

Small Lives (Vies minuscules, 1984)

Masters and Servants (Maîtres et serviteurs, 1990) Rimbaud the Son (Rimbaud le fils, 1991)

Winter Mythologies and Abbots (Mythologies d'hiver, 1997; Abbés, 2002)

The Eleven (Les Onze, 2009)

The Origin of the World

PIERRE MICHON

TRANSLATED AND WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY
WYATT MASON

WITH AN AFTERWORD BY
ROGER SHATTUCK

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A note on the title: Michon’s working title was *L’Origine du monde*. Shortly prior to publication, however, another work came out so named, thus he chose *La Grande Beune*. For the English edition, the author prefers that his original title be preserved.

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INTRODUCTION

WYATT MASON

In 1998, François Bon, a contemporary French writer unknown to English-language readers but with following in France, wrote an essay called “Sur le «Fausto Coppi» de Pierre Michon”—“On Pierre Michon’s *Fausto Coppi*.” Initially appearing in issue number five of *Scherzo*, a high-ideals, low-circulation literary review, the essay quickly became notorious. It was soon reissued by Bon and Michon’s principal publisher, Éditions Verdier, as a limited-edition letterpress chapbook the size of number 10 envelope and almost as light. Even so, it contained enormous news.

“We know,” Bon’s essay began, “two years ago, there were problems with a distributor, and despite the best efforts of a ‘little’ publisher—‘little’ as in one willing to publish work as excellent as it is challenging—its three hundred copies of Pierre Michon’s *Fausto Coppi* are still in a storage facility in the boonies.”

Bon’s “we know” was a provocation: we most certainly did *not* know that publishing jack-puddingry had consigned a new novel by Pierre Michon to the alien corn. This marooning, Bon knew, recalled other miscarriages of French literary-historical justice. “As *Une Saison en enfer* itself sat in an attic in Belgium,” wrote Bon, “or as *Les Chants de Maldoror* was, by the printer whose press produced it, held hostage from sale, a book by Pierre Michon—that major figure, that example of a writer who is his complete works—*Fausto Coppi*, is missing from the whole.”

Lovers of international cycling know the great Italian name that Bon tells us Michon chose for his lost title: Coppi was the world’s premier bicycle racer during the decades spanning the Second World War, winning races and devouring altitude with an attitude that made him known simply as *Il Campionissimo*—champion of champions. In a pre-Lance Armstrong era of cycling, when one might like to suppose that the air in the mountains was pure and the hearts of the riders who sought it were open as those of children, Coppi was himself a drug enthusiast before the letter. Whereas Armstrong’s deceit brought about his fall, Coppi made no bones about taking amphetamines—not illegal at the time—to aid his performance. Reckless as a rider, he fell often owing to his aggressive style, breaking bones in eight races across his career. His fame as a victor made him an early icon of athleticism, and as such he became more than an athlete; he was also a tragic case, his decline the stuff, if not of fiction, of the TV movie. Naturally, he enjoyed the sort of scandal to which we’ve come to understand the famous are susceptible: the Very Public Adultery Problem, one which, in postwar Catholic Italy, left him vulnerable. This, at the very time that his brother, also a racer but not Fausto’s equal, was thrown from his own bike to his death. To complete the storybook decline, which included poorer and poorer performances through to the end, Coppi was invited to race in Africa, in Burkina Faso, in December 1959. The day before the race, he and the other riders went on safari, to hunt big game, and that night he was put up in a house that swarmed with mosquitoes. “It was like the safari had been brought forward several hours,” said Raphaël Gémiani, another rider housed there that evening, “except that now we were hunting mosquitos. Coppi was swiping at them with a towel.” As it turns out, this semi-comic scene—grown men, at night, flailing at bugs—was fully tragic. The mosquitoes carried malaria, which both men caught, and which killed Coppi two weeks later, on 2 January 1960. Not that the story could end there, for some said that, actually, Coppi had been poisoned, whereas others said that he had died of a cocaine overdose, while others said ... In other words, Coppi had become, upon his death, myth.

And myth—the myth of a stable, describable self; the myth that the story of a self can be told—is a central Michonean preoccupation, central to the incomplete whole that Bon alluded to when he claimed Michon as “a writer who is his complete works.” Michon had been assembling that corpus

over the fourteen years since the appearance of his first book, *Vies Minuscules* (Gallimard, 1984; *Small Lives*, Archipelago, 2011). So coherent in theme and nature was the whole of Michon's—production, Bon argued, that to read it one needed to read all of it. To read any of Michon without recourse to the rest was to risk reading none.

“We’ve been watching a strange body of work being born,” Bon wrote, “not just a book and what followed it but a tremendous turbulence at the heart of all the books, a turbulence responsible for the slowly mounting body count in Michon’s output, figures drawn to and downed by this turbulence, whether painters burning from the inside out because of it (Watteau, for one, in Michon’s *Masters and Servants*) or the tobacconist in *The Origin of the World*, or Vitalie Cuif née Rimbaud listening to her son’s Latin poetry in their kitchen (in Michon’s *Rimbaud the Son*), or Fausto Coppi, streaming in sweat in the mountains as he catches up to the pack of racers in the Tour de France on a hissing July road.”

Figures in turbulence, figures of turbulence, turbulent figures. In both French and English, Bon’s extraordinarily apt word, *figures*, is identically defined. It is etymologically based on the Greek term that means “to fashion, to form.” We use the word variously, now, to describe the exterior forms of material things; to mention the representation of such a thing in painting; to distinguish modes, in rhetoric, of deviating from the ordinary use and arrangement of words for the sake of effectiveness or beauty of expression; and to mark persons as objects of contemplation. Bon means all of these. Each of Michon’s figures, his fictions, has taken as its Vasari-like ambition to offer up the story of a person’s life. The first nine stories Michon published all bore titles that literalized that ambition to seize a figure fully: “The Life of André Dufourneau,” “The Life of Claudette,” “The Life of Joseph Roulin.” A person’s life as an object of contemplation, one that, in Michon’s writing of it, deviates from the ordinary use and arrangement of words. Vast in their smallness—Michon’s books are short, averaging some fifty pages, a *corpus minus*—the prose is maximal. Sentences have a Faulknerian heft, not infrequently running densely down a full page, grammatical subjects or objects held in suspension until the sentence’s very end, the reader stockpiling the freight of Michon’s accumulating clauses until being delivered to a destination the drama of which only grows with each deferral of arrival.

As with the drama of Michon’s sentences, so too the appearance of his books: since Michon had begun publishing in 1984, his bibliography had fattened to seven lean books. In the same period that Philip Roth, for example, published some three thousand pages, Michon compiled five hundred. Quantity, of course, couldn’t matter less, can’t be a measure, shouldn’t be a subject, but in Michon’s case, it became one nonetheless.

“Announced and awaited,” Bon wrote, of Michon’s marooned *Coppi*. With so little Michon, all Michon had become doubly precious.

But now a secret must be imparted. *Fausto Coppi* does not exist. Not in the sense that the route to the storage bunker in the boonies has been lost. Rather, there is no route, no bunker, no book at all. Bon, friend of Michon, fine fiction writer, cunning critic, confected the story of this embargoed story—meretricious publishers! lost masterpieces! alien corn!—as a gift to Michon, and to us. As the best gifts can, it satisfied a need, that of acknowledging that the dropperfuls of writing that Michon was managing to extrude, every half a decade, were painful to those who, during those years, were finding—as Bon did; as the translator of this book did—that Michon was accessing something in stories that was powerful, precious, new. Bon’s own story of *Fausto Coppi* was a nudge to the elbow of his friend that said: please keep going. As pastiche, or as threat of pastiche, it had the imagined author dead to rights. Coppi was just the sort of man obscured by myth whom Michon had, in his work to date, saved from that second death, exhuming from the available facts, like those of Coppi’s life, the turbulence

that would drive such a man through his days, the force of life that had been and then not been.

~~And, anyway, the story of an actual Michon book being waylaid was absolutely true. The book you have in your hands, for example, announced in 1991, arrived five years late, in 1996. When it did, it ran a skimpy ninety-six pages. No publisher was to blame this time, only the author, if one can blame a writer for taking the time, or having to, upon which quality depends. During that five-year gap when nothing appeared and Michon fell publicly mute, the title of the book as announced and awaited, *L'Origine du monde*—what a title; what a promise—was poached by another author. Michon renamed his novel, with some regret, *La Grande Beune*.~~

The Beune: a fourteen-mile-long river, in southwest France, in Dordogne. If we know Dordogne at all, it is by association with the names Font-de-Gaume, Grotte de Vil-lars, Les Eyzies, Lascaux—four of the most famous European caves containing Paleolithic paintings by our forebears. Thousands of early human artworks hidden under the earth on those walls, instance after instance of the attempt to fix figures in paint. Lost masterpieces. The sorts of things that, given the inconvenience of painting below ground by torchlight, given the astonishing fineness of the images found there, you would leave there only if driven to do so, driven by some inner urge, some turbulence.

But if you didn't have the skill to leave such a mark on the world, that urge might be there nonetheless. It would find its outlet elsewhere. Its turbulence, its inexpressibility, beats at the heart of Michon's *Origin of the World*, his only fiction to date not based on historical fact, not based in the exhumation of a single figure's life from out of the death that befalls him in stories. Rather, it is about something larger, stranger. Not an attempt at reconciling man with myth, it is, itself, a myth, one about the original urge, first told in Genesis 2, when Adam names the animals, and God looks on, delighted and proud, at his creation's powers. Expressed on walls and expressed on flesh, Michon's little novel tells the story of the marks that humans make or can't, and the violence that licenses our essentially human savagery.

The Earth slept naked and tormented like a mother whose bedcovers have slipped away.

ANDREI PLATANOV

Between les Martres and Saint-Amand-le-Petit lies the town of Castelnau, along the Beune. I was posted to Castelnau in 1961: devils are posted as well I suppose, to their Circles below; and somersault after somersault make their downward way just as we slip gently toward retirement. I hadn't fallen yet, not exactly, it was my first post, I was twenty. There's no train station in Castelnau; it's long gone; buses leaving Brive or Périgueux early in the morning drop you there at the end of the line very late at night. I arrived at night, in something close to shock, in the middle of a galloping September rain that bucked in the beams of the headlights, in the pounding of the long windshield wipers; I couldn't see the village at all, the rain was black. I took a room *Chez Hélène*, Castelnau's only hotel, perched on the lip of the cliff beneath which the Beune flows: that night, I couldn't yet see the Beune, but leaning out the window of my room, I was just able to make out a hollow in the darkness behind the hotel.

Three steps took you down into the bar; it was painted that blood red once called *rouge antique*; it smelled of saltpeter; between long silences, a scattering of seated drinkers spoke loudly of gunshots and fishing; their movements in the low light cast their shadows over the walls; if you looked above the counter you would see a stuffed fox staring out at you, its pointy head turned violently your way but its body running along the length of the wall, as if in flight. The night, the creature's eyes, the red walls, these people's rough talk, their archaic words—all of this sent me back to some uncertain, pleasureless moment past, filled me with a vague fear that was compounded by the fear of soon having to face my students: this past seemed to be my future, these shady fishermen whose captains were loading me onto the rickety raft of adult life and who, reaching the river's middle, were stripping me and throwing me to the bottom, snickering in the darkness, in their beards, in their bad patois; later, they would squat along the banks and wordlessly scale enormous fish. September's bewildered rain was beating the windows. Hélène was as old and massive as the Cumaean sibyl, as pensive, but all dolled up in nice old clothes, her hair in a scarf; her fat arm and its uprolled sleeve wiped the table in front of me; her least movement radiated pride, a silent joy: I wondered how she'd come to run this red tavern presided over by a fox. I asked her for some dinner; she apologized modestly, for her oven that had gone cold for the night, for her advanced years, and then served me a profusion of cold morsels that pilgrims and soldiers in stories are forever filling up on before their bodies are run through with swords, as they cross a black ford full of blades. And wine, in a fat glass, to better brave these blades. I ate these haute-époque cold cuts; at the neighboring table words came infrequently; heads drew nearer, heavied with sleep or the memory of animals about to pounce, dying; these were young men; but their fatigue, their hunts, these were as old as fables. My Wallachian brigands at last donned their hats, stood, and in their inky black oilcoats whose broken folds gleamed moved off bravely to perform the strange orders of boatmen, of the sleeping world; one of them, above his starr greatcoat, had turned his finely featured face toward me; he offered a complicitous smile, or perhaps was only pity; either way, his teeth shined a bright white. You could hear the mopeds starting up. Through the open door, the night was turbid, moveless: the rain was galloping elsewhere; there was fog. "It's Jean the Fisherman," Hélène said, with a little nod of her head toward this fog through which the shrill motors flew; her gesture was so vague that she could just as easily have been naming the fog. She smiled. The wrinkles in this smile sorted themselves out perfectly. She shut the door, fiddled with some switches, the lights went out; rising, I was already asleep; I was anywhere, in lands where foxes run through dreams, in the heart of a fog of fish one doesn't see leap from the water, falling back in with a hard flat noise, at the very bottom of Dordogne, which is to say nowhere, in Wallachia.

It rained all of September.

My students weren't monsters: they were children who were afraid of everything and laughed for no reason. They had given me the little class, not the smallest but the elementary level; it was—composed of many little bodies that all looked alike; I learned how to name them, to recognize them during recess as they ran through the rain to the windy hollow beneath the covered playground; I would observe them from behind the high windows of the room, and then all of a sudden I wouldn't see them anymore; they would be huddled under an awning, beneath the blithe bodies of falling rain. I was alone in the classroom. I looked at a long row of pegs from which their car coats hung, still steaming from the morning rain as if drying in some bivouac, the belongings of a dwarf army; I named even these little castoffs, said them aloud with some emotion. And of course there were big blackboards on the walls bearing letters and syllables, words and phrases flanked by drawings, posters, all the predictable imagery, the naïve nothings that charm young hearts, hook them, while flogging them with times tables that make them cry beneath these innocuous lures, pictures of plump little boys laughing, of young girls with braids, of rabbits. Children move their feet when they think, when they cry: I could see the traces of this careful, sad dance beneath their desks, little circles of mud; and large inkblots on the white wood testified to the same rhythm, to the same piety. Yes, this moved me; I wasn't much older than they, I was twenty; and I was drifting away, I was barely even there.

What slept beneath the dust in a glass display case in the rear of the class came from a deeper beyond. The case was from the last century, from the era of socialist savants, of the three Jules, of yet another Republic, from a time when athletic curates of the Périgord would roll up their cassocks and crawl through caves in search of Adam's remains, a time when instructors, from Périgord as well, were themselves crawling around in the mud with a couple of brats in tow, making their way to remains that would prove once and for all that man wasn't born of Adam; such was the provenance of the case's contents, as the labels affixed to each object attested, learned names calligraphied in a fine hand typical of the time, a beautiful hand, vain, rounded, cluttered, ardent, a hand they all shared, the fools, each group more modest than the next, those who believed in Scripture and those who believed in mankind's glorious tomorrows; but the case held artifacts from our century as well, however stingy by comparison; how the calligraphy had suffered at Verdun, how the calligraphy had fallen to ashes, spidery scrawls, in the hells of Poland and Slovakia, in infamous camps not far from Attila's own burrows which made Attila's look like schools of philosophy, fields of beets and watch-towers that neither God nor man would have use of again; and despite Verdun and the Slovakian fog, the teachers, without the fine hand, had continued all the same, heroically in a sense, to put long names on little stones, with the faith that remained theirs, that of habit, which was better than nothing; and beyond just arriving from teachers of every stripe, the contents were gathered by other men as well, men who had made things, not just labels, men of whom we can no longer say whether they believed in something while making them or whether they believed in nothing and made them out of habit, but whom we rightly believe never demeaned themselves as deeply as those in the Slovakian Circles. These were just stones. What one calls weapons; harpoons, battle-axes, blades, though they seemed like stones that the ground spit up after rainstorms, which they were as well; these were flints, the fabulous silicates that had received the names of long-forgotten villages and which in return had saddled these villages with the weight of history, had burrowed underneath an infinity of catacombs, older than Mycenae, older than Memphis than Genesis with all its dead, and so convincingly that we ask ourselves to whom the Mayor of Les Eyzies was addressing himself on the eleventh of November, with his little piece of paper wavering in the north wind, standing before a monument to the dead; these crude flints, precious in their own way like the gold coffins in the Valley of the Kings; more precious; the noble flints with royal patronyms drawn from their parishes in Somme, in Lot, in Yonne, and which too carry first names of fishes and trees, of birds—*Willow Leaf of Solutré, Parrot's Beak of Madeleine, Great Dab of Saint-Acheul*—but which quickly acquired sobriquets—*the loveliest, the oldest, the most perverse*—each a shimmering

jewel, and each of which nonetheless could kill a cow, impeccably. The display case sat there: we were right around the corner from Lascaux, the Beune flows into the old Vézère valley, the ground brims with these implements of slaughter, these obsolete grenades forever with pins pulled and bouncing through brooks, freezing in the ice, rising through the roots of fallen trees and leaping from ditches upturned by the plow, children collecting them on a road and carrying them to school under their bonnets, in their little Wallachian hats, and with a sweet smile offering them to a teacher well versed in such things, interested in them, held in their weak little hands, these bits of darkness. That accomplished, they sit, slip off their schoolbags, and unwind by shuffling their feet, tipping their braids and necks over pages where little rabbits show them how to read; and to make their parents happy, their teacher, and even they themselves occasionally, they try to grow up unfazed by what looms behind them, in a display case filled with stickers. These stones rolled all the way to the Castelnau school and were waiting for the flood that would roll them elsewhere, remaining stickered this time so that they might be read by fish. There was another quarter hour to kill before the end of recess; through the window there was still this rain, this fog filled with people that Hélène called Jean the Fisherman; two little bundles below were attempting an outing in the courtyard, moving at a gallop, running with shivery, excited cries back to the playground; I left the stones there, their low weights; I was sitting on my desk; I was listening to their legs. I was giving myself over to another devotion, to another brand of violence. I was thinking about the tobacconist.

The Tabac was beneath the old arcade, on the fairground that is Castelnau's square, home to its businesses. I went in shortly after my arrival, after school, of an evening. And of course it was raining; my hair was soaking wet; the shop was empty. I looked vaguely at the revolving postcard stand by the door, saw the abandoned wolf of Font-de-Gaume and the great cows of Lascaux, the round bison, and the outrageous women from the same era that they call Venuses, their outsized asses, their long fine necks. Pictures like this are sold throughout the region. In this zoo, this harem, a strange image stopped me for a moment: it was a reproduction of a shoddily painted plaster statuette, a monk in his frock collapsed against the stump of a tree, to which he's nailed here and there by long arrows; his tonsured head is askew; the man is dead. Putting the card back, I read that this was the blessed Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, a Jesuit whom the Chinese tortured to death around 1650, a native of Castelnau. Although it was all a bit much, the tilt of his head nonetheless screamed loss, made it moving, a sort of resignation, perhaps even despair, which didn't quite look right on a saint, given he was dead. I heard the hit of her heels; I turned around and she was behind her counter. I saw her from the waist up. Her arms were bare.

Women of rare and subtle beauty have never really done it for me, beauties that slowly reveal themselves with time; I want them to suddenly manifest out of the ether like ghosts. And this one had me pondering abominable thoughts instantly, thoughts that ran through my blood. Saying she was a nice piece is saying nothing at all. She was tall and white, a white like milk. She was grand and ripe like the houri Above, unbridled but reined in, cinched tightly at her waist; if animals stare almost bodily, she was an animal; if queens carry themselves as if with their heads atop columns, upright and pure, clement but lethal, she was a queen. Her royal face was as bare as a belly: and within this face, beneath raven hair, were such pale eyes, eyes forever the miraculous preserve of the fair, a secret light beneath darkness that if by some miracle you might have such a woman would nonetheless remain an enigma that nothing, neither lifted dresses nor heightened voices, can ever lay bare. She was somewhere between thirty and forty years old. Everything about her screamed desire, something that people say enough that it's almost meaningless, but it was a quality that she gave of generously to everyone, to herself, to nothing, when she was alone and had forgotten herself, setting something in motion while settling a fingertip to the counter, turning her head slightly, gold earrings brushing her cheek while she watched you or watched nothing at all; this desire was open, like a wound; and she

knew it, wore it with valor, with passion. But what are words? She wasn't clay: more the beating of wings in a storm, and yet no flesh could conceivably have been more perfectly ample, more substantial, more bound by its weight. The weight of this torso, so slender despite the blossoming of her breasts, was considerable. Packages of cigarettes haloed her in neat rows. I couldn't see her skirt; it was nonetheless there, behind the counter, vast, unliftable. Outside, hard rain lashed the windows: I could hear it crackle on this unsullied flesh.

My hair was still dripping on my forehead. This woman, her lips lightly parted, benevolent and mildly surprised, patiently considered my silence. She was waiting to hear what I wanted. I spoke in a dream, in a voice nonetheless clear. She turned around, her armpit appearing when she lifted her arm to the shelves, and her hand, smooth and beringed, opened under my eyes with a red-and-white box of Marlboros in its palm. I brushed it while taking the box. Perhaps to see this gesture again—the coins resting in her palm, painted nails joining and separating—I also bought the postcard of the arrowed saint. She smiled, broadly. “Would you like an envelope?” she said. Absolutely I did. Her voice was generous as well, words like gifts. Once more the white arm plunged, her fingers joined, her earrings caressed her cheek. When I left, the sky was just beginning to clear; the cobbles shone, rejuvenated; the rain had ended. Along the slope toward the auberge, toward the Beune, the sun appeared, the sky opening and the pale trees appearing indelibly against the sky; in my throat, in my ears, something plaintive remained, something powerful, like an unending cry cut short, modulating, full of tears and invincible desire, a desire that rises from nocturnal throats, cinched tight but strangely free, like the word *honey* in a blues tune. In the bar chez Hélène, the sun could be seen setting over the Beune, dark black clouds bending over like maidservants, approaching; love that moves stars stirred the stars, dolled them up, made them look like Esthers, stripped them bare to white, instantly; sunlight caressed the red fur of the fox, little children in the countryside saw a rain-dipped pebble and it would be in a fist they would offer me tomorrow with something like love; up above, on the square, the tobacconist was already shivering from the brutal festivities of the night to come, her hand perhaps trembling briefly on a packet of Marlboros, her skirt caressing her thighs. *Honey*: when the sun goes down, when night comes, when the souls of women are as naked as their hands.

Did I dare think she could be mine? Of course, and feverishly, but only by some miracle, no more shocking after all than the miracle by which she existed in Castelnau, and that from her divine hand she could birth packets of Marlboros. I was of an age when one believed that one had nothing to offer, nothing one could exchange against such wealth, such thighs and breasts, gold earrings and the call from her skirts, nothing, and especially not that incongruous thing that grows magnificently from our groin. And what's more, I was of that ridiculous generation embarrassed by everything, that imagined a woman's desire was subject to one's ability to talk about notable, serious matters, pop songs or paintings, politics, some blob of nothing; or, if you can't talk to them, at least make sure that they think you can. And I was a good-looking kid, charming enough, and I had enough in my pants to convince her—or would have, it will soon be clear, had she not already belonged to another, as they say. So I didn't try a thing, I made no more move for her hand than to collect the little red-and-white boxes; and I added a dash of loftiness to the part by buying *Le Monde* every day, which I didn't read—she also sold newspapers—the copies of which piled up in my room above the great tangled hole of the Beune, and of course she didn't witness anything in my actions that would have won me any points, she couldn't have cared less. I went to the shop every day, out of my real passion for tobacco and my feigned passion for undigested newsprint, which were justification enough: we exchanged a few words, she always offered her smile and the warmth of her voice, she was patient, her skirt rustled, occasionally I saw her legs, and her heels, always high.

I had noticed that often, on Sundays and certain afternoons, she went by foot along la route des Martres, always in high heels no matter what weather, all dolled up, returning much later or not at all—unless she had come back via a shortcut I didn't know. I didn't need to ask what she was doing there: the sky was my answer, to see her beneath it was enough. This road soon became my passion. There were great meadows, and dark walnut trees at the edge of the village, and farther along were woods crisscrossed by footpaths leading to various hamlets; the road followed the lip of the cliff, sometimes climbing steeply, with hiding places lost behind masses of fallen rock, hollows in the side of hills from which one could only see sky, secret resting places beneath beeches. There, on my free afternoons, most often beneath the rain, I pretended to get some air and to take a profound interest in plants and pebbles—instructors are allowed their eccentricities—but of course I was pacing the paths and was waiting, tensed, consumed by a painful image that flowed through me, her image, as if she were in my blood, images of a woman in her Sunday best, then naked and dressed again and naked again, a rhythm of stockings, of gold and of skin, a thousand silks beating this silken flesh. With such thoughts I made my way to the Beune; I watched it flow through its hole down below, dirty waters beneath a dirty sky in which unseen fish were spawning, eyes wide open and doleful: and yet this world was beautiful nonetheless, if stockings could fill my soul, could strip it bare while I stripped imaginary flesh. I returned beneath the shelter of the trees. I stopped suddenly; I imagined her mouth. I imagined her neck; at the thought of the rest of her I trembled with a feeling well beyond desire. At the sight of you, I told myself, perhaps she will wordlessly let her head fall back, will tremble as you tremble, will seize you where you want to seize her, and with her skirts in her hands she will give herself over, against this birch, in these puddles into which her earrings will have fallen, where she will paw the ground, where you will see her breasts, and, more shaken than a tree in the wind, her great tumbling cries will scare the crows away. I heard a sound, my heart collapsed. I resumed the bearing of an attentive botanist; it was nothing, a spooked animal: but other times she was there, in the foliage, the mud, with her high heels and her perfect makeup, all of her, sometimes in gloves, her hands in the pockets of her raincoat, her head high, a queen, stopping near me, talking about the bad weather, sweetly telling me that I smoked too much; I responded from the same script, I fell into her smile, I wanted to hold onto this drop of rain clutched in the down of her cheek, hesitating, flowing. The pale violet rings beneath her eyes tore at me, her perfume in the woods pressed into my stomach. She moved off, her skirts rustling louder than the trees, her heels piercing fallen leaves. Her hands were in her pockets. The raincoat flared out around her hips. I was suffocating. The world was white flesh, a nice piece at that. The arrows that pierced and burned Jean-Gabriel Perboyre collapsed on his tree stump burned no more than those that pierced me, collapsed upon my own, receiving pleasure from hands no longer my own, but hers: the delights that she filled me with, that, in a way, she gave me herself, because I'm certain that she wasn't unaware of them, are the most pointed I have ever felt. Sometimes she wasn't there at all.

I would return only near nightfall. Through the walnuts my Wallachian village loomed up above, the school perched there since the three Jules reigned, the drowsing arsenal, the panoply of old men who had felt desire in the woods; and the church below with its little Jean-Gabriel within who had wished to be tortured on the Yellow River, had been so and had so been thankful; and the eternal auberge. The branches and the rain threw themselves at the windowpane. A kettle was singing, the percolator was smoking. I was soaked through but was boiling in all this wet. I sat down dumbfounded beneath the familiar fox; there were a few drinkers in smoldering oilskins, boatmen taking long draws on their beers as if stuck to the counter and yet seemingly transported to some other side, another bar.

that looks just like this one, where there are the same people, but that is softer, hotter, more alive; Jean the Fisherman wasn't with them—he didn't live there and he didn't come by every night—I'd seen him leave before dawn to catch eel or who knows what, he'd winked while turning away and had disappeared with his hoop nets, his spider over his shoulder, toward the Little Beune. Hélène served me more of her endless ham, her musketeers' pâtés; my desire hadn't waned, it weighed on my stomach while I ate. My thoughts roamed the landscape, I was drifting away. In this blood red room that smelled of cigarette butts, of rotten wine casks, of saltpeter, I was imagining that all the drinkers were making for the black, for night, toward what they couldn't resist, the tobacconist giving herself over to this call, sitting up in her bed, throwing her raincoat over her shoulders and rushing to the auberge, twisting her ankles on her high heels, this queen, coming in like the wind, opening her raincoat with two trembling hands, throwing herself naked onto one of the sticky tables, onto the sile pinball machine, shedding her earrings, her eyes white with ecstasy, all for my unique use, beneath Hélène's thoughtful eye, behind her counter, watching Yvonne move through every position, knowing her raven hair, her orgeat thighs, her mother-of-pearl ass, all shining immoderately beneath a fox, her cries tumbling out like an eagle's, hurtling over the cliff, startling poachers crouched along the Beune. I gutted her.

Hélène cleared the tables, deep in thought, her heavy arm wiping gracefully. I wondered what once had been beneath her fine old rags: it didn't seem to bother her that there was no longer anything there, she had shaken off that finer flesh, that want that throws even the youngest hearts toward dram and night, both debases and blesses, felling them to all fours where they lose themselves in pleasure, and still on all fours and barely less frenzied are other times lost in pain, in grief, in misery. Hélène's dead flesh was radiant. Her flesh was no longer hers but was elsewhere, detached, free of her, fishing eels over the Little Beune, resting on her elbows in another bistro in Saint-Amand-le-Petit, amazing the drinkers with tales of her exploits, fly-fishing, drop nets, her gift for the gab, her ruse, ancient and refined, and her tinkering with net and lead that were no less so; her flesh wandered far afield with a pouch over one shoulder, stuffed with little fish, corn Gitanes, bait; she would stop and plant herself facing the river and whip the somber water with bright nylon, with nickel-plated flies; Hélène's flesh had borne the finest fisherman in the district, perhaps the region. She was Jean the Fisherman's mother and this now sufficed, he would still be there—on his heels near the water's edge watching, grumbling, rejoicing, striking fish, brutally unveiling the mother-of-pearl scales beneath the living light—while she was becoming pulp beneath the earth of Castelnau, next to the church. She spoke to me a little, looked out at me with shrewd eyes and pretended to listen, she knew, of course—although she didn't know that my desires were called Yvonne and they sold me Marlboros. So for a moment I saw both of them there, the one who wandered away and the one who lingered, the callipygian and the soothsayer, each immemorial in her own way. I left the blood red room, the cave with its mothers, its sons, its companions in tractors whom libations make brothers, and its great callipygian molested up above, strutting her stuff, giving this comedy the weight of tragedy, without limits and invisible. The fathers hunt far off in some elsewhere beyond imagining. I went to bed; moonlight entered my room and far off in the lost clearings caressed flints no one saw, a more furious rain burying them. Doors slammed in the black night; the hooded sexes of dogs quivered, they howled. I fell to sleep atop women who push these doors, entering the fields. Jean the Fisherman caught a carp.

And in the morning there was school, the ring of little feet. They learned penmanship while crying grammar and spelling, all without knowing—and anyway we never know in advance that the little braids are destined to become black as ravens, that long pants will be worn even in the middle of summer—that the world becomes just words and their effects, heavy machinery, job offers, souped-up motorbikes and hunting rifles, parties and movies at the theater in Périgueux; they aren't yet aware that's all there will be between you and what grows from your gut, or, for the little braids, between

you and what grows into your gut, pushing upward. The little feet were moving, the big, round eyes looked at me. ~~The knees applied themselves beneath the tables, the hands wrote. The calligraphers from the Third Republic and their fine hands aged on in back while other hands, fervent and precise as well, which patiently cut Acheulean flounder, scale after scale, hone harpoons for fishing, write on water; and I who went on; I, serious as some socialist savant, who taught them spelling in his high collar, his embUTTONAGE with its exuberant ties, his frills and flounces, his brooch, but who, when they had barely reached the courtyard under the rain, stripped and parted a woman of perfect whiteness who sold them lollipops and who smiled at them, who was mother of one of them. Yes, something in my class resembled her, it had bright eyes under plump eyelids and inky hair—but not the breasts or the ass, without even mentioning the earrings, and who therefore didn't resemble her at all: Bernard, her son, who was seven years old and whose flesh was entirely superfluous to hers, because hers was a flesh more impetuous and dense than these thirty little-boy kilos. So there was another form of mediation between us than just the cigarettes and the fabulous stupors that the woods where she appeared induced in me, another currency than these botched encounters, furious and courtly; it was this child.~~

November came and the rain didn't cease. The Beune was fat, was drowning the fishermen's path. While we were in the courtyard, cranes flew low in the sky, our faces tipped back, running with water, pondering these great shapes that threw cries onto the dense whiteness of the clouds, slowly raking the sky like a net drawn through the Beune; a farmer killed one, ancient and exhausted, that had come to rest near the water and that I saw at night chez Hélène, on the counter between frothy glasses of beer. The wound was invisible; the white neck hung over this side of the counter, the beak stretched out as in flight, its neck hanging down. Men in dripping oilskins thrust their fingers into the feathers, kneading the dead crane. She wasn't stuffed, these people didn't have a taste for such things.

Cranes passed and my students learned their times tables. Around this time I climbed toward my little Golgotha, hoping that Yvonne would be wearing the dress I had seen her in the day before, would be wearing the two combs I liked in her hair that bared her cheeks in such a way that one better saw the delicate plumpness that was revealed when her chin flexed toward her neck. The Tabac was filled with people, men come from the hamlets in their Sunday best to replenish their stores of loose tobacco; and the village gossips come from Mass to glean whom they should damn or perhaps spare. Behind all of these stiff-suited shoulders, these flannelette dresses, Yvonne served, as lively and open as ever. She was wearing the combs, she was wearing the dress, her face, bigger than ever, dispossessed me immediately, filled me with unspeakable happiness. A man appeared, who cavalierly swept past everyone and, leaning on the counter, bent lightly toward Yvonne; he spoke a few words that I was too far away to hear, and anyway it seemed to me that he was speaking in a low voice. Below the clean lines of the back of his hair, I noticed a not-very-well-cut suit that hung well on his sloping shoulders nonetheless, and on either side of him his delicate hands resting on the big plastic shelf where the lighters were displayed below. Yvonne looked at him. In an instant, in a blink of an eye, she, so lively just before, so self-possessed and expansive, had a complete change of face. Change? It wasn't that she closed herself off, that she no longer appeared charitable; now she was generating something completely different. Like Jean-Gabriel, perhaps, seeing that ineffable Hand behind the one that drew taut the bow, blessing them both, trembling; but it never occurred to me to think about Jean-Gabriel. She had flushed an even crimson, her white chin hesitating, weighing whether it would continue to bear her smile. It did; but in her eyes was a sort of call, a dream, a refusal sometimes seen on women, on both those of the shadows and of the Mass, a delicious servility and a vain shudder of revolt that was yet more delicious. She bridled, she relented, she offered up both her revolt and her defeat, the two grinding against each other with neither of them prevailing. This occurred in an instant, the man's inaudible murmur, his hands resting on the display case of lighters,

Yvonne's vacillating look and this pathos smoldering in her cheeks, the brief burst of the faltering beast, subdued. The man turned around, he was of average height, well built but that was all, with thick, dull blond hair and a low hairline, cheerful little eyes, a large mouth, generous or greedy; he had a ruddy complexion and, as I already said, delicate hands. He hadn't said good-bye, but there was neither coarseness nor hostility in his bearing; instead, a sort of courtesy, like a sort of calm, that reigned over this droopy strongman, this low sort of elegance, his big, straightforward features that had an unexpected charm and him, this charm, this, well. Underneath it was the sort of half-drunken contentment that hunters have after a good shot. The rain fell onto his shoulders, in no particular hurry he made for an old Peugeot that he'd left with its motor running. During the instant of silence that weighed upon the store, I thought about the sound of the blood that was beating in Yvonne's cheeks. The gossips looked at each other with little smiles, the cruelty of which nearly made them seem pretty; the farmers asked for their cigarettes in voices that were heavily tender, but laced with something wrong. As unquestionably was mine. Yvonne lowered her head, bared her cheeks. Selling me my Marlboros, she raised her eyes violently and looked at me as she never had before.

At the end of November, the weather changed, the waters froze. The flooded fields froze, tufts of bulrush stood frozen over the region. It was the time of year when vehicle registrations were renewed it was around three, a Sunday. Snow had fallen during the night, these little flakes, dense and reticent that one sees only in the coldest periods and that don't accumulate very much. It froze solid, the sky was rigid, pure. The light seemed green; another hour of daylight remained. The Tabac was full of unhappy customers waiting impatiently, tapping the toes of their shoes; they grew tired of waiting and left: Yvonne wasn't there; little Bernard was watching the store as he often did, but while he could sell newspapers and cigarettes, he was ignorant of the complicated maneuvers necessary to dispense the tags. I left the store into a gust of wind: I don't know what came over me as I lumbered down la route des Martres; beneath the pungent walnuts, I had to keep myself from running: the pure cold was biting into me, the world was a frozen stocking, a fabulous surface beneath which beat, and I knew not where, a boiling flesh that I felt compelled to seize, that would make me burn; I wanted to peel it back and hear it crackle. My ears were buzzing, I was out of myself. Just out of town is a long straight stretch surrounded by wide fields, beyond the walnuts but not quite to the forest; I stared into these fields as if eye to eye with them, peering to their borders with the trees and back again, all the places where a thousand times Yvonne had manifested in her stockings, all white, her hips naked in the cold, bitten, thrown far from the forest for the benefit of winter and my soul. This big game a thousand times lost. Far in the distance I suddenly saw a few specks coming out of the underbrush that were making their way to the edge of a meadow; as they moved closer, I was able to see the red stain of a hat that danced gently around the uneven terrain; and around the red hat were others, in ponchos, arms that moved brazenly, four or five skimpy lads proceeding with resolve, like little old dwarves. The dwarves were carrying something; they followed their path the length of the field toward the main road without straying from the browned lip of frozen trees. Sometimes Yvonne would take the high road through the fields while on her enigmatic outings; and the dwarves doubtless were there to announce their queen, were dancing around her: and without giving it any further thought, I stepped over the fence and made my way toward them.

They were children from school, those who lived in the Martres commune; so it was I recognized them from far away. What two of them were carrying on a pole resting on their shoulders surprised me greatly, and at first I didn't believe it; but no, it was indeed a fox, suspended by its paws in the old or barbaric manner, and I had no idea why they were taking this thing that way through the cold. Apparently, the animal was dead, the big, abandoned tuft of its tail hung down to the feet of the children, heavily red beneath the green sky. I hurried toward them. This trophy from another age that these little hunters were carrying toward me—the offering they were making me, this fine carnivore borne by back-country tykes, the bright red bonnet, the ponchos from an earlier age, the clodding bustle of those who were carrying and the drunken dances of the others who were gamboling around them—all this inflated my wickedness, cracked it, honed it with the uneasiness that gives it meaning was in an obscene fable. An invisible hatchet swung mightily and shook a tree nearby. The woods filled with the woeful cries of wolves gorging themselves on beautiful victims dear to you; the pole across their shoulders seemed suited for other prey: in place of the red fox, I thought I saw bound there—in icy stockings pushed up by the odd position, all black and raw, foam-ing—the thick haunches of this bitch. I ran outright, with reason; bulrushes cracked beneath my feet; the air in my ears deafened me; exiting the woods via a little footpath, straight ahead and perhaps terrifying like Constable Ysengrin, and as fierce as his she-wolf—there she stood, just a few feet from me. I could easily have collided with her. I stopped short.

There wasn't a breath of wind along the edge of the woods. She was in her Sunday best, in one of those ample brown car coats that one imagines draped from the shoulders of haughty young ladies from the turn of the century who, with a little finger raised skyward and a cherry red mouth, look through a lorgnette at jockeys weighing in; underneath she wore pearls that despite winter she left bare at her neck; earrings, as always, and fine icy stockings beneath which a tormented whiteness had begun to blush pink in the cold. All this chic at the edge of a lost wood was as out of place as a pornographic doodle on a jockey's pristine shirt. I tried in vain to catch my breath, what cut it short now came from below, sharp as a razor. I believe that she had run as well, her heavy breaths sweeping through her throat, her car coat, her pearls; the scene shook; moreover, the frost revealed these brief breaths, spoke of her willingness or her upset. The cold had slapped her in the face, her lips were raw and chafed, but lipstick covered the gash. She watched the children approach and turned away as if she hadn't seen me: this bit of coquetry moved me more than if she had been naked. Her breaths ceased; she turned toward me slowly, and with a look of rapture more moving than her earrings or the raven diadem or the bursting mouth, her eyes bored into me from a face that floated as if lost at sea, her boiling cheekbones, her steady stare; her nostrils flared; she turned her head a little to the left as if to look toward the woods, but with an affected slowness and without breaking eye contact: and so I saw her right side, and there—highlighting her beauty spot and holding her right cheek in view, budding amply on her neck, flowering lower beneath the car coat and grazing her cheek with this abject petal—was the thick mark, bloated with black blood and more bruised than a black eye, more devoured than her lips—a mark left radiantly by the tail of a whip.

The fire that this vision made circulate through my veins should have made me cry out. Nothing could have equaled the unveiling of this face upon which suddenly had leaped something like her other lips, like the strawberries of her breasts. Her glorious face bore into mine, and as I held onto it she reddened ceaselessly. Arrogance and shame fought for that face, like a piece of meat between two dogs; and like a piece of meat, she resisted. The children were upon us; would she lift up her dress right there and reveal the rest, in front of them? She was drunk. They were upon us, they passed, with loud, boisterous hellos; the dwarves that brought me stones looked at the queen with round frank eyes; the tobacconist; one of them carried a little basket filled with white eggs; the fox swung at the rhythm of their steps, its mouth open upon and full of little bones set in black gums; the stiff tail was frozen. I saw this in a flash, our eyes did not leave each other. The she-wolf hadn't looked at anything. "What is it?" I said, out of myself. I don't know what I was talking about, what unsayable red or crimson trophy I meant, but these words were strangling me, they had to get out: I still heard them whistling in the frozen air, fogging the mirroring metal of the hatchets echoing around us. I was a tree. "They are carrying it," she said, "to the houses, to show it off. People give them a little money, eggs. At night they'll skin it against a door." Her voice was too sharp and lashing, with a sort of precocity that made it crack; she curled her lips and lisped a little. By now her face was well beyond red and her words were pure shame, like the fresh mark that burned in the cold. "What do they do with the body?" I continued with the same elation. She hesitated, her sharp voice springing forward and breaking off cleanly, her mouth dry; and in one breath, she at last lowered her eyes and said: "I suppose that they give it to the dogs." The piece of meat ripped apart, her hands stiffened in the pockets of her coat, she shuddered. Her chin was trembling.

And once again she was the woman who sold Marlboros to the young instructor and made the best of things in Castelnaud. She existed. The callipygian Venus was only a woman. She turned away as one does when one is about to cry and without a word left me there in the field and moved toward the village where she would sell tags, one of her own on her cheek. She had another one on the fat of her calf; it looked astonishing beneath the black nylon. She walked slowly, immoderately. She swayed as she walked. The little hoods were disappearing beneath the walnuts. At their shoulders in the shadow

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