook up with Delambre soon -- and I mean soon -- they will destroy you.

MÉCHAIN: They have always wanted [to] --

THÉRÈSE: Don't talk stupid, Méchain, really --

THÉRÈSE slaps his shoulders to flatten them.

THÉRÈSE: -- really -- that's your big manly shoulders talking -- the proud savant grinding out Nature's secrets --

THÉRÈSE moves around, observing and plucking the lines of the triangle.

THÉRÈSE: -- your children live in the best house at the Observatory -- another A -- and your government salary per year -- more than anything a farmer mucking around here makes in several -- yes, they must truly truly hate you, Méchain -- triangular harmony -- but their patience? thin, Méchain, thin and getting thinner --

THÉRÈSE faces him directly.

THÉRÈSE: The savants from the other countries are already here -- the conference on the meter has already started -- and everyone waits, with his breath bated, for Méchain -- my beloved Méchain --

THÉRÈSE touches his face.

THÉRÈSE: You know, you do, in a way, hold the world on your shoulders. And if you don't deliver the triangles and your numbers, they will send someone to finish it off, which will finish us off -- they don't chop heads off anymore, but they still do -- do you hear me?

MÉCHAIN: I hear that you're one of them.

THÉRÈSE: *(tenderly)* No -- no my dear one --

MÉCHAIN: You want to steal --

THÉRÈSE: Your pain? Yes. I'll eat it all.

MÉCHAIN: And make me look like a fool -- "Barbe-Thérèse Méchain had to come pull her husband out of the shit-storm" -- I'm going to let go --

THÉRÈSE: No! No!

THÉRÈSE grabs the end of the strings just in time as MÉCHAIN walks away. The triangle is intact.

MÉCHAIN: You want a pain to eat? You are so ready to [eat] --

THÉRÈSE: Of course -- come [back] --

MÉCHAIN snaps his fingers, but the STARS do not return. It is now day.

MÉCHAIN: Shit! Shit! I want them back --

THÉRÈSE: What?

MÉCHAIN: My stars, the ones you trashed --

THÉRÈSE: They won't seek you until --

MÉCHAIN: See, another part of [the] --

THÉRÈSE indicates the strings.

THÉRÈSE: Keep these with [me] --

MÉCHAIN: The mistake is not just numbers -- in the figures -- it's in me, is me -- is the whole me! -- you don't -- my skin is pricked by what I didn't do in the proper [ways] -- inked, drenched in a tattoo that reads to the world "Méchain has fucked up -- "

THÉRÈSE: You are not the num[bers] --

MÉCHAIN: I am! That is my world! Not this new one -- the one built on all the heads -- the skulls -- it's so hard to be part of --

THÉRÈSE holds out one of the strings.

THÉRÈSE: I am tired -- please --

MÉCHAIN takes the string. They are close together.

THÉRÈSE: To be part of?

MÉCHAIN: It -- it levels everything, this new world, flattens the universe -- the stars my stars -- rrrrrrkkkkk! right into a -- commodity -- a new word with the young ones -- "economists" they name them[selves] -- and I feel flattened by all --

THÉRÈSE: You are far from --

MÉCHAIN: Creamed, squashed, rolling-pinned --

MÉCHAIN makes a flattening gesture.

MÉCHAIN: Pfft -- and these numbers I have -- will do --

THÉRÈSE: Even as you love doing the numbers.

MÉCHAIN: Even as I love doing the numbers that will kill me -- and when they're wrong --

THÉRÈSE: Have you ever thought -- look at me -- have you ever thought the earth may be wrong?

MÉCHAIN looks at THÉRÈSE, and for the first time he seems genuinely stumped. THÉRÈSE takes advantage.

THÉRÈSE: Nature might be, well, lumpy? You know, porridge? Glop glop. What numbers would be the right numbers for the meridian of a bowl of porridge?

MÉCHAIN: I -- I --

THÉRÈSE: "Perfect" may be perfectly off the mark --

MÉCHAIN: I -- can't -- I -- don't -- know --

THÉRÈSE: You do the best you can. Why should you think can do better than that? Why do you think you can do better than the two of us here?

THÉRÈSE plucks one of the triangle sides.

THÉRÈSE: Where does this go? You set the station up -- you know.

MÉCHAIN: Lumpy?

THÉRÈSE: *(laughing)* Lumpy -- like us. At the end of this, what?

MÉCHAIN: Perfect not perfect -- I can't even begin --

THÉRÈSE: *(impatient)* Where?

MÉCHAIN: That's Rodez.

THÉRÈSE: Rodez.

Along another side.

THÉRÈSE: And --

MÉCHAIN: Lagaste.

THÉRÈSE: And the other --

MÉCHAIN: Montredon.

THÉRÈSE hands MÉCHAIN her string. She takes a notebook out of her bag. She records the numbers.

THÉRÈSE: And so these angles are done.

THÉRÈSE rips out the page of the notebook. She takes the string-ends as she hands it to MÉCHAIN. He does nothing with it.

THÉRÈSE: Aren't you going [to] --

MÉCHAIN: Yes --

MÉCHAIN folds the paper and puts it in a pocket.

MÉCHAIN: There are more --

THÉRÈSE: Something had to get you started.

THÉRÈSE pulls the string off the hooks and out of his hands and rolls it back up.

THÉRÈSE: And so you can now finish them -- finish them, like that! And then we can [go] -- Méchain -- you'll finish them, right?

MÉCHAIN does not answer her.

THÉRÈSE: Méchain -- what is --

MÉCHAIN: Why should I?

THÉRÈSE: I thought we had --

MÉCHAIN: You thought we [had] -- if perfect is not perfect -- "lumpy" -- God! -- then why?

THÉRÈSE stares at him in disbelief.

THÉRÈSE: What?

MÉCHAIN: Why? Why? What?

THÉRÈSE gathers her stuff.

THÉRÈSE: Nothing nothing --

MÉCHAIN: You thought porridge would --

THÉRÈSE: -- nothing nothing nothing --

MÉCHAIN: -- soothe the beast --

THÉRÈSE: I can't -- I can't --

MÉCHAIN: What you said only makes me more terrified -- stop --

THÉRÈSE: We have children --

MÉCHAIN: A world crushed to a thin paste --

THÉRÈSE: They have obviously lost --

MÉCHAIN: -- and without the rational bones underneath --

THÉRÈSE: -- one parent they don't need to lose two --

MÉCHAIN: That sense makes no sense --

THÉRÈSE: I have to leave --

MÉCHAIN: -- melts me to nothing -- dice, just dice --

THÉRÈSE: I can't compete with this other wife of yours -- your consort! -- crush her to you! -- let her crush you, since you so [love] -- I have to leave -- I have to leave you --

And THÉRÈSE does. She crosses paths with DELAMBRE, who is carrying a ladder. She goes to say something to DELAMBRE, cannot bring herself to say anything. She leaves.

MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE look at each other. MÉCHAIN turns away.

MÉCHAIN: Now they send in the savages.

DELAMBRE sets up the ladder, climbs it, sits on the top. MÉCHAIN snaps his fingers or claps his hands. Night comes on. MÉCHAIN snaps his fingers or claps his hands again. STARS come on but stand in a file upstage.

MÉCHAIN: Move!

The STARS do not move.

DELAMBRE: They're being lumpy.

MÉCHAIN: Shut up. (to STARS) Move!

The STARS do not move.

DELAMBRE: They won't.

MÉCHAIN: Why not?

DELAMBRE: Who knows?

MÉCHAIN: What are you doing here?

DELAMBRE: Waiting.

MÉCHAIN: You can wait until you die.

DELAMBRE: I work until I die. You're the one who's waiting. And dying.

MÉCHAIN turns his back on DELAMBRE. Two STARS step forward. One climbs up the ladder and hands DELAMBRE a bucket of sand. The other puts a box of some sort underneath to catch the sand.

DELAMBRE: But I also don't mind waiting. If what's waiting for is worth the wait.

DELAMBRE tips the bucket and pours out the sand. The pouring lasts 50 seconds. The SOUND is of falling sand but also of many other SOUNDS -- not quite a music, not quite a cacophony. The light on the sand shifts with the SOUNDS.

MÉCHAIN: Well, it's not -- it's rotten -- go to Paris and get your glory --

DELAMBRE: It's our glory --

MÉCHAIN: Reproaches, disdain, contempt -- everyone knows -- sending my wife --

DELAMBRE: We can only do this together --

MÉCHAIN: Laughingstock -- I'll stay in the mountains --

DELAMBRE: Your family --

MÉCHAIN: A burden to them -- a weight around their -- you think I don't have offers from --

DELAMBRE: It is running out --

MÉCHAIN: Stop --

DELAMBRE: Without you, no glory for either of us --

MÉCHAIN: Don't hold me respon[sible] --

DELAMBRE: Without your data, no meter --

MÉCHAIN: Aarrgghh --

DELAMBRE: Without you, the world moves on incomplete --

MÉCHAIN: It already is -- a knife in my [eye] --

DELAMBRE: I do not go back without you --

DELAMBRE finishes pouring.

DELAMBRE: It's that simple.

At the end of the pouring, the STARS take away the bucket and the sand. And they themselves disappear.

The two of them wait a minute in the semi-darkness.

DELAMBRE: The time is out. You have no place left to go.

MÉCHAIN: I have -- true.

DELAMBRE: Except Paris.

MÉCHAIN: True. True. And true.

DELAMBRE climbs down the ladder, comes to MÉCHAIN. Two DRESSERS come on with a change of vests and coats for each man. They re-dress.

DELAMBRE: They want your data. I want your data. They want you. It's time. It's your time.

MÉCHAIN: But not my choice.

DELAMBRE: You can't have everything.

MÉCHAIN settles into his clothes, turns to DELAMBRE.

MÉCHAIN: Well, then --

* * * * *

SCENE 7

Paris. Light. All the SAVANTS.

LAPLACE: All Paris -- all the world -- welcomes you both to the honors you both so richly deserve.

LALANDE: Make no mistake about it, you will get, both of you, what you deserve.

LAPLACE: Lalande's acid nature hasn't diluted in seven years.

LALANDE: Because vinegar excellently preserves this corpse of mine. And further because seven years hasn't done away with the stupidity of this whole --

BORDA: And now that we have your data -- (to LALANDE) -- thank you, your eminence, for your vinaigrette --

LALANDE: No good deed --

BORDA: (to MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE) All written out -- (to MÉCHAIN) -- and yours in such a neat hand --

LALANDE: -- will remain unpunished --

BORDA: -- in such compact and precise books -- what we have been waiting for --

BORDA claps his hands.

BORDA: -- we can get started!

The SAVANTS, except for LALANDE, pull notebooks and pencils out of their pockets and become THE GREAT CALCULATOR as they move in geometric patterns around the space. Then LALANDE, unable to resist, pulls out his notebook and calculates as well.

At times through the following conversation, the SAVANTS will stop, look at their calculations, scratch their heads in puzzlement, then continue their patterned walk.

DELAMBRE and MÉCHAIN move among the SAVANTS. THÉRÈSE appears.

DELAMBRE: You're looking well --

MÉCHAIN: Everyone has been -- kind --

DELAMBRE: Yes -- I noticed --

MÉCHAIN: What?

DELAMBRE: It's a small thing, I'm sure --

MÉCHAIN: Then say it.

DELAMBRE: That you only turned in summaries of your measurements --

MÉCHAIN: I did -- so?

DELAMBRE: Turned out in a nice hand, I might [add] --

MÉCHAIN: Is neatness also a crime now against the Revolution?

DELAMBRE: No, neatness is not a [crime] --

MÉCHAIN: The summaries are all they need.

DELAMBRE: For them, yes -- perhaps -- but --

MÉCHAIN: What?

DELAMBRE: I'll need your original notes --

MÉCHAIN: You'll need? Why?

DELAMBRE: And your original logbooks --

MÉCHAIN: And I'll say again, why?

DELAMBRE: Because I have been asked to write the official record of the expedition.

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures. They begin their calculations again.

MÉCHAIN: Really. Who asked you to do that? (to THÉRÈSE) Do you see how they all work against [me] --

THÉRÈSE: No, I don't.

MÉCHAIN: Really? (to DELAMBRE) Who asked --

DELAMBRE: The Academy of Sciences, of course -- the Bureau of Longitudes -- the government, which did pay [for] --

MÉCHAIN: Why you? Why not me? Come on, answer me.

DELAMBRE: It's not really neces[sary] --

MÉCHAIN: Why not me? Why not us together?

DELAMBRE: It's not important --

MÉCHAIN: I asked you "Why you?" and why won't you tell me?

DELAMBRE: Even if I write it, it is our work, joint discovery --

THÉRÈSE: Let it [go] --

MÉCHAIN: (to THÉRÈSE) You are a thief -- a ball-breaker --

DELAMBRE and THÉRÈSE are stunned at this. MÉCHAIN does not notice.

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures. They begin their calculations again.

MÉCHAIN: (to DELAMBRE) You are junior to me in the Academy -- junior -- I have ten more years in the Academy than you --

DELAMBRE indicates the SAVANTS.

DELAMBRE: Perhaps we should join --

MÉCHAIN: I want to know whose ass you kissed --

DELAMBRE: This is not --

THÉRÈSE: Let it [go] --

MÉCHAIN: Tell me! Who pulled his pants down --

DELAMBRE: I really don't want [to] --

THÉRÈSE: *(to MÉCHAIN)* Can't you see he's [trying] --

MÉCHAIN: Tell me!

THÉRÈSE: Tell him, if that's what he --

MÉCHAIN: Me!

DELAMBRE: *(to THÉRÈSE)* This is not the place [to] --

THÉRÈSE: If it's what he [wants] --

MÉCHAIN: To me!

DELAMBRE: I surveyed -- I surveyed over two-thirds of the triangles -- I laid down both
baselines --

MÉCHAIN: You stole -- you tricked -- you forced --

*The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they
review their figures. They begin their calculations again.*

DELAMBRE: No -- no -- and I'm afraid I need to make this clear even if I really don't want to
because I still respect --

THÉRÈSE: Don't waste your breath on courtesy --

MÉCHAIN: *(to THÉRÈSE)* Who can trust --

DELAMBRE: If I stole anything, I stole you.

MÉCHAIN: Stole from [me] --

DELAMBRE: No, stole you -- it took me fifty days to pry you out of your funk --

THÉRÈSE: I tried for five weeks and got shit [for] --

MÉCHAIN points first at DELAMBRE, then THÉRÈSE, then back and forth between them.

MÉCHAIN: Ah -- ah --

DELAMBRE: Fifty days while you measured this --

MÉCHAIN: The two of you --

DELAMBRE: -- and fretted about that and dithered and grouched and snarled and bitched --

THÉRÈSE: You're only seeing this now? The great logician?

MÉCHAIN: The two of you -- against me --

MÉCHAIN points to the SAVANTS.

MÉCHAIN: And all of them --

DELAMBRE: What would you expect?

MÉCHAIN: Respect!

DELAMBRE: From their perspective, they have a melancholic genius holed up in the Montagnes Noires gripping something they need -- death-grip -- his letters sometimes ten pages of self-pity after self-pity -- he may even be completely dissolved --

THÉRÈSE: In short, they couldn't respect a nut-case --

DELAMBRE: Please --

THÉRÈSE: I respect him, I don't have to be nice to him --

DELAMBRE: Just --

THÉRÈSE: Go on --

DELAMBRE: So, of course, yes -- the two of us, the others -- all to steal you from yourself --

MÉCHAIN: And steal my work -- steal my work --

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures. They begin their calculations again.

DELAMBRE: Your work? What makes you think --

MÉCHAIN: I did it, it belongs to [me] --

DELAMBRE: Let's make clear between us what should've been clear to you from the start --

THÉRÈSE: Dawn comes late to the mountaintop --

DELAMBRE: -- whatever you have stashed away in those logbooks of yours, the ones you won't turn over to me or anyone else -- it's not yours -- it belongs to France, it belongs to the people, it belongs to the Revolution -- you get to hold it in trust and that's all -- and as Permanent Secretary of the Academy --

MÉCHAIN: Perm[anent] --

DELAMBRE: Yes.

MÉCHAIN: When did that hap[pen] -- when did --

DELAMBRE: You refuse to come to the Academy meetings, you miss out on --

MÉCHAIN: Napoleon --

DELAMBRE: By his hand --

MÉCHAIN: So he dropped his [pants] --

DELAMBRE: Listen to me --

MÉCHAIN: Stuck out his arse --

DELAMBRE: Listen to me -- your work? In a sense, one that you have no choice about saying "yes" or "no" to, your work belongs to the Permanent Secretary of the Academy of Sciences --

MÉCHAIN: To you.

DELAMBRE: To me.

MÉCHAIN: The general's boy has done so well for himself.

DELAMBRE: As has the melancholic genius -- as unreliable and irritating as you've been, they have taken care of you -- director of the national Observatory, which you deserve -- living on the grounds, with your family, in Cassini's apartments -- do we understand each other?

MÉCHAIN: Of course you'll have them.

DELAMBRE: Have what? Yes?

MÉCHAIN: The logbooks.

DELAMBRE: And any notes.

MÉCHAIN: (to THÉRÈSE) Why can't you see --

DELAMBRE: I'm glad to hear [that] --

MÉCHAIN: When I get them arranged --

DELAMBRE: They aren't already --

MÉCHAIN: You'll get what you want -- you don't need to question my methods, question me! (to THÉRÈSE) Why can't you see --

THÉRÈSE: What I see saddens me.

MÉCHAIN: Always undercut, always --

The SAVANTS come to a unanimous halt. As one they scratch their heads as they review their figures.

SAVANTS: Hmmm.

MÉCHAIN: What? What?

The SAVANTS ignore him.

MÉCHAIN: What?

They gather in the center, muttering, checking each other. MÉCHAIN drifts toward them, his whole body crouched in fear.

Out of the pack erupts BORDA, notebook in hand, trailed by the other SAVANTS. He beelines to MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE.

BORDA: What is this shit?

MÉCHAIN: Barcelona, wasn't it.

BORDA: Barce[lona] -- what are you talking about?

MÉCHAIN: Nothing -- no[thing] --

BORDA: I want to know why --

LALANDE: Monsieur Borda has had a shock!

SAVANTS: We want to know [why] --

DELAMBRE: Monsieur Borda, what do you want [to know] --

BORDA: Either the numbers are all wrong -- all crap --

MÉCHAIN: The numbers are [fine] --

DELAMBRE: Yes, they are, so --

LAPLACE: (*smiling*) You weren't supposed to discover something completely new, is what Monsieur Borda is [trying] --

BORDA: Why are you smiling? (*to LALANDE*) And you?

LALANDE: It's not completely new but --

LAPLACE: It's new enough for "new" -- and good for a smile --

LALANDE: Agreed.

MÉCHAIN: What --

BORDA: It's a disaster!

LALANDE: Most new things are, at least to you.

DELAMBRE: Could you please let us in on the joke, or the disaster, depending on which [of you] --

LAPLACE: The extra latitudes we had you measure --

BORDA: Dunkerque, Paris --

LAPLACE: Evaux, Carcassone --

MÉCHAIN: Barcelona --

BORDA: And Barcelona --

LAPLACE: We had suspicions.

LALANDE: Devious bastards, they were.

BORDA: Careful bastards -- (*to MÉCHAIN*) Boscovich.

MÉCHAIN: From Ragusa, the Jesuit.

BORDA: And? C'mon --

MÉCHAIN: He measured the meridian through the Papal States. I have his report at the Observatory.

DELAMBRE: I own it, too.

BORDA: And? C'mon, both of you -- what did he suggest?

MÉCHAIN: That the meridian through Rome did not --

DELAMBRE: -- did not match the meridian through Paris --

LALANDE: (*laughing*) Absurd, right? A meridian is a meridian, right?

LAPLACE: (*overlapping*) -- is a meridian -- right?

LALANDE: From the equator to the pole --

LALANDE makes irregular arcs with his hands.

LALANDE: Pfft! Pfft! Pfft!

MÉCHAIN and DELAMBRE look at each other and realize. They smile and laugh.

LALANDE: Ah --

MÉCHAIN: No.

LALANDE: See?

DELAMBRE: No.

LALANDE: See?

MÉCHAIN: No. (*to BORDA*) You must have found --

BORDA: Lumpy -- the goddamn earth is lumpy!

At the word "lumpy," MÉCHAIN and THÉRÈSE exchange a look and a smile.

THÉRÈSE: (*mouthing the words*) What did I tell you?

BORDA stamps his foot several times.

BORDA: Like a squash.

MÉCHAIN: Like porridge.

BORDA: Boscovich -- Christ!

BORDA makes irregular arcs with his hand.

BORDA: From Barcelona to Carcassone -- a fucking broken-spined mule -- from Carcassone to Evaux --

LALANDE: A fucking -- tree branch --

LAPLACE: From Evaux to Paris -- the broken fucking teeth of a peasant --

MÉCHAIN: From Paris to Dunkerque -- a fucking arthritic crone!

LALANDE: I love this disaster!

BORDA: Shut up! Shut up -- I need to think --

MÉCHAIN joins THÉRÈSE, tries to kiss her -- she refuses. He moves back to the group.

BORDA: If we don't own a smooth meridian through France, a nice clean simple arc -- why do things always have [to be] -- if what we have's as lumpy as plaster! -- we can't make the meter. Can we? Can we?

MÉCHAIN: I have a --

BORDA: *(ignoring him)* A meter can't be one ten-millionth of a gourd, of shit! And if we don't get the meter -- if we can't [get] --

LAPLACE: Trying breathing in between --

MÉCHAIN: I have a solu[tion] --

BORDA: *(ignoring him)* -- then it's seven goddamned wasted years and a betrayal of -- I can't even --

BORDA indicates the SAVANTS.

BORDA: -- and in front of -- France will be --

LALANDE: We can go back to my original proposal -- use the Paris measurements and --

LALANDE snaps his fingers.

LALANDE: -- it's done --

BORDA: If you don't shut up, I'll use your ugly corpse for a ruler --

LALANDE: This is great fun!

MÉCHAIN: I have a solution --

BORDA: *(to MÉCHAIN)* It's not you I have to talk to. *(to DELAMBRE)* You're the Permanent Secretary -- the general takes such a shine to you -- what've you got to say to our illustrious International Commission? What the fuck should our illustrious International Commission do now?

BORDA is so agitated that he cannot even wait for DELAMBRE's answer but must pace to work off his agitation. DELAMBRE examines everyone before he speaks.

DELAMBRE: You won't like it, but here it is: fake it.

BORDA: What?

DELAMBRE: Not all meridians are equal -- I'm sorry -- well, not that sorry -- that Monsieur Méchain and I found what we found, but -- well -- what can I say -- the earth is what it is.

BORDA: Fake it?

DELAMBRE: Did I say "fake"?

BORDA: You said --

DELAMBRE: Slip of the tongue -- I meant "interpret." What we savants can do so well.

LAPLACE: Interpret what?

DELAMBRE: Our data aren't the only data lying around. There's Cassini's work from 1740 --

BORDA: Which your whole mission was supposed to make more precise!

DELAMBRE: Which it did.

BORDA: Yes, but [still] --

DELAMBRE: So don't shoot the messenger -- in any case, we also have numbers from Peru and Lapland --

BORDA: Fifty years old!

DELAMBRE: To an earth millions of years old -- pfft. My point is this: you -- we -- this illustrious gathered "we" -- can have consistency -- Keep to the data! Always the data! -- (*DELAMBRE laughs*) -- or we can have believability.

DELAMBRE lets this thought sink in.

DELAMBRE: Look --

DELAMBRE unbuttons his vest.

DELAMBRE: I am investigating my vest.

DELAMBRE re-buttons his vest -- but one hole off, so that it's buttoned wrong.

DELAMBRE: I can be very deliberate and very strict in my buttoning -- set my fingers just so -- like I was setting my sextant or plumb line -- move the buttons through with a calculated

push -- like writing my numbers down in a clear hand -- in short, be conscientious, clear, careful, preeeecise -- and yet, for all my concise precision --

DELAMBRE's vest-buttons are one hole off. He shows this off to everyone.

DELAMBRE: Now --

DELAMBRE goes to another SAVANT, unbuttons and mis-rebuttons his vest.

DELAMBRE: If we all have -- stand still -- if we all have our buttons misarranged in the same way --

LAPLACE: If the error is systematic --

DELAMBRE: To put it in a scientific lingo --

DELAMBRE finishes.

DELAMBRE: -- there we go -- then no problem --

BORDA: A shared mistake --

LALANDE: Devoutly believed in --

BORDA: -- is no mistake.

DELAMBRE stands next to the misbuttoned SAVANT.

DELAMBRE: And here we have Castor and Pollux -- our beliefs about the way the earth should be shaped, our beliefs neat, precise, and --

DELAMBRE pulls another SAVANT next to him, with the vest properly buttoned.

DELAMBRE: Oh my deity, look! New information? What shall we do?

DELAMBRE looks back and forth between the two, eyes agog.

DELAMBRE: If am who I say I am, I have to follow it -- bitch and moan, maybe, at having to change -- but -- ready?

DELAMBRE and the SAVANT re-button their vests -- make a race out of it.

DELAMBRE: Hah! And so it goes. Except, except -- if I am honest with myself -- if I am energized by knowing -- I notice that his buttons and my buttons, though now supposedly arranged by truth, are not the same -- his meridian, so to speak, has a different slant to it than mine --

LALANDE: (*sing-song*) Lump-didi-dump-didi-lump-lump-lump --

DELAMBRE: Lumpiness --

LALANDE: Lumpy --

DELAMBRE: -- and if my mission is to measure the perfect "vest-button arrangement," the Platonic ideal that spawns other Platonic ideals, like, say, the meter -- I am up shit's creek, am I not? What do I do? What do I do?

LAPLACE: Aren't we lying?

DELAMBRE: And I'll answer with a question. How well are the government's efforts going to prepare the people, the glorious people, our touchstone and beacon --

BORDA: You don't have to [mock] --

DELAMBRE: -- to eat, sleep, and breathe our revolutionary meter? And you don't have to answer -- I already know.

LALANDE: They hate the fucking thing --

DELAMBRE: An excellent scientific formulation. And I would even add that our celebrated science-loving general will not be entirely gifted with affection for the meter if it makes his subjects unhappy. So. What do we do?

LAPLACE: I can smell what's coming up --

DELAMBRE: Always a good nose, Monsieur Laplace, for wine and possibility. This is what we do: we make-believe -- excuse me again, we "interpret." We take all our vests, we mix them in, we look over the results, we say to ourselves, "Well, one set says this -- lumpy lumpy lumpy -- but this other set says this, and if we use some from there and some from there, then this new set just feels right, righter -- more like the vest we need." Not perfect, not precise, but what is perfect and precise anyway? -- just the fever-dreams of stuffed-shirt intellectuals like us. Do we need a meter?

BORDA: We need a meter.

DELAMBRE: Then let's make the meter we need, supported by the numbers we need to support it. The most precise point we'll be able to argue is that our meter isn't wrong. So says the Permanent Secretary, this April of 1799.

BORDA ponders this. The SAVANTS ponder this.

BORDA: Sometimes to serve the people, one must resolve to give them only that knowledge that will serve them well.

DELAMBRE: You could say it like that.

BORDA: *(to others)* Come here.

The SAVANTS huddle and discuss. From them comes the SOUNDS of metal being cut and shaped.

MÉCHAIN: I have a solution.

DELAMBRE: To what?

MÉCHAIN: You can't honestly believe this fig leaf will --

DELAMBRE: It's not a fig leaf -- it's how science gets made.

MÉCHAIN: No it's [not] --

DELAMBRE: For all intents and purposes, this meter is the proper meter.

MÉCHAIN: But the numbers --

DELAMBRE: Are just numbers.

MÉCHAIN: But they're the wrong --

DELAMBRE: Numbers are just num[bers] --

From the SAVANTS comes forward the meter bar, which BORDA holds aloft. SOUNDS of fanfare and celebration.

BORDA: June 22, 1799, we present this platinum bar to the French legislative assemblies so that the people's representatives can consecrate by man's law what nature has rendered through its own law.

With great fanfare, whoops and hollers, the SAVANTS march off with the meter bar held high.

MÉCHAIN: Believe me, I know about wrong numbers.

DELAMBRE: Really.

MÉCHAIN: I mean, in general --

THÉRÈSE: He knows.

MÉCHAIN: -- how they can -- you know, "lumpy" -- but the solution is to get better numbers!

DELAMBRE: And that's the solution you want to talk to me [about] --

THÉRÈSE: Don't you dare.

MÉCHAIN: (to THÉRÈSE) I have to.

DELAMBRE: Before you say anything --

MÉCHAIN: I am not --

DELAMBRE: Don't be rash --

MÉCHAIN: -- going to wait --

DELAMBRE: You have to consider --

THÉRÈSE: He won't --

MÉCHAIN: Extend the meridian past Barcelona -- extend the meridian past Barcelona --

DELAMBRE: What, into the Mediterranean?

MÉCHAIN: To the Balearic Islands.

DELAMBRE: You just spent seven years --

THÉRÈSE: He's trying to kill himself.

MÉCHAIN: Put the southern latitude on an island, and you don't get distortion from the mountains.

DELAMBRE: True, but -- *(to THÉRÈSE)* Can't you --

MÉCHAIN: Extending it -- listen to me -- don't pay any attention to [her] -- extending it would bring it to the 45th parallel --

DELAMBRE: Go back to the Observatory, continue your excellent work there as Director --

MÉCHAIN: The 45th parallel! Makes it easier to extrapolate the partial arc through France --

DELAMBRE: You are the nation's senior astronomer --

MÉCHAIN: Listen to [me] --

DELAMBRE: Go find more comets -- enjoy your family -- *(to THÉRÈSE)* Take him --

MÉCHAIN: We can extrapolate it to a true quarter meridian -- cleaner, more exact -- don't look to her for -- we can do away with all this "interpretation" nonsense -- vest buttons! --

THÉRÈSE rises.

THÉRÈSE: I am not needed. For anything.

THÉRÈSE leaves.

DELAMBRE: Don't be a fool. I agree, it'd be a good mission to do, but give it to someone younger --

MÉCHAIN: You can talk to the general, get him to approve --

DELAMBRE: He's not my employee.

MÉCHAIN: Tell him that -- that the mission would -- cement the "intimate union" -- yes, that -- between France and Spain. Having peace on the islands would keep the sea lanes open for France, against Britain --

DELAMBRE: And when did you put "military strategy" on your résumé?

MÉCHAIN: That's the "interpretation" he wants to hear, so give it to him --

DELAMBRE: At the risk of being boring and dull through repetition, you have a family, you have important work to do, your body is not a young body anymore -- did I mention that you have a family? Who has just left you?

MÉCHAIN: I need to do this! I need -- for France --

DELAMBRE: Not for a moment --

MÉCHAIN: For my own peace of mind!

DELAMBRE: Why would this give you peace when seven years of the same kind of work has done exactly the opposite? I have watched you since we finished keep feeding your soul, bit by bit, to whatever demon ate at you for fifty days in the mountains --

MÉCHAIN: That's none of your busi[ness] --

DELAMBRE: -- for five weeks when your wife came to find you, for more days and years than I care to, or can, count -- praise, prizes, gratefulness -- none of this soothes you a bit, not one bit --

MÉCHAIN: I have to prove --

DELAMBRE: What is left for you to prove?

MÉCHAIN: That I can lay out my own goddamn triangles --

DELAMBRE: No one's ever doubted --

MÉCHAIN: I don't need Tranchot or Thérèse -- I don't need my wife to come save me -- and I don't need you -- I can do an arc better than the great Delambre! Triangles 120 miles long, across uncharted terrain, island to mainland -- that would be a reputation worth fighting to get!

DELAMBRE: And your current reputation -- praise, prizes, gratefulness -- none of that -- ?

MÉCHAIN: None of that!

DELAMBRE: It still feeds.

MÉCHAIN: Will you talk to Napoleon? Will you talk to --

DELAMBRE: Yes.

MÉCHAIN: Tell him it'll be great science -- he'll like that -- did you know my son went with him to Egypt, to do surveys while the general had his ass handed to him -- mention that to him -
- my son, not about his ass -- this challenge will bring France glory -- put that in, too --
yes, good, that will all be good for the general to feed his ego on --

DELAMBRE: And not only his ego.

MÉCHAIN: It is always so easy for you, so easy, the gentle-tempered Delambre, the cloth-seller's son with the soul of a humanist --

DELAMBRE: And I have never seen you happy.

MÉCHAIN: Your conscience is so clear --

DELAMBRE: I did twice as much work on the meridian as you did and never once felt any despair -- the mission was there, I was here -- I kept them several healthy triangulations away from each other -- it's just a game, anyways -- life has been good -- but you have your demon -- I'll make the general say "yes" -- and so it goes --

DELAMBRE leaves. THÉRÈSE enters. The scene is set as at the top of the play. DEZAUCHE and the BARON sit by the bed.

THÉRÈSE: If you die --

MÉCHAIN: I am not going to die.

THÉRÈSE: Then let me be more exact, since you so much treasure the exact: after you're done killing yourself --

MÉCHAIN: I am not --

THÉRÈSE holds up a mirror to MÉCHAIN's face.

THÉRÈSE: Look -- look -- and tell me again --

THÉRÈSE throws the mirror down, stomps on it.

MÉCHAIN: Not your face at all -- something else -- presses from behind -- ugly and toxic --

THÉRÈSE grinds her heel into the glass.

THÉRÈSE: My eyes will melt if I look any more --

MÉCHAIN: Look at me --

THÉRÈSE: I can't -- I won't --

MÉCHAIN: Then fine! Fine! Just turn into another one who gives up on me, abandons me!

THÉRÈSE: Yes, of course, that's who you are now -- my husband would never say that --

MÉCHAIN: Look at [me] --

THÉRÈSE: -- but this -- thing -- speaks -- no don't touch! -- after you're done killing yourself, you'll stay buried wherever you drop -- don't! -- if it's here, then I'll stuff your mouth with French dirt -- if there -- I won't bring you back --

THÉRÈSE pulls out a cloth and blindfolds herself.

THÉRÈSE: Done.

THÉRÈSE wanders away. MÉCHAIN stoops down, picks up a piece of broken mirror. He puts it in his mouth and eats it.

MÉCHAIN: The demon's appetite [swells] --

A ladder appears. MÉCHAIN takes out his own cloth, folds the glass shards in it. He climbs the ladder. He blindfolds himself with the broken glass. He looks right, he looks center, he looks left, he looks center, he looks right -- all with increasing frustration. DEZAUCHE and the BARON walk up behind him. With a sudden collapse, he falls into their arms, and they bring him to the bed.

DEZAUCHE: Baron --

BARON: Good morning.

DEZAUCHE: Morning, yes --

BARON: And?

DEZAUCHE: Not well, Baron -- not doing well --

BARON: No, I can see that. It seems this kind of fever either leaves you alone after it touches you or it rips you apart.

DEZAUCHE: I am not willing to guess.

BARON: But you're not a doctor, either, are you.

DEZAUCHE: Baron, I mean no disrespect, but I don't have to be a physician to see what's in front of me.

BARON: Proves nothing. Eyes -- not always reliable. Has he been bled?

DEZAUCHE: The leeches sing him thanks.

BARON: There's a distrust in your voice.

DEZAUCHE: I don't trust butchery.

BARON: So I've hired butchers?

DEZAUCHE: These "cures" -- bleeding, blistering -- like the Inquisition --

BARON: You're free to say whatever you want here, but I'd still be careful --

DEZAUCHE: I'm sorry -- it's been a long night.

BARON: For everybody.

BARON points to the journal.

BARON: What are you --

DEZAUCHE: I'm cleaning up the calculations. Whether he lives or dies --

BARON: The calculations will live on.

DEZAUCHE: Yes, always.

BARON: If they're right, that is.

DEZAUCHE: Why would you think --

BARON: Have you ever known anything humans have done that has been done without mistakes?

DEZAUCHE: The triangulations have been very precise. He is a very precise man --

BARON: But accurate?

DEZAUCHE: It's the same --

BARON: I can be very precise and still be dead wrong: "I've cut the board twice now and it's still too short."

DEZAUCHE: Not the time for mock[ery] --

BARON: On the other hand, for truth --

MÉCHAIN: My venerable host is right.

DEZAUCHE: Oh, good good -- you're awake -- don't speak -- you need to --

MÉCHAIN: Don't speak? -- don't speak? -- what've I got to lose? I've been not-speaking for days -- at last a clear moment -- I'm dying -- isn't that the truth?

BARON: All are dying, Pierre -- the only difference is the rates.

MÉCHAIN: Fast track for me. Slippery. Downhill. What a miserable way to end a life -- fevered and shitting myself in Spain --

Sickroom goes to dark. DELAMBRE steps forward. He carries three heavy leather-bound volumes. He drops them to the floor, stands on them.

DELAMBRE: My final report: Base du système métrique. Two thousand pages. A real best seller.

MÉCHAIN joins him.

DELAMBRE: I held nothing back, including how you shaved the Barcelona numbers, how you hid the deception behind those beautiful hand-written summaries you gave to the Commission.

DELAMBRE steps down, invites MÉCHAIN to stand on the books, which he does.

DELAMBRE: I also "interpreted" the fudge as a good example of how a working scientist continues to seek out perfection in the midst of the flawed and the futile.

MÉCHAIN: Nice save.

DELAMBRE: What do you see from up there?

MÉCHAIN: Nothing I want to continue seeing.

MÉCHAIN steps down. They face one another, then hold each other as dance partners.

DELAMBRE & MÉCHAIN: The Scientists dance the dance of Science.

MÉCHAIN: And a-one, and a-two, and --

They begin their dance in very formal patterns -- rigorous and exact and, in its own way, beautiful. As they move, they can ad lib statements. As the dance goes on, it becomes increasingly less exact, more fluid, beautiful in another way. And they laugh.