GUY HOCQUENGHEM

The Amphitheater of the Dead

AN ANTICIPATED MEMOIR

PREFACE BY ROLAND SURZUR

TRANSLATED BY MAX FOX

Introduction

MAX FOX

What are you supposed to do with the dead? In the 2018 film *Birds of Passage*, about the Wayúu people in 1970s and 1980s Colombia, a second burial provides one answer. The community assembles around a grave, which is opened up and the bones disinterred from their coffin. One woman sprays the skeleton with a mouthful of alcohol, then a second takes each bone and wipes it with a white cloth, handing it to another woman who places them in a white bag, while a fourth woman sings out to the dead: "Oh, why have you died? Now that the sorrow has subsided let us ask what your death means, so that we may remember and understand."

Capitalist modernity doesn't have a lot of rituals like the Wayúu's. It holds that it's possible a death may have no meaning at all. One of the ways it exerts its power over the present is to forbid that death be questioned, in favor of a demystified, scientific, and final absence that leaves us to mourn or commemorate privately whenever death inevitably touches us. Capitalism insists that the dead have no further social existence and can make no further difference in life.

Guy Hocquenghem's *The Amphitheater of the Dead* disagrees. The sci-fi memoir, written on his deathbed in 1988, is organized around the idea of a reunion with those who have passed on. It is a strange text—an incomplete, vivid account of his midcentury life told through the frame of a speculative 2018. It imagines, first of all, an alternate history of the AIDS crisis where antiretrovirals had been developed and introduced more swiftly, converting the virus into the chronic and manageable condition it is for many today thanks to the scientific intervention of activists. And second, it imagines a 2018 in which Guy Hocquenghem has not died.

The amphitheater in the title is an anatomical theater, one of the central sites of the historical construction of modernity, where corpses were flayed and put to work building the foundations of medical knowledge in concert

with the students gathered to observe. In Hocquenghem's text, it is the countersite to the hospital waiting rooms where he has made regular pilgrimages for his thirty-year treatment. In this amphitheater, instead of medical students congregating around a corpse, Hocquenghem's dead friends and comrades have taken their seats, gossiping and catching up. "There, death and dissolution by a mysterious spectacle of Nature have convened a spectacle of science," writes Hocquenghem.

A truly visionary appraiser of social form, Hocquenghem should be read very precisely here. In this space it is the mystery of death which commands science, not the other way around. Science masks its obedience to mystery through a spectacle of its mastery over it. *The Amphitheater of the Dead* narrates the experiences of mysterious social forces like this as they moved through the France of Hocquenghem's youth and took hold of him and others, despite capitalist modernity's claim to have rid itself of them. These forces bore different names: "erotic follies," "this era without restraints," "a parenthesis in the history of man," "a sigh of happiness in the partition of catastrophes," "our abortive revolution," but they all signified a departure from the grip of capitalist modernity's prescribed experience.

These mysterious forces are all aligned with death in the

capitalist cosmology because what they portend is the collective power to determine history. It is an obscure power, uncontrollable even by those who exercise it and effectively impossible for an individual to grasp.

Hocquenghem uses the language of religious transformation to describe how it entered his life:

> This mutation, of the extremist and solitary adolescent (large families are sometimes spaces of solitude) into a newly conscious young man quickly habituated to Marxisant meetings and debates, remains a mystery in my memory.
>
> My conscious life begins there; I protested in front of the Odéon to support The Screens by Genet, attended the second protest of the Charonne massacre, and for the first time I felt the hysterical, almost tearful intoxication which seizes you when the whole crowd shouts in a single voice, and in an instant, like the mystics, you believe.

The rest of his abbreviated book is devoted to recording his passage between different worlds, figured as different sexual orders, as a result of these collective efforts to change history. The first is his petit-bourgeois postwar childhood, where he is exposed to sex as transgression. This readies him for the demimonde of the pre-liberation *folles*, or

queens, into which his high school philosophy teacher and first lover inducts him. Hocquenghem's narration of this world and era makes it clear his participation in it was consensual, but as it comes to a fiery end he escapes with his first boyfriend of his own age to the Sorbonne and revolution.

At the barricades and in the occupied campuses, Hocquenghem becomes the militant he is now known as. The futility of his and his comrades' attempts at making revolution is noble and touching, if a little silly up close. Here we see the pre-gay liberation Hocquenghem, who is still too ashamed to admit that he's a homosexual when a member of a rival faction accuses him of it. The narrative ends—that is, Hocquenghem died—before discussing his involvement with the *Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire*, a previously lesbian militant group emerging out of the post-'68 Parisian ferment, or the publication of his theoretical texts. But the quotidian objects he dilates on paint a living picture of the world that sexual liberation fought to free itself from, and remind readers born in its aftermath how this world still structures our desire and our freedom.

This was a question that translating this book, in the real 2018 it speculatively described, kept raising. How much of it was truly in the present, and how much did my present

color how I apprehended his past? Reading the scenes themselves for historical content can be frustrating, and Hocquenghem has limited interest in imagining 2018 as containing anything other than survival. But he can't avoid making predictions about what the episodes he lived through will come to mean. I found myself wanting to correct him: "No, Guy, you misunderstood—that's not why that happened." The hubris of hindsight, sure, but he equally refuses to imagine what our experience might be in his wake. "Nothing important, in my eyes, has been produced in the years that followed" the end of the revolutionary 70s, he writes, even though a page earlier he claims "I am frightened of people who leave without arranging their affairs, without considering the futures where they won't be there themselves."

Why might that be? In his essay "On the Concept of History," Walter Benjamin writes about the weak messianic power the present holds for the past. At any moment, we might be capable of redeeming our ancestors' thus-far failed attempts at liberating themselves, establishing them as forerunners of our finally successful revolution. But what form of liberation can we deliver the past? And what claims might we make on it in the course of the struggle? Queers are famously free of rituals for stabilizing intergenerational responsibility. But living in the social form which our predecessors helped forge against the terrifying power of

the modern capitalist state means their concerns are still our concerns, as are the meanings of their deaths.

In the same essay, Benjamin contrasts the historical materialist with the historicist method of relating to the past. The historicist sees the past as a mass of facts that fill up a homogenous and empty time, while the historical materialist sees in the past singular presents as transitions in which different orders of time originate and come to a standstill. Hocquenghem's text in historicist terms is a strange and incomplete attempt at recording his memories. But seen as a text written from and for the historical materialist tradition, its concern with the transition between worlds makes more sense. Hocquenghem's subject is his personal experience of the revolutionary suspension of capitalist time, and he maintains faith in its ongoing possibility even after he lives past one of its ends.

On his deathbed he may no longer be a fighter, but he is still a partisan. Recording his memoirs, which he had always avoided dwelling on, becomes an urgent concern, "the only duty I recognize: not to undertake but to write, in this state of exaltation, which rejuvenates me, to recount my earliest unfulfilled promises, my anguishes, to myself who will disappear." This is the Benjaminian position: articulating what is past "to take control of a memory as it flashes in a moment of danger." It is also an expression

of belief in the messianic power of future generations, and a decision to leave them a revolutionary chance in their struggle to liberate the suppressed past.

The book itself is oblique proof of his belief in this power. Hocquenghem expresses it in individual, even scientific terms—"Writing saves. Doctors are experts. The drive which is at the origin of a book assures a whole lifespan. You don't die while writing a novel"—but it is not even his decision to set his memoir in the future that stages the reunion with the dead of the opening scene in our present. By pinning his salvation in 1988, after the sour end of French modernity's blossoming, onto 2018, another thirty years in the future, he offers to the present the possibility of answering the question of whether his unachieved horizons will outlive him. But in thirty-one years, he will still have given his life over to the tradition of the ongoing project of liberation as a historical object. *The Amphitheater of the Dead* is an eternally scheduled second burial. It lets us ask what his death and his life means, so that we can collectively determine it.

Preface

ROLAND SURZUR

"Written in urgency..." This expression, unpleasant yet accurate, above all since the appearance of AIDS, finds its full significance in Guy Hocquenghem's *The Amphitheater of the Dead*.

It was in fact a few weeks before dying in a Parisian hospital that Guy Hocquenghem began to write *The Amphitheater of the Dead*. By the end of April 1988, he had filed corrections for *Frère Angelo*, the novel which by cruel chance would be published the very day after his death, August 28, 1988. In early May, he began editing *The Amphitheater of the Dead*. For more than two years he had been affected by an advanced stage of AIDS. With

characteristic force and will, Guy Hocquenghem refused to let his illness, which required frequent and sometimes extended stays at the hospital, stop him from writing *Ève*, *Frère Angelo* and the draft of this *Anticipated Memoir* during this short period. A prodigious effort, regardless of the circumstances.

Nevertheless, as the months went by his heath became more and more unstable. In early May 1988, his spirit was divided between contradictory assessments of his physical state. On the one hand, he was gripped, in a sometimes terrifying fashion, by a certainty that death was inexorably approaching; and on the other hand, he felt an immense desire to live despite everything, to leave the hospital and settle into the disease, as he delights in imagining in *The Amphitheater of the Dead*.

The following phrase from *The Amphitheater of the Dead* may help grasp the nature of the thoughts that seized Guy Hocquenghem: "Each time I started a book, I knew I would go all the way to the end. With this book, I launch the challenge once more." Writing was no doubt equally a manner of warding off a bad lot and the challenge that Hocquenghem set for himself, which, alas, he was unable to meet.

Hocquenghem would come to know the fear of death—of the unknown, the hereafter, of the nothingness, perhaps, which grips everyone gifted with sense—maybe more than most:

"And here, now, death 'really' approaches... forcefully, inevitably, I'm afraid. Once again. Again and again. One never exhausts the fear of death. Except in dying." His *An Anticipated Memoir* is, above all, a particular form of appearance of that fear. By then, for at least two months, it had passed closely by him, and each new approach was grueling.

Certain people, particularly in what is known as the "gay community," are astonished at the fact that Guy Hocquenghem didn't publicly reveal his illness. By using his notoriety, even such as it was, the larger public could have put a face to AIDS, which, in the years 1986–7, was still poorly understood. In *The Amphitheater of the Dead*, Guy Hocquenghem partially explains his position on this question: "... the crazy, inextinguishable charm of the double life. I never ceased living in two registers. Homosexual on one side, militant on the other, and later a writer and invalid, I always had something to hide from half of my relations. I love it; it's a kind of extra wealth... Total consistency (doing what one says and saying what one does) is a totalitarian fantasy."

All of that is true, surely, but it doesn't fully explain the fact that Guy Hocquenghem did not want to talk about the disease he suffered publicly. If there was no "admission" on his part, it's because he wished to live out the last years he had tranquilly. He never imagined himself as some kind

of figurehead for something he considered not a cause but a strictly private affair. He dreaded the mediatic frenzy which would have permanently surrounded him, as was the case at the time for Jean-Paul Aron and, later, Hervé Guibert.[1] In addition, and this is not a small detail, his parents were wholly ignorant of their son's illness, as unbelievable as it may seem.

Written in urgency... If all the facts recounted in this *Anticipated Memoir* are correct, the chronology is not always rigorous. Certain events, particularly in the episode at the Mill, are condensed.

By the end of June 1988, paralysis was besting Guy bit by bit. It was with great difficulty that he wrote these last pages of the incomplete manuscript. His hand no longer responded to the commands from his brain. It was his first death. The other, the real one, was not too far behind.

Roland Surzur

1 Jean-Paul Aron was a writer and historian, and one of the first people living with AIDS in France to go public with his diagnosis, on the front page of the largest news magazine in late 1987. Hervé Guibert published a best-selling *roman à clef* about his diagnosis as well as his friend Michel Foucault's in 1990, causing a national discussion about the virus. –*Tr.*

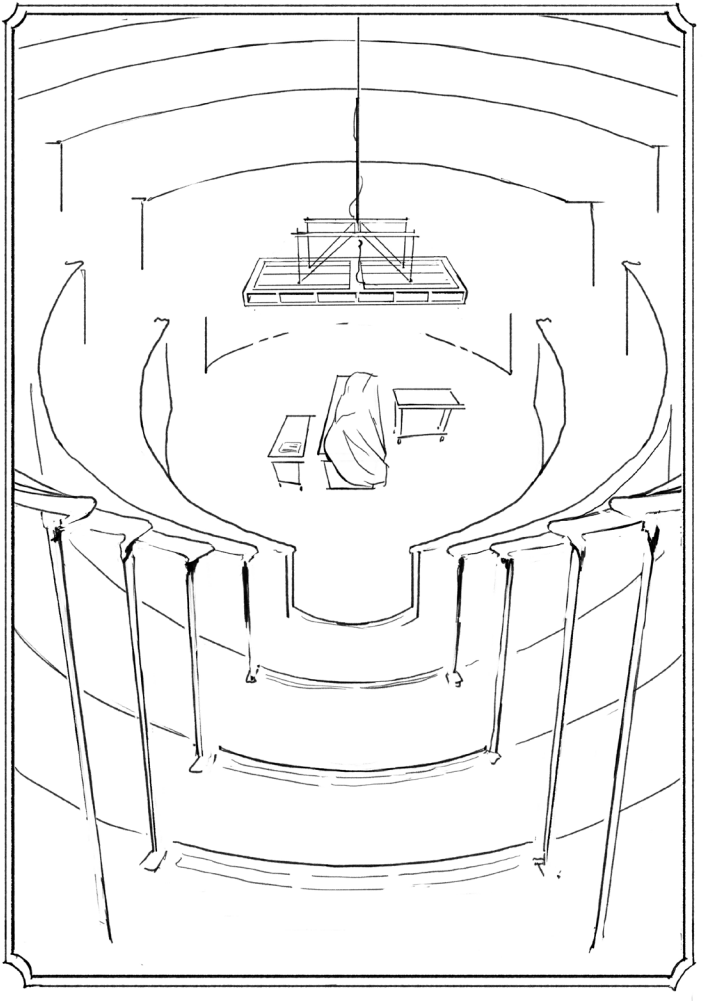
Editor's note

If *An Anticipated Memoir* (*Mémoires anticipées*) is written in the feminine,[2] it is not absent-mindedness, but a wink at a passage in *Prisoner of Love* by Jean Genet: "The transsexuals—or perhaps transsexuelles, for they merit the feminine plural" ... And memoirs, too!

For R.

2 In French, the word for personal memories, *mémoires*, is a homonym of "memoirs," the word for the literary genre, but the genre is a masculine noun, while "memories" is feminine. Here, Hocquenghem extends the feminine to the genre. –*Tr.*

Paris - Montparnasse
May 2018
"Amphitheater of the Dead"



Chapter One

I had often contemplated, with the characteristic distraction of the springtime walker, or the wintry detachment of someone who has a single idea to interrupt his suffering, this enigmatic inscription planted like a *mene mene tekel upharsin* on the alley by the hospital. For thirty years, I will have walked these alleys waiting for a death which has not come, and I will have contemplated this inscription without understanding its meaning, hidden, mystical and trivial all at once.

"Student Amphitheater;" "Amphitheater of the Dead" read the two placards, indicating opposite directions. Did the dead, too, come together in a frozen assembly,

to hear a silent discourse, shaking each other's fleshless hands?

Not long ago—yesterday, to be exact—I went all the way to the amphitheater of the dead. It's nothing but a dissecting room, or an operating theater, rather, surrounded by stepped benches in a semicircle. There, death and dissolution by a mysterious spectacle of Nature have convened a spectacle of science.

The dead, in the amphitheater in question, constitute not the audience but the spectacle itself, incessantly renewed, where one never performs more than once.

No matter: pushing open the pre-war steel doors pierced by portholes and entering the vast room with its glaucous light, I saw all my dead reunited, not somber and silent but agitated, breathlessly chirping, thrilled to see each other again.

My dead: The expression is not the happiest. I owe to the reader, at the beginning of this work, my sincere excuses; speaking obsessively of the dead isn't nice. I will try not to come back to it. But better to lance the boil. I am myself in a suspended death. For thirty years, the cooled blood running in my tired veins has only been slowing down. I am suffering from Rosenbaum's disease, one of the forms of what we used to call contagious cancers, which

exploded in the eighties like a shrapnel bomb seeding unknown diseases on the surface of the earth.

I'm 70 years old. For thirty years, I've believed I'm going to die tomorrow, or at least in the next three weeks; I don't know why, but this delay is the exact measure of my medical misery. You are, in my case, generally "gone in three weeks." For me, it's been almost the length of two generations. And now, at present, death is "really" approaching (an adverb which fits it poorly, by the way), necessarily, inevitably, I'm afraid. Once again. Again and again. You never exhaust your fear of death. Except by dying. In short, I survived the first huge epidemics, in the seventies and eighties. Sometimes, looking at the Pantheon, which I see right on the horizon, in the French window facing my bed, its large welcoming dome and its eighty columns, I find myself rueing it; my friends are gone, my future, my "career" (frightful word) has taken exactly the turn I feared when I was young and sincere: social integration, a habit of luxury, epicurean knowingness, and refined egoism. I make my visits to the Académie—which, like me, has survived these thirty years of upsets.

I'm ashamed: It's true, when I was little, I believed that to be old meant to be free, to buy and eat as much candy as you wanted. As an adolescent, I vowed never to be older than 40. When I was touched by my terrible

disease, I had just turned 40. This illness has remained an infirmity—today, everyone knows, you don't die from it, before the age prescribed by destiny for a natural death. You survive it, you make do. For thirty years, I've made do (not to mention that Mauriac,[3] too, hit his own death thirty years before it arrived).

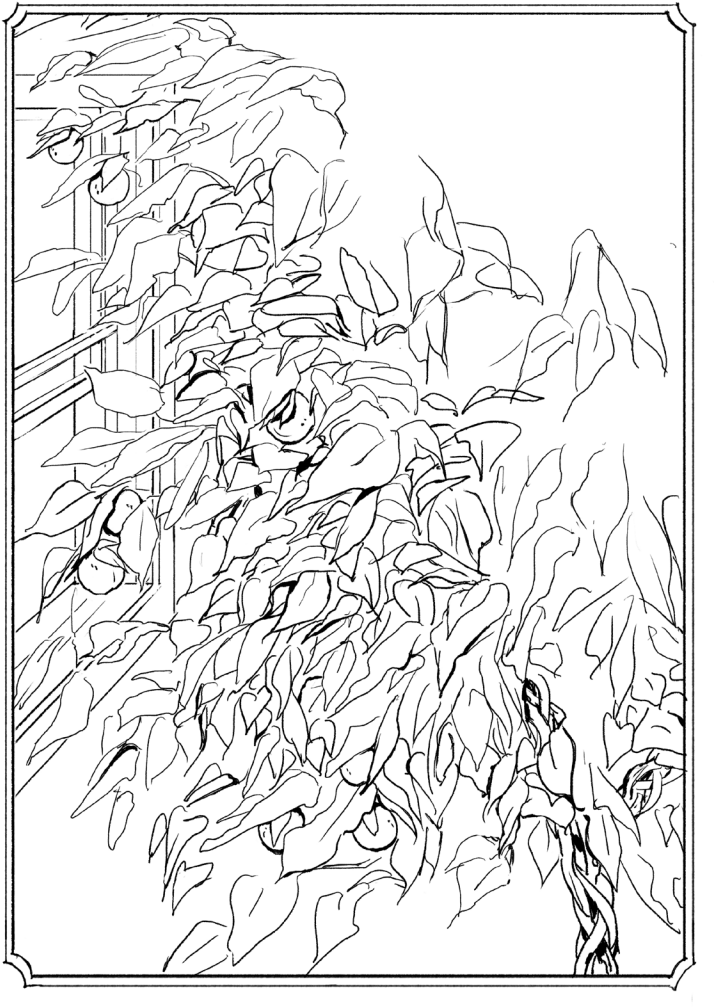
The first years, I felt guilty, to live longer than the period that my own stubbornness had fixed for myself. This terrible illness—we can no longer imagine what it was in our youth to be in this distended terror, before the vaccine—chose for me. It was no longer a question of patience. Two years, three years at the very most, and I wouldn't have had to wait to keep my promise. I wouldn't betray my powerless extremism.

But because I got sick, I didn't kill myself.

(Or was the illness itself a suicidal form of revenge taken by the pure, utopian madness of the years of my youth, lurking in me like a virus, at the bottom of my cells?)

3 François Mauriac, a prominent Catholic writer and member of the Académie française, whose later works Hocquenghem must not have thought highly of. –*Tr.*

I slid from compromise to compromise, from bestseller to dignity; I lived nothing like I had promised myself. Because I believed every day I was reaching the end, and also for R....



The other day, in this new apartment just below la Coupole, on the twelfth floor, the florist came to deliver my new green plants. Oh, nothing special: one of those genetically modified ficuses which grow blue oranges, and a phosphorescent dracaena (the effect, at night, is surprising. It's crazy, the progress they've made with plants...). The florist is a woman of 40 at least, with dyed blonde hair, and she has a servant, her husband maybe, who follows her carrying the pots in his big hands.

"You'll like them, you'll see... in five years, your ficus will fill up half the apartment. With the light you have..."

In five years. My plants will outlive me, they'll keep growing, like hair and fingernails on corpses. At bottom, this woman's remark, absurd and rude (you don't talk to a dying old person about a future so far away), is also full of hope. Something of the type: "Life goes on." The plants will go on living when I'm not there.

There are enough of them, the things that will go on when I won't. The 95 aerobus will continue to chug on Millerand Avenue below my windows, the asthmatic hiccups of compressed air that keep it afloat, bringing its cargo of elderly and immigrants. In the Luxembourg Garden, the Japanese tourists will continue to line

up between the hives and the flowering chestnuts, photographing little girls and statues. And then there's R., who will outlive me.

All that will continue to grow, to snore, to vibrate; plants, men and machines, to grow and embellish themselves.

Poor R. He "had luck in his misfortune," according to the maternal adage. I still consider him a child even as he approaches the end of his fifties.

I will introduce R. to you later. Know only that he had a paralyzed naval officer for a father, and he and his mother were Catholic Bretons both.

At thirty, I only made a single will: I left him everything.

One must be responsible with what one leaves behind. (Should I set up a pension for my plants?) I am afraid of people who leave without arranging their affairs, without considering the futures where they won't be there themselves.

(For thirty years, I've paid for life insurance to make sure he has some money after my death.)

R. has been my lover for thirty years.

Oh, don't imagine the word "lover" means unrestrained libertinage. Like all old couples, we only occasionally make love; more as proof of tenderness than violent desire. Anyway, our second vintage, so full of technology, is no longer the time for sex.

I love R. in a way that is almost painful, I can't stop worrying about his future. To the point where I exasperate him, prevent him from living, sometimes. At over 50, R. is still very attractive, or attracting, thanks to physical exercise. Plus, he's never been sick.

He escaped the disastrous virus which struck me, after many years of frenzied worries. Spontaneous seroconversion, said the doctors. But he has remained my caretaker, my support, sometimes my nurse, my courage for these thirty years. (Like his mother had been for his father, having spent thirty years the caregiver of a quadriplegic.)

The promises we make to ourselves when we're little. And those we make while young, and then old and sick, which we make despite ourselves...

Childhood years are indistinct, driven by a desire to differentiate oneself, a frenetic aspiration toward other atmospheres which swell the chest with unfulfilled regrets. Something between the promise of being a genius, to make the revolution, to be a saint or a grand artist, or else to kill yourself at the first signs of adulthood.

Swallows, which have taken this old apartment block as a rest stop in their migration, whirl incessantly in front of my bay windows. Further back, the Pantheon shrouds itself in mist, or, when the clouds rend themselves, attracts the light of the sun like a star attracts spotlights, jutting up brusquely behind the grey roofs and illuminating the night, then blinking out when clock strikes midnight (the Pantheon, where I will never be).

Maybe it was this, a real amphitheater of the famous dead, that I saw as a child.

I don't know why, or maybe I know too well and so repress this evidence with all my remaining strength, but I am more and more haunted by the anguish of gathering, recollecting, reassembling my memories. Strange business: I've never been that interested in myself. Of my forty-two books—I had written twelve "before," and "after," each year of sickness saw the birth of a new baby, always the last, as I endlessly heard on the TV—none of them, novels, essays, reportage, nothing was plainly, truly "me." I never liked or never dared this kind of disrobing: half from the secular puritanism inherited from my family (we shook hands, children and parents, until I introduced kissing hello, adopted from hippies), and half because my perpetual agony, which obliged me to observe myself "up close"—and what else was there to do in the rumpled beds of a hospital afternoon?—drove me more to desire evasion, fiction, adventure, everything I had weaned myself from for so long. (Writing saves. Doctors are experts. The drive which is at the origin of a book assures a whole lifespan. You don't die while writing a novel.)

Maybe I lived all these years provisionally, as a traveller whose bags are always packed, thanks to R. And to literature. (Of course, R. worked in publishing. He was very successful.)

Each time I started a book, I knew I would go all the way. With this book, I launch the challenge once more.

Outside, in the changing of the light, the swallows are calling. A worker on a balcony sings a song from the East, slow and melancholic. Since immigration from there began, there are almost no more of the Arab road workers of my youth. It's the same for my apartment: the florist said: "old apartments like yours..." It was built the year de Gaulle took power. For me, it's still "modern." (Don't fall into banality. It all happened so fast, this life, these thirty years, etc.)

Anyway, there's only one way out this time. To denude myself. Try to die with dignity, console R. ahead of time; all that, I believe, erases itself before the only duty I recognize: not to undertake but to write, in this state of exaltation, which rejuvenates me, to recount my earliest unfulfilled promises, my anguishes, to myself who will disappear. Because this time, I know the next infection will take me.

In rereading this—my god, how far this is from what I want to write; how stiff, how cold—one of my unkept promises has come back to me: when I am certain, or at least very sure, for whatever reason, because one can irrevocably condemn oneself to dying imminently, then... Then, I will undertake a courageous act that stuns the world and makes me feel like I haven't been useless: assassinate a torturer,

take a prison warden hostage and liberate the poor held there, something. The final gratuitousness of someone who has nothing to lose by risking being killed would at least serve to help something.

Another promise I won't keep, no doubt.

In the end, my literature will look like my life, borrow the remains of my life, which has fictionalized itself for thirty years already.

I have been living a novel all this time. And even before. But I never had the desire to narrate it, at least directly. It's a poignant novel, like a breakfast slowly conquered by quotidian despair; of awakening, at least at the beginning of my suspended life, during the first years of my illness. I don't keep a journal: My memory is getting weaker. Yes, you have to question them, all these dead reunited in discussion, those from before, those whose disappearance marks the end of a unique era, unheard of in the history of humanity, a brief era of twenty years between the fear of syphilis and the bomb, and the fear of the epidemics and ecological catastrophes which came to darken the end of our particular vintage. A parenthesis in the history of man, where the ancient anguishes, guilts, self-limitations receded a little. A sigh of happiness in the partition of catastrophes, the repressions and social nightmares. Humanity probably only ceased being afraid once in its long life: between the sixties and the eighties of the last century. When I was little, I couldn't get to sleep without thinking of the atomic bomb, terrifying menace suspended above my child's bed, whose mysterious presence and maleficent aura radiated

through the night. Later, I wanted to kill myself because of my first syphilis infection: The Algerian war came to an end, and *France-Soir* ran the headline "Return of the Venereal Peril."

And then came this era without restraints, in the sense of high school punishments, this time—so quickly over—where everything seemed permitted.

The time of my youth.

I exasperate R. when I speak of it. To begin with, never having abandoned a certain pretension to youth by dint of comparison with me, and his electric bodybuilding, he has never realized that his points of reference have moved along with him. He never lived through anything like it. He arrived in Paris as a young man with short hair when it was ending. If it happens that I ramble on about the erotic follies which marked my youth, or even our abortive revolution in '68, a half century ago, it's because nothing important, in my eyes, has been produced in the years that followed. It was before the Third World War, which lasted two hours. As everybody knows... There are those for whom the real avant-garde is that of the thirties, just as how for my grandmother "pre-war," in 1950, was still pre-1914.

"Anyway, I don't really believe in all these political ideas..." he has repeated for thirty years in his obstinate voice, his

stubborn Breton face, when my senility began bringing me back, before him, to this world that drowned almost a half-century ago. Since the death of the politics, which, like that of happiness and inventive liberty, dates from before the Third World War, my stories of youth become bit by bit incomprehensible, without common referent. "Leftists? Oh yes, that band of visionaries in 1968," say the ill-informed youths (the others know nothing of this drowned continent), as if they had it confused with 1848.

O, my youth! Youth of the world, youth of the spring air on the boulevard Saint-Michel! These gloomy and stupid youths who I've seen parading in front of my unstable observatory since that time make it more precious with each year, each generation. How the sublime absurdities called "future of humanity, sexual liberty, eternal youth" become more precious the more they recede in the cold fog of stagnant time.

All of that is truly forgotten today.

Of these interminable years of suffering and hesitation, I have accumulated no memories. Maybe it's the fact that each morning, each week, each month, I have to restart my life almost from zero. Or from the vital stand-still, in some way: I walk backwards on the conveyor belt that goes to the Final Breath. But it's not my fault: I am nothing but one symbol among others of this stasis, of the immobility of a

perpetually unstable equilibrium which forms the social setting in which we've all lived for all these years.

Other than my social ascension, so long awaited that it brings me no new emotion, nothing has happened. When, three decades ago, I learned of what I thought was my imminent death, R. told me in a sincerely apologetic voice, "And the most enraging thing is that, in ten years, you would become a popular novelist, rich and famous..." (It's exactly what has happened. Without me wanting it and without surprise: I didn't resist enough.)

It's why, a little cruelly, I say sometimes that my youth was the only youth the world has known, even until now. People often say that it's the most distant memories that are the freshest, still exhaling their fragrance when we encounter them, protected as they are from the glare of awareness by the piled layers of memory. So let's return to the amphitheater of the dead and exchange these messages with the past, these old fragile papers, so easily blown away.

Above the grey and brown roof of the church, already-tall trees grow with vigor, their roots displacing the upturned slate. A curly-haired child, sulking adorably, comes down the path in a zigzag, passing in front of the wash house. He holds his grandmother's hand. Behind them, the dark blue of the pine forest and the intense green of the pastures all speak of the dense vitality of this corner of the Vosges.

Suddenly, preceded by a screeching on gravel, a bike ridden by an old peasant appears. The child cries, lets go of the trembling hand of his elder. Like chickens before a car, he teeters toward the danger he wishes to avoid.

(I won't speak too much of my grandmother, who I barely knew besides her bringing me to mass, profiting from parental indifference.)

This is my earliest memory of childhood. The impact of the wheel, the toddler rolling on the ground, the bloody forehead.

"It's nothing. It'll heal..." repeated the old peasant while examining the shape of his bike to see if it had been bent. The accident, which won me repatriation in an orange Economat truck, wasn't serious. Nevertheless, it gave me my first concept of illness and death.

I have only two other memories of this grandmother; born Meyer, she was distantly descended from Central Europe and, I understood much later, was a converted Jew. She made all the more effort to drag me to the modernist steel chapels of the time, which populated the surrounding area of our house in the suburbs.

In her room, she had a large polished walnut armoire, so large that it took up half the room, and in it were pieces of ten, twenty centimes, the old money, pierced in the middle, with new francs and "cent sous" (the five francs of de Gaulle), which she distributed indifferently to the collection plate. I had the heartlessness, already a little racketeer, to oblige myself of my part of this humble treasure, to ransom the poor old lady. In the end, she died, and no one ever spoke to me about religion again without a condescending smile in their voice. For a long time, this cleansed me of any superstition. (But I become superstitious as I age.)

She died, and with her, the poor square of my Oedipus complex, a miserable grey ghost barely visible through the crack in the door at her bedside. Her death was my first death. She agonized, skinny as a tree branch on the little iron bed, and my mother said in my father's ear, though we all heard it, us "kids":

"Get the kids out of here, she's letting herself go..."

So as to not see her shit herself, I missed witnessing the tragic and delicious moment *par excellence*, the moment of another's death.

The first time I saw a cadaver, it was Christian. There is always something incongruous in the spectacle. A ruddy, overdressed fat man, here was what remained of him. Today, in my amphitheater of the dead, he is in the first row; he holds forth, a glass in one hand, one leg at a right angle in the other, pudgy dancer of a ballet on the theme of a perpetual cocktail party. His nose, surprisingly fine and pale on his red alcoholic's face, reflects all his subtle malice; and this bent nose, ironically, is all that remains of his photos from childhood, when he was a student dandy in a cardigan.

Christian died a hero of his cause: a little glass of plum brandy in the gullet. A sudden stroke, he fell face-first in the middle of a telephone call. His doctor had warned him: the bottle of brandy, proof of his indiscipline, was found on the telephone stand three-quarters gone.

He had such an air of satisfaction at having become a cadaver, his hands crossed on his plump chest, his "fine smile" on his lips, amused for all eternity.

When I published my first book, this pillar of the caviar

left—a sort of comfortable hypocrisy that was half-scene, half-protest movement, which in my naivety I believed was an old affair destined for political extinction, and which has ended up enveloping everything—took me on a long walk around his pond, the pride of his country house, and told me:

"People like you and me aren't geniuses. We are journalists, writers—intelligent, but not geniuses..."

This way of at once showing me to be on his level and making me share in his resignation to mediocrity very much depressed and moved me.

Peach pits. When we were little, the four or five youngest, because our family was large, piled into the back seat of the grey Ford with the little oval windows. These were grand departures, at six in the morning, after my dad busted his gut to cover all the bags with a plastic sheet on the top, fixing it with a web of rubber bands which almost blinded one of us every time, the first days of our vacations away from our suburban home to the Vosges, or, later, the Midi. I am a child of Route 7, the "vacation route," of black-and-white TV that wished us kids goodnight at seven-thirty, of the first food processors and scratchy Teppaz record players.

Each time she got in the car, my mother never failed to remark in a dry voice: "I'm sitting on peach pits! You should have bought a different car, instead of this jalopy..."

In my innocence, I believed that there were really peach pits sewn into the fabric of the seat. My father obeyed her suggestion the millionth time, and the Ford was replaced by a Trianon, a huge green clunker that lugged itself down the streets with its cargo of kids and the plastic sheet flapping overhead, inevitably undone after a few kilometers by the wind sweeping it up. But, barely settled in the new vehicle, my mother took up the refrain of the peach pits again.

As these trips would make me carsick, they would give me bitter pills to take before we left, crushed into jam. This medicine, which I still remember was called "Dramamine," rekindled the drama of these departures for me. I monitored myself the whole journey, attentive only to the appearance of illness, nauseated and half-asleep, while service stations and traffic jams passed us by. At that time, the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, the highways ended suddenly, without warning, a few kilometers from the capital.

From time to time, my mother would turn around, look me over, and ask: "You don't feel sick, do you?" I shook my head in denial. She added, every time: "Because if you feel it coming on, say so. Your father will find a place to pull over..."

My brothers and sisters, vigorous and unruly, were themselves fully immunized against this illness. I envied them, but I enjoyed my unfortunate distinction.

We would stop sometimes at a good restaurant, somewhere between Auxerre and Joigny, or between Tonnerre and Avallon, whose names were always scrambled in my head. My mother would grab the waiter as soon as we were at the table: "For the kids, we only need two orders for the four of them..."

The waiter would crease his forehead, aggrieved by this

thrift. But instead of following our mother's orders, my siblings and I schemed to undo what had been done by demanding full plates for ourselves.

"You have always had eyes bigger than your stomach," she would sigh at the end of the meal, regarding my half-eaten plate.

I had been a magnificent baby: huge, chubby cheeks and butt, a pleasure to mothers. And then I had stopped eating, became difficult, willful. Why didn't I stay what I was poised to become, a fat, happy, ravenous baby! But barely did I know how to walk when I became thin and somewhat malnourished.

I see this now as the first inkling of my uniqueness, of being an ugly duckling. One day, years later, I recalled how my grandmother fought against this sly revolt against overeating, stuffing me with sugared raw ground beef. I've kept the faint nausea from this bloody jam in my mouth to this day.

Like "carsickness," my refusal to nourish myself fell under the sign of that which, later, must have brought me to homosexuality. (After a half-century, the word still scares me.)

A mad desire to not be like the others, to refuse the easy life, was already taking shape in my choices. My brothers

were all scientific technicians, like my father. I chose the side of my mother, who had been one of the first women to be a professor of the humanities. From a very young age, I saw myself very clearly as a "writer," that is to say an artist, an exception, an eccentric among this numerous brood, all practical and all occupied by immediate interests.

"Pull over, Father, you can see this kid is sick," my mother cried. She called my father "Father" when she felt her native exasperation rising in her; she, "independent woman," academic once full of future, who in marrying my father and bearing ten kids (of whom three would die for lack of milk during the war) was condemned to familial subjection.

So we pulled over on the side of the road. I heard the noise of the cars behind me, while my mother extended her concern to the point of sticking her finger in my throat to help me vomit.

I had lowered the sacrosanct "average," but my little mournful air, the bags under my eyes, my interesting state, had once again won me the envious attention of all the other kids (we said "the parents" and them "the kids," vague plural).

And then, relieved, I got back in the car, the enchanted Car and its human cargo, which lurched off on the bumpy asphalt of the time.

Of truly bad deeds, I only have memory of three. In one life, that's not many; and given the very short time I've been allotted, I doubt I'll have the time to commit many more. I already recounted the first, the grandmother racket. The second is the worst one. We took in an old Polish refugee couple at our house, of which the wife, Augustine, made us borschts, and the husband, inveterate drunk, worked in the garden. I denounced them to my parents for having beaten me with a tree branch for some childishness. The couple was sent back. Poor Augustine! She was potbellied, and like all babushkas or Arab women cut from the same pattern, walked by shuffling around in open-toed slippers. She intervened in our fights over our toys, and cried in an authoritative voice, when we started choking each other over a game of building-blocks: "Have have cubes!" A sentence that only we could understand: half of the blocks for each of us.

My third bad deed was to make my little brother eat dirt, to humiliate him. His despair was funny to see.

And now, a fourth bad deed comes back to me, much worse than these childish things. To have kicked my first lover out of "my" house, because he started using drugs. But the time for this story will come...

High school and sex arrived at the same time. When I entered Lakanal high school, it was a vast building fortified with barred windows, where thousands of loud and ill-washed boys were cooped up for entire days. It was very far from our little telematic units of today. And yet, these enormous prisons at least had one advantage: They taught us about society.

I was more a whipping boy than a hero in this infantile society. My innate romanticism and prettiness won me persecution from the fat gingers in glasses who already knew swear words. I was a physical romantic: the face of an angel, but a dirty nature.

There was one other exploit that I don't consider a bad deed. I was 12, in tenth grade. My mother had at the house the complete collection of a booklet only for teachers, which gave them the keys to the enigmas which they imposed on us. This is how I was able to read the more advanced versions of the Greek. I got the top grade; but I barely had I finished the test, the unhappy artifact still in my bag, when I was gripped with a morbid idea: I wanted to boast to my classmates.

Yes, strange desire. Cheating didn't satisfy me: The whole world had to know. Already a militant against the regime

of knowledge and competition, these had no attraction for me. But the people with the least true morals, these brutes interested only in cars, girls, and money, were all indignant. They kept me in social quarantine for weeks.

It was well before this episode that I had made the discovery of Sex, on my own. Her Majesty Sex. With parental authorization, I had watched *Marius* by Marcel Pagnol on TV. Returning, pale, to my room to lie down, I fell asleep on my stomach. As a stimulant, I could have better than the contrary loves of Marius and Fanny. But oh well: an agreeable movement, which consisted of rubbing my sex against the sheet, made it grow. I was at once terrified by this erection growing below my waist and panicked by the delights of the first conscious ejaculation.

Talking about sex wasn't my parents' strongest suit. To this day, I privately thank them for it.

I was seven or eight when a young maid—this mediator of Eros, this portent of Sex—told me everything. The "home assistant," her official title, disabused me of an important point. I often heard recounted, at the dinner table, in discussions between my mother and sister, a medical student and already fluent in all the horrors of the doctors' dining hall, and my older brothers, the bawdiest operations. The word "bugger" came up often, and even more often on the playground at school. This word perturbed me. I

already knew that a man and a woman penetrated each other in front to make a baby. But what was the relation with this heavy word, this jewel of a verb with obscene accents? "Bugger..." The young maid explained everything to me. No, it's not simply a more vulgar way of saying "fuck." There was nothing likeable about the ass here.

Chapter Two

As the old man hobbled into the waiting room on his cane, his other hand on the arm of a solid blue-eyed younger man, silence entered too, interrupting the murmuring of the sick receiving their consultations.

Other than him, the room had nothing but young people. And these apprentice invalids, unaware of the gravity of these spaces, young fags ripped from their provinces, regulars of porn theaters, experienced a slight thrill at his arrival, pausing their conversations. Perhaps besides astonishment, they demonstrated an unconscious respect, in this aquarium-green hospital silence, for the man who had victoriously traversed the savage, heroic, difficult era of the first years of the illness.

Now, you don't die of it anymore.

As soon as the old man, as tall and dry as a dead tree, sat down painfully on the bench, his companion placed an old Scottish plaid on his shoulders. There was such sensitivity and tenderness in these gestures that the young patients (for whom this history was no more pressing than a bad case of gonorrhea), and even a nurse passing by, touched, felt a twinge in their hearts.

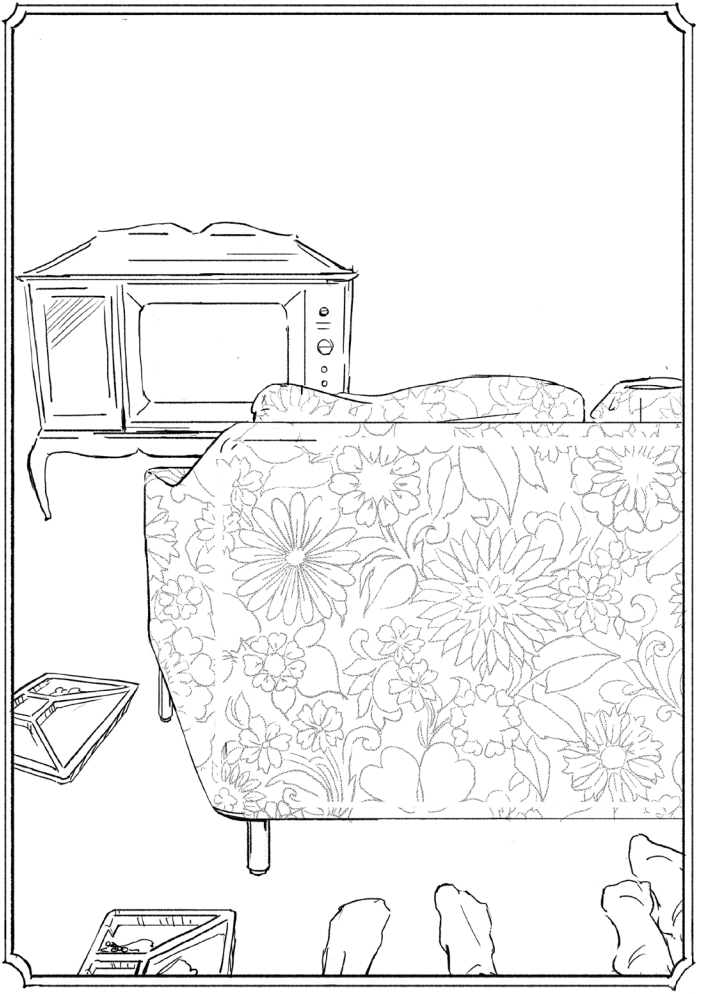
Darkened with blotches of cancer, the face of the old man expressed no concern for anything other than the immediate and material (the rigidity of the bench, worry at a gust of air). He bore the traces of a protracted war waged by medicine on the long-merciless epidemic. His stitched-up body, thin as Christ on the cross, cut by scars from operations, and the eye twitches left by a stroke, formed a repertoire which the younger invalids consulted almost with admiration.

This man had seen plenty of doctors pass him by. More than fifty, certainly. Like his lovers in a different time: impossible to count. Barely seated, he reached for a large spiral notebook, which his companion, whose close-cropped hair gave an air of youth but who must have been approaching fifty, handed him. And he began to write with a large Parker fountain pen, black and gold like a precious insect; now one could only see his long curly hair, worn in

the very old style of the hippies, but white as snow, and his hand, waxy, long, dry, and blemished, which ran over the paper.

There were no old people in these venereal clinics. Those who could have become old had all died long ago. Some of them had lasted ten, twenty years. He had been saved by the bell, the discovery five years earlier of a miracle medicine after so many others, but which had finally turned out to be real, at the moment when people had lost all hope of holding out.

The whole hospital staff knew his history; and as they knew he was a writer, a warm atmosphere of understanding gentleness surrounded him as soon as he passed through the examining room doors. After all, if anyone other than death could say they were at home at the hospital, it was him. Generations of doctors and nurses had passed under his gaze, more anxious than comforted by the idea of meeting an almost mythic invalid.



Malls and lawns of a triumphal green tattoo the small towns of the south of England. On a street corner, two bigger girls with braids tease a little curly-haired "Frenchy," and one of them plunges her hand down his largely open shirt, slowly caressing his chest.

"Nasty little boy! You like that!"

Her fingernails stroke his nipples. Eyes closed, overcome by the cries of the birds and the spring heat, the little Frenchy sighs.

The little village in the south of England lined by parallel streets of little industrial houses, where I was sent to perfect my English, was called Shoreham-by-Sea. Like all French children of that time, a lecherous English girl was my first sexual educator.

But I retained an almost feminine attitude, which meant letting the other take all the initiative.

I was placed with a working-class family. Every other day, we ate beans on toast for breakfast. The father thought of nothing but his tea, his slippers, and the TV. We dined at six o'clock.

I stayed in the same room as the oldest son, a reserve cadet, and who on Sunday would march in his handsome uniform. I watched him undress at night, and the twitching of his white muscles vaguely troubled me.

Image a working-class English room, the bow window of a humble and ordinary dwelling; through the windows that jutted out on the street, the light of a grey sunset. The room is lit only by the changing light of the television. In the foreground, the back of the sofa covered in little flowers of printed cotton where the two parents are asleep, whose shoulders and head block out the screen. We are behind the two adults on the other sofa, she and I. Everyone is balancing the terrible TV dinner plate on their knees or on the ground.

Suddenly, I sense a hand gliding along my leg, fiddling with my fly. I can feel her long fingernails.

This girl was really crazy for vice. She was fourteen or fifteen years old. Her ultimate pleasure, in this faded Victorian room, was to rifle through the flies of the lodgers. At every moment, the old ruddy-faced man, who swayed under his cap as he walked, threatened to turn around and see us while her hand continued to lightly masturbate me.

And I believe, like in a novella of de Villiers or Barbey,[4] that it was this danger, this impropriety, which excited her.

One day, I tried to join her in her bed. She drove me away forcefully; I understood then that she had chosen me to play in her erotic fantasy, that of a crazy challenge thrown at the post-prandial familial tranquility, and not as a lover.

Vice, for me, was this, at once frightening and delicious: to be fooled with by the expert hand of a slightly crazed young redhead. But at no moment did my hand linger on her; she would push it off just as quickly. Treating me as an object, almost brutally, she gifted me the fears and the delights of violation, embellished by the idea of a terrible scandal, if by chance one of them had caught wind of it. But they absorbed the television with such attention that during the dozens of evenings that we passed playing this little impish game, they didn't turn back to look at us a single time.

4 Gérard de Villiers and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly are French writers who deal with themes of sex and transgression. –*Tr.*

We lived in Sceaux. I took the subway line of the same name to get to the Comédie-Française or to the National Theater to see Gérard Philipe, minuscule white figure in a puffy shirt, lost in the immense black chasm of the theater. The day of the Algiers putsch, in 1958, the front pages of the newspapers interested me in politics for the first time.

Sundrenched days of May, this May which gave rhythm to my youth as it gave rhythm to the century. We were spread out in the sun, on the grounds of the lycée Lakanal; and we scanned the too-blue sky looking for parachutes and flotillas of airplanes from Corsica and Algeria. We wished for the parachutes; they would finally shatter the tranquility of a country where Renaults trundled and washing machines multiplied. A crazy wish for an endless vacation took shape behind the parachutes. At every terrible event in the history of humanity—the burning of Rome, or of the Reichstag—there must have been dreamy adolescents like us who see the Event finally arrive, and rejoice.

Real politics, with its serious air, I only knew in Paris, when I entered the lycée Henri-IV. I arrived as

a Gaullist[5] (yes, me). It was either foolish or totally insufferable ignorance, if I think back on it.

Paris, Henri-IV and its medieval tower transformed me internally, even if I came home every night to my suburb. I left it a leftist and a homosexual.

My parents, other than a few puzzled questions, seemed to see nothing of my transformation. It was like I was a marionnette coming up the stairs to say goodnight, while all afternoon another me had roamed the boulevards. This tactic of leaving me in peace with the unsaid avoided any conflicts.

Ah, the early sixties, when the Algerian war seemed to go on for no other reason than to agitate the students and the left. How those years shine in the spring sunshine, for me who has nothing more in my eyes than the pallid light of the hospital neons.

I had been a fascist in my childhood and a leftist in my youth, without becoming a "moderate" in my old age—that's how much those tepid opinions have always put me off.

5 Gaullism was a right-wing, anticommunist French republican nationalism. *–Tr.*

Of course, I have calmed down somewhat. But the main question—being neither a bastard nor a bourgeois—this Sartrean engagement (at that time, the influence of Sartre, today mainly forgotten, was all-powerful) has never ceased to haunt me, even now that I am condemned to a short deadline.

What a shame that I never kept a private journal at that time! I never kept a journal; those days streamed through my fingers like water, and it was almost out of pride that I didn't write anything down. To tell the truth, each time I had the desire to start one, I had the vivid feeling that it was already too late. The most interesting events had already happened. (Perhaps this is how every life unfolds, regretting not having kept better hold on the preceding moment.)

This mutation, of the extremist and solitary adolescent (large families are sometimes spaces of solitude) into a newly conscious young man quickly habituated to Marxisant meetings and debates, remains a mystery in my memory.

My conscious life begins there; I protested in front of the Odéon to support *The Screens* by Genet, attended the second protest of the Charonne massacre, and for the first time I felt the hysterical, almost tearful intoxication which seizes you when the whole crowd shouts in a single voice, and in an instant, like the mystics, you believe.

The young people in my time didn't meet by the Medici fountain in white gloves, yellow caps, and russet vests, like those of Gide in *The Counterfeiters*. But they had their form of dandyism, from imitation leather brasseries (le Balzar) to committee meetings. That is: the feeling of belonging to the avant garde.

Eros and Thanatos held hands in my poor head. At that time, during the last spasms in Algeria, posters against torture, with photos of the poor mutilated bodies, hung on telephone poles. In my memory, though I know it's too simple to be true, these posters bothered me, which in no way stopped me from devouring them with my eyes, and had something in common with my first sexual feelings.

I was what Sartre calls a pervert well before understanding the reality of sex. At the lycée in Sceaux, my classmates snickered at my way of separating myself from the others for long walks in the park. In reality it was to smoke cigarettes. But all of that was already experienced as a perversion, both by me and by the others, who were not mistaken.

And in fact the exchange of cigarettes, with two or three friends who had like me extravagant collections, oval Turkish cigarettes with gold logos, menthols of all kinds, Camel, with its supposed opium, was followed soon by

stroking each other in the bushes. Watching the film *The Lovers* with a friend precipitated the crisis: to the bouncing workhorse of a movie, I was jacked off for the first time. It wasn't the image on the screen but the idea that excited us.

As so often is the case, we had no idea of anything, of homo- or heterosexuality; only vice interested me. Like another avant-garde, a secret aristocracy, it spontaneously drew me in (real shame at such a confession).

(I realize that I am circling the pot here, which is my first erotic relation: the intervention of S. in my life. A bomb in my solipsistic universe. The discovery of the real, of the social, of the sexual.)

That clear September morning, beautiful like the whole decade was beautiful, a slender adolescent, wearing too-short polyester pants, walked through the heavy gate of the *lycée* Henri-IV.

It was not without concern that he marched down the corridors. He mechanically creased a letter of recommendation in the pocket of his shirt. A new school, and the strange idea of "philosophy," the name of the class he was entering, announced big changes in his life.

This curly-haired child is me, who memory has split into two, ten, a hundred cliches that now come back to me.

I could have, I should never have met Samuel. The letter—my parents believed strongly in recommendations—was addressed to a Professor Lévy. But I had been placed in the class of Professor Samuel, who was this little man in striped velour standing right in front of me.

I must have had both little and noble allure, badly dressed in hand-me-downs, too skinny—and still, I can see it in my photos (all burnt in the end, in the fire at the Mill), with an exceptional, incredible beauty. Samuel had neither, and welcomed me into his class without realizing that my letter of recommendation was addressed to a colleague.

In my first compositions, poor Samuel had to vanquish in me a real naiveté, a truly stupid innocence in my idiocy; though he didn't have to. Eventually, in December, he invited me to a meal.

All his life, Samuel had been himself. Since the age of twenty until the ninety-five he is now, he has resembled himself so much that his photos have the look of different hours of the day and not ages of life.

I could never say how much I owe to Samuel. He sharpened me, morally, physically, intellectually.

When I entered into his class—grey iron walls, pale green ceiling, high windows opening onto the courtyard—Samuel was at the lectern. He read my letter without blinking; then, addressing me, with one foot on the dais and one on the floor, in his voice with its strange Alsatian accent, he said: "I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Please sit wherever you would like."

Samuel, however good-looking or immaculate in his person (he shaved his shoulders and dyed his hair), made one think physically more of a tanned peasant than an intellectual. In the moment, I was disappointed; I imagined that all philosophers had glasses and white hair.

Samuel taught me everything, sex and politics, at a time when these were the only profound concerns. Still, today we might feel scandalized, in the beginning of the second millenium, that my teacher slept with me. His room in the Hôtel des Grands Hommes was minuscule, but there was a little camping stove in the entryway. Samuel got on well with his Czech or Portuguese housekeepers, who sewed his buttons back on. He enjoyed the comfortable existence of an old hotel-living bachelor (he was in his fifties).

Samuel was so typical of the intelligentsia of that time! It's not just him, his little stocky silhouette, his slightly asymmetrical face, it's the taste for slices of quiche reheated on a plate which comes back to me. His life of a bachelor, to which I subscribed.

His sheets of raw linen scratched me a little. The first time, I came back on the subway to Sceaux, and I couldn't stop repeating to myself: "If the people around me knew..." Knew that I was returning from making love with a man. How would they have reacted, these dazed housewives with the look of a melancholy cow, these middle managers in dirty suits, these bespectacled students ...

And the feeling of my uniqueness abruptly revealed itself, swelling my head, turning this little smelly, rattling train compartment upside down.

What this experience taught me above all is the inexhaustible charm of the double life. Ever since, I never stopped living in two registers. Homosexual on one side, militant on the other, and later writer and invalid, I always had something to hide from half of my relations. I love it; it's a kind of extra wealth.

The moment it all came together was the miraculous moment of "sexual liberation." But even while I was a militant homosexual, one part of my life, that of the erotic frenzy, remained submerged. And it was good this way; one must always keep a reserve. Total consistency (doing what one says and saying what one does) is a totalitarian fantasy.

The shrouded sun glimmers on the pond. Dwarf hens, mini-fowl, fancy pigeons with spread white tails, shake themselves, pecking in the gravel courtyard. Although it was already late in the cold morning, nothing was moving in the little mill nestled in the bare thickets of elderberry. It was a watermill in the countryside, whose paddles were moved by the stream flowing from the huge pond. You could believe you had been dropped a century into the past, if not for the parked cars near the woodshed whose license plates gave away that this was the country home of some Parisians.

The door of the little house on the other side of the courtyard, one of those Burgundian cottages which seem to be trying to bury themselves as much as possible, opened. An old woman came out, so bent in two by the years of cleaning that you would swear she was made of two pieces stuck together by a bracket. She entered the mill without knocking, and set about piling up the glasses and dirty dishes from the previous night in a large tray. Her domestic noise, bee-light and industrious, rose bit by bit up the stairs, where the guests were sleeping, exhausted from the alcohol and useless, violent discussions.

Mother Laveau drank, herself. But only eau de Cologne,

which perfumed her whole person. She would down a glass discreetly, wiping her mustachioed lips on her apron in the kitchen.

On the second floor, a heavy step made the the floor's huge wooden slats creak. Someone cracked the window which opened onto the courtyard, appeared with a yawn in the opening, saluted the icy day with two wide arms, and positioned himself to piss over the balcony. The stream sprayed off the wall, watering the courtyard.

"Some people are really disgusting, Monsieur Christian. People who piss, with all due respect, out windows..."

The master of the house, wearing a Moroccan djellaba which exposed his little fat, white calves, nodded his head while blowing on his coffee. Truly, the old lady was always right.

Christian was a literature teacher at a high school and his brother, a commercial engineer. They lived together in a little apartment on the rue Victor-Hugo and were both queens, as we said at the time.

The old lady, even more bent by the two large trays full of dishes which she lugged to the little house, crossed the courtyard once again. The Mill's comforts—there was never any other, and there will never be any other

Mill—were extremely rudimentary. The only water there was trickled in cold from a plastic pipe over the wall which marked its boundaries. With this, too, we can see how much time has passed: Discomfort and the basic half-rustic, half-upholstered style were accepted by these people who understood themselves as chic and typically belonged to the intelligentsia. Christian and his brother were best friends with Samuel, and they gathered around themselves a court of worldly queens, lawyers, society directors, theater people.

It was at their house that I experienced my first love. New Year's Day, shopping day. Christian kept counting the bottles of wine, the *petits fours* made by his aunt, eating one before it was time over the protestations of his brother.

The two brothers shared something outrageously comic, a routine which they had honed over the twenty years that they lived their life of queens together, and self-deprecating at the same time. The brother looked more like their father, a Burgundian farmer with a pug nose and drunk's complexion, than Christian himself. Christian was forged as if from an engraving of Wilde or Jean Lorrain, a bizarre foppish dandy, and had a way of holding himself, like a penguin with his pinky finger in the air, which remains inimitable and symbolizes an entire era.

The era is that of the homosexual intellectual world of the time, chatty, naive, hypocritical and sincere. The epoch of

weekends in the country, with roads worthy of Godard's *Weekend*, these national highways lined by plane trees red with the blood of drivers. Christian and Antoine should have lost their lives there twice, pinned each time by the body of the sport cars that Christian would buy, their lungs pierced by the windshield or the bars of the canvas roof (Christian only ever drove convertibles).

And the evenings flowed by on plum brandy and whiskey, speaking of theater, of the left, and of Godard, while the enormous fireplace roared, burning up logs of an equal size. There was no way of heating the place other than a coal-burning stove in the living room, which was the origin of the catastrophe.

"We have to take Albin over to the house," said one to the other that morning, the other nodding his head with an echo: "We have to take Albin over to the house." Albin was their father. The house was a cottage stuck in a somber dead-end road of the little neighboring village where their father lived, and where he kept a shop on the first floor. Though he was a cobbler, the two brothers would affirm together, "Our father is a shoe salesman."

The old man was known to enjoy a single passion: fishing, at which he would spend hours, his wide purplish face radiant with satisfaction. What did he really think of this

strange sterile couple that his only two children made? Despite a general state of drunkenness, he only drank bottles of uncorked wine, vile liters, "the red of Our Father," the two brothers said respectfully. But what lay behind the face of this landsman, this big red nose, this peasant with his peasant's cap? How did he judge this society of homosexuals, this home without a woman—and given that his two sons were queens, did he not see an abomination, he of the race of the perpetual obsessives of order?

He passed among us, sprawled on the couches and chairs with exposed springs and stuffing, into the living room, slowly, his cap screwed on, his rubber boots squeaking on the tiles, without seeming to see the makeup, the extravagant outfits, the attitudes between men: this fifty-year-old lawyer stroking a young gazelle-eyed Arab boy by the light of a gilded lampshade (Christian was a great enthusiast of gilding; he placed it not only on the panelling and his church monstrances, but even in his theater criticism in an important newspaper).

And then he disappeared to go drink, seated on his folding chair, fishing, or fishing while drinking, watching the grey, muddy pond lined with poplars on the other bank, all day long.

Perhaps he thought that a divine curse had been leveled upon the flesh of his flesh, or he thought nothing of it, so

used to appearing not to see what was in front of him that he effectively saw nothing at all.

New Year's Eve! Rites of parties past! After toasts and late dinners, under the chandeliers, Christian and his brother, like every year, performed a play, or a sort of satirical review in verse that Samuel wrote for them. Other years, the light of an old aluminum projector laid on the floor cut off and whitened their too-made up faces, like a Fellini film, the two brothers in gowns of window drapes and cashmere tablecloths.

But that year, the final year, they didn't have time to get to the spectacle.

"You could feel the evil approaching, for sure," said old Mother Laveau much later, though, having gone to sleep early, she saw none of what happened after seven in the evening. It was at the moment when the dinner reached its peak, from the alcohol, chicken, and warmth amidst the chilly air which rose from the pond, that the cops knocked on the door.

Out of principle, from an innate respect for procedure, whether they be those of the Church whose pomp they

adored or social forms in general, the two brothers arose unsteadily, offering the cops the cup of friendship. They refused it with a grave air.

The silence landed like a blow on the banquet. Only a single hysterical giggle escaped from one of the assembled, an antique jewelry seller (whatever happened to the habit of referring to oneself in the feminine? Christian always said "my sister" for his brother).

I can see this scene as if it were imprinted in the theater of my memory: "Come outside with us for five minutes."

The icy wind beat at the old fabrics hanging on the walls, in front of the door which no one got up to close. Yes, I can see them now, Christian and his brother, usually red, turned pale, gripped by the cold and by the news that they now had to announce to us, their guests.

"Our father just killed himself."

The youngest assembled, these men's lovers, of which I was one, already dead drunk, thought it was a joke. Useless questions burst out, the "How? Why? Where?" embellishing the annoyance while aggravating it. The old man had left with his secret on this night of celebration, pulling a charge of buckshot right in the mouth, the rifle between his knees in his little dark house.

If you can believe it, the dinner continued.

"Our father wouldn't have wanted us to stop the New Year's dinner," said Christian in a funny, strangled voice (it is only in the face of death that that the voice fails).

And when midnight chimed, the lawyer queen, a little, depleted man, in possession of millions, took his glass and raised a toast:

"To Albin, who would have so loved for us to drink to his health..."

These were the years of heavy pouting and grand dramas. I accompanied the two brothers in the early morning to the paternal abode. The walls, the bed, the crucifix (from their mother) were covered in blood and brain matter. They had already removed the body, a hole straight through the throat, his head blown off by the explosion. The brothers had to go identify what was identifiable. And for hours, in party dress, or almost, in the day dawning with the pale light of a new world, their faces still bearing traces of makeup, the two brothers cleaned the room with sponges and detergent, to make the blood disappear.

I went with them, having become a confidant, with two other guests, to their thoughts about this death. Sad but still animated, the conversations of that first grey and cold day of the new year cycled hopelessly through a litany of whys. That this fat old man, up until now a part of the decor, had had such romanticism and courage moved me to tears. All of a sudden he had drawn the fires of general attention to him; everyone now remembered a phrase of Albin's, a remark of his, which revealed a penetrating spirit hidden beneath his rough exterior.

We paced like phantoms between the rooms while snow, little by little, buried us in the soft twilight; half of the

guests had already gone, but the other half, under the pretext of intimacy with Christian and his brother and of tasks to share, as if they had nowhere to crash, dug themselves in, parasites at a funeral meal.

The next morning, we went down to the town. Goodbye, Mill: it's the last image I have left of it intact. A real Christmas card of my youth: standing on the carpet of snow, pierced here and there with the deep green of holly, its huge roof covered by white and its little windowpanes covered in frost, the Mill, in the soft pink light of a winter sunset, and the black, bare trees, as if drawn by a Japanese woodblock artist.

In the little convertible leaping down the road whipped by bands of icy wind, the two brothers, seated in front, tease each other. Christian drives with clenched teeth, more recklessly than ever in the deceptive light of dusk. They are both in mourning dress, a costume made of two veils, white shirts and black ties, which at first glance makes them look like waiters at a brasserie.

Behind, squeezed onto the little seat, there are three young-friends-of-these-men (an idiomatic phrase to designate supposed lovers). Of the two brothers, only one really slept with them, the other turning the prey rustled up by

Christian away from his bed. Ahmed, the putative lover of Christian—it was at this time that I discovered Arabs and their relation to queens—wept for Albin like his own father. Arabs and homosexuals often found common ground in their shared taste for theatrical sentimentality. In the middle was me; to my right, a young actor with long hair (the two brothers gladly collected young actors) and a big, tormented, romantic face. Until that moment, I hadn't paid much attention to him, I should say. Nobody speaks. It is like a rolling funeral wake, this car. Everyone is thinking of death, of punishment, of the unknown.

Ahmed sobs in little conspicuous bursts. The only lights are the reflection from the dial, a feeble greenish glow, and the streetlights of the villages, lost in the shroud of the wind and the snow. I feel against me the large, warm body of Ahmed, who has his head between his knees, which are jabbing me in the kidneys.

And then, all of a sudden, I realize that a hand is stroking me. It's my neighbor to the right.

He contained, in this lively, muscled body, this face with its large forehead and aquiline nose (it was with him that I understood the word), an obstinate desire, tenacious and sly.

My neighbor had chosen me to mark the moment when death prowled around us, precisely at the moment where

we said goodbye to their father. His stubborn desire for sacrilege spiced itself with risk: If one of the brothers had turned around (and Christian did so a hundred times an hour), it would surely be a scene. There is a moment for everything. But not for my neighbor, who for a long time had felt he had nothing but missed occasions.

An implicit rule, in these societies of queens in the fifties, was the impossibility for the young-friends-of-these-men to sleep with each other. A double sacrilege, therefore, the caresses of Romain were ecstatically guilty.

It was this way, in the darkness of winter and the grave, that I came to know Romain. He was my first lover "of my own age." (Samuel, for his part, hated for his lovers to become homosexual, and did all he could to stop them).

Romain was a "discovery," Christian's lover in name only, which implied nothing sexual between them. But that was no reason for me to attack his discoveries and privileges, whose public display Christian prized above all. Sex and Death were there in that car and, as with my little English girl, it was that transgression which excited Romain. And which excited me.

Until then, I wasn't a homosexual. I was "the-friend-of-mister-Samuel," as Mother Laveau would say. From that

day on, I became one. But the catastrophes of that New Year's Day weren't finished. While the two brothers were attending to their various obligations for the dead (for death had its obligations, in the countryside at that time), serious troubles were gathering. They turned their heads almost fully backwards, nearly apoplectic:

"Quick, we have to go back! The Mill is burning!"

Only one person was left there, Ahmed's brother[...],[6] who had fallen asleep after filling the stove. But this stove was just touching the old, dry wood of the state bed where Christian slept (he always had a sense of panache). And everything caught fire.

Above the snow, immaculate against the black of the night, the flames devouring the roof threw up red and fuming flashes. The fog had lifted a bit and we stood in a line, stamping on the snow to warm ourselves up, with Ahmed's brother (who'd escaped from the flames), the two brothers bundled up in their mourning outfits, and the firefighters. Everything burned like a match, the old carpentry, the polished furniture, the joys and the sorrows, the photographs where each one of us had immortalized a

6 These brackets appear in the text, where presumably the name is illegible or otherwise missing from the manuscript. –*Tr.*

previous summer, an evening of theater, a successful outing ("this was when we went fishing at the pond"), and finally all the souvenirs, my first reminders of the queens' perverse and acid taste. These memories, as light as the cinders which descended on us, which I seek out to this day.

My face lit up by fire, there I am, contemplating the punishment of Sodom (for I have always believed in the blameworthy character of my loves, even if it never halted my practices). And I begin to cry like a male Scarlett O'Hara before this destruction.

Chapter Three

Swallows dive outside my large bay window on the tenth floor, drunk off the altitude. Their perfect dovetail shapes dance an incessant ballet around me (or rather, around my apartment, a stopover site for migrations). From all sides, they rush forth and glide on the fickle air, like a sky in Brittany in this Parisian spring.

Someday, I must tell the story of my nurses. I don't know them anymore; those from my time have all disappeared.

My new doctor had a funny air this morning. He doesn't even know how to lie well. The doctor with the same name as my disease died before me. Strange world, where doctors perish before their patients.

The problem, all throughout these long years of illness, has not been one of dying. For that, I've been prepared every day of the week. I have even wished it: "One must always die," said the morose Abbé Jules. And this exaltation which inflated me, at the beginning of my illness, the certainty of dying in the next few months (and it was effectively a rule at that time) was almost enjoyable. One sees others, their activities, their worries, with such a detachment!

And with this detachment, a lust for simple pleasures. A slice of watermelon, a sunset in the desert, a sunny afternoon between the urns and the statues in the garden of Luxembourg beckon to those who are about to die, or at least those who believe it. They live as if on a cloud. But after this short, almost enthusiastic period, one must reapply oneself to life. Because what's exceptional about the situation is purely interior: everything else goes on, the little troubles and the needs (of which one had thought oneself, at least, definitively free).

And then it becomes a drug, the idea that you're going to die tomorrow, which one can no longer let go of, without which everything no longer has a taste. But as always with drugs (and I was once quite familiar), the effect weakens from year to year, and the stuff of life reassumes its odorless, tasteless character.

Let's return to my first lover (though if he heard me talking about him this way he'd tear this page up). Romain wrote, in his miniscule and too-neat letters, by his bitten-nailed hand with its bitten nails, too-short aphorisms about life, love, and all the rest. He was never able to fill more than half a page, like the amateur novelist of *The Plague* who can never get past the first sentence. He was small, Burgundian, stubborn, and a performer. Not just in his life, but on the stage, where he played the roles of the exalted in Romantic dramas. I lived with him those years in a miniscule attic on rue Monsieur-le-Prince. Samuel had purchased this heap of exposed beams for a crust of bread. He gave it to me after 1968 with his habitual generosity, all while gently mocking the little couple we made, Romain and I.

A disused couple. When I was at the cafe with my leftist comrades, according to Romain, I would kick him under the table if he did anything too faggy. You must believe your friends' memories of you, even if you yourself have no recollection.

Because meanwhile, I had become a leftist.

This is what frightens me about life's choices: they are such fruits of chance and habit. One can only read them, at best, like astrological predestinations, with two paradoxical effects. I became a leftist, like I became a homosexual, to belong to the Circle. Secret circles, groups, with their spontaneous elitism, always seduced me.

At the beginning, no one believed it, this leftism of a young man who wants to be noticed. Not even the members of my cell, formed by opponents of the official line of the Communist Party. It took me months of patience to convince them it wasn't a facade. Without anyone speaking about it. Beforehand, they had always seen me like an "aristocrat" or nut. (I should say that I did once act like a dog all day, in the courtyard of the school, responding only with barks at every attempt at conversation.)

In fact, it was really a facade, which has lasted twenty years and decided everything for me.

I became politicized as the opposition within a party of opposition. It was a question of being the furthest left possible; even Trotskyism, which I subscribed to, seemed tepid and opportunist to me.

On the Day of the Barricades, in Algiers, tanks made their appearance in front of the National Assembly. I

wished with all my power for a civil war, a bloodbath, the monuments of Paris brought low by cannons.

Before moving to the rue Monsieur-le-Prince, I was accepted into the École normale supérieur, thanks to the fanatical study sessions Samuel imposed on me. That meant financial independence and an adult life. And a room in the Latin Quarter. We moved in, Romain and I, to the narrow bed of my room at the school, under the effective protection of the woman who cleaned that floor, a grumbler from Auvergne with a good heart. The fact that we were a couple didn't escape her notice, but she never denounced us. For which I thank her to this day.

A MEETING of leftists in one of the classrooms at the École. Busts of historians and archaeologists look out with their empty gazes at the longhairs in jeans who, through chain-smoking and all-nighters, have attained the pale tint of someone eaten away by worries, which is the revolutionary ideal. A tanned revolutionary is a contradiction in terms.

We adopt motions, we count the abstentions, over an obscure quarrel between two wings of Trotskyism. Suddenly, Chisseray gets up and starts shouting. Chisseray is the leader of the other wing, the one I am not a part of. We are wreckers, petit-bourgeois. The orator is round and pink, with the face of shopkeeper, which hides the soul of a prosecutor from the Reign of Terror.

"And what's more, H. is homosexual. Your group admits vicious, petty-bourgeois degenerates..." (Later, I learned of Chisseray's suicide, at the age of thirty, from revolutionary disillusionment.)

It's the first time that someone has publicly accused me of this. My heart stops beating for a second, and then I have a strange, icy sensation—as if I had been stripped naked in front of everyone.

I hadn't thought that it could ever be known. I had constructed, between my private life, my weekends in the countryside, and my first outings to nightclubs, my love for Romain, and the embryo of my public life, a wall that I had thought to be impassible. I saw in the eyes of my comrades an immense discomfort. A leaden silence imposed itself; we could hear, outside, the far away rumor of traffic, the beating of the Parisian arteries that, like those of your own heart, were amplified all of a sudden in grave circumstances.

Still, below this public shame, I felt almost comforted, a perverse pleasure to be the object of general attention. I got up without responding, walked like a ghost down the deserted corridors, and got to a cafe, le Mayeux (since turned into a fast-food place), where we would hold our little conversations while devouring eggs and ham—the revolutionary diet, plus beer and coffee. The others came to join me a little later.

My comrades. The expression, still, can make me smile. I had with them a relation like an individual to a tribe, a friendship one only develops among a band of young people, the potent friendship of those who know they share the same values.

Around this little iron table there was Henri, a tall, thin son of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, who, after

organizing with left Zionists, had come to Trotskyism; his wife, Pascale, a sexy blonde Jew with a protruding nose and breasts, and Jean-René, who I was close to—from nights of bonding together, distributing texts at the Renault factory and taking the first subway back to get breakfast in a still-sleeping neighborhood in the Latin Quarter; fights with "fascists," everything that unites and ties—bearded and blond with innocent blue eyes. He was always smiling, and embodied for me the naive generosity of our world in the face of adult, bourgeois cruelty.

Yes, I loved them, all three, I believed we had to build a new world together; I would live in a collective, later, with Jean-René. That day, we had, by an implicit common agreement, begun by avoiding comment on the incident. But my comrades began a complete demolition of Chisseray and his group.

"They're punks, henchmen. They think that proletarian style is just insults and punches, like a big vulgar insult is proof of being a worker..."

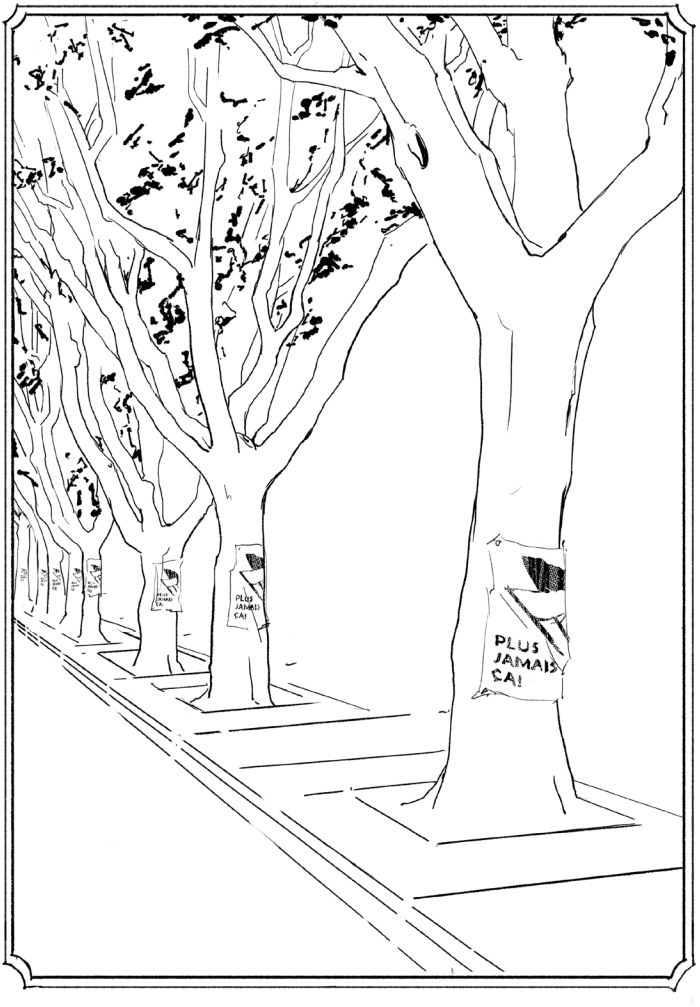
Suddenly, Jean-René turns to me with his myopic blue gaze, his social myopia that makes him commit the worst gaffes as well as see rainbows, the revolutionary El Dorado behind the quotidian grey, and he blurts out:

"But is it true, that you're homosexual?"

He wants simply for me to know that it's all the same to him. For the second time, I am disarmed, frozen; I didn't expect it from his part, for their part, my comrades. And I respond in a small voice, while Henri and Pascale dive into their glasses to avoid my gaze or to not let me read theirs, and Jean-René blushes like a bearded little girl, finally understanding how rude it was to ask:

"You're crazy! What a question!"

A response I am still ashamed of a half-century later.


PLUS JAMAIS ÇA!
PLUS JAMAIS ÇA!

Let us fly on the wing of time. In '68, with the approval of the Organization, which feared a mass raid of militants, we adopted pseudonyms and new addresses. Romain and I stayed on the rue de Cherche-Midi, with a short, wide young Canadian who played servant-girl roles in the same plays as Romain. It was like playing hide-and-seek in real life, this life between the Sorbonne and insurrection, and these incessant disguises. Romain took part in the actors' committee, and I joined all the barricades.

Who, today, among the French youth, still knows the experience of the barricades? We were perfectly aware of their essentially theatrical function, a castoff of a nineteenth-century revolution with its living works of art (and Romain more than anyone). But we felt, both of us, magnified in our complicity, our desiring flesh just barely out of adolescence, by the Great Game of revolution. Living in hiding is a thrilling experience. It is like disposing of yourself for a while, getting rid of your old self. With Romain, it became erotic. And when I came back in the early morning, the odor of tear gas clinging to my skin, he would lick the smell of the riot off me.

When summer came, we were sent out to the Jura countryside with a group of comrades—mainly, Jean-René;

Michel, the grandson of a rabbi from Marrakesh who had put his earlocks, childish air, and charming smile in the service of the revolution; his girlfriend at the time; and my brother and little sister, who were part of the little group of which I was the natural leader. (When and how had I become "leader"? By the very particular charm of an anti-authoritarian exhibitionism, I suppose.)

On trees, along the roads, Gaullist posters prepared for the elections. "Never again!" they proclaimed to the passersby, with a red flag and a black flag mixed up.

We were more than a political organization; and we groped our way forward, like babies in the dark, trying to grab onto one another, toward the evanescent idea of an absolute happiness, of a life reconciled with itself. And what we believed ourselves to be grasping for, the phantom of liberty, continually escaped us. We discussed it for hours each night without realizing that this happiness was not "to come" after the Great Overturning; we had it already, between us; it had taken us by surprise without us even recognizing it.

We smoked enormously. Weed, Moroccan hashish, black oils in little kohl bottles. It was Romain who introduced me to drugs. (I took a long time to realize that drugs are above all a sign of downward mobility. It took me trips to Morocco to realize that kif is correlated to misery.)

Romain knew a girl, Paulette, and her brother, both of them from the solid middle class of the region, both of them frizzy-haired like lambs and cute like unisex angels. Romain had eyes for the brother. One night, I found the two of them, seated on the rug in our attic where you couldn't even stand up without hitting your head, the sunny light of autumn coming through the fanlight, through which you could see nothing but sky. Adrien—that was the name of the brother—took a black stone gravely out of his pocket and asked me for an empty bottle. He performed a mysterious operation on it, rubbing its neck rapidly with a string to heat it. The top of the bottle fell off cleanly.

"Shilum," (*sic*) Adrien said gravely while brandishing the neck. Then he began, his angel's face creased with focus, to heat up the stone, which he rubbed between his fingers. "Hashish," said the instructor, just as sober. When they passed it to me, I shrugged my shoulders. I was against drugs, as a revolutionary. I drew it in out of curiosity—and to not fall in their eyes—a burning mouthful of incense that smelled like a Pall Mall.

And this mouthful led me to smoke for twenty years.

The attic was a boat, an oscillating gondola, floating in the air, with its masts of beams, the heavy smoke of the little service filled it entirely with its curls of smoke, through which the setting sun played its muffled golds.

A GREY suburban detached house—the very idea of the suburbs, of the suburban-detached-house, realized on earth. A dirt path, squeezed between the adjoining walls and a open-air pile of automobile carcasses, follows along the road. The enameled plaque with a branch of blooming roses reads "Villa-Les-Roses." The only rose is on the plaque. The windows of the rooms on the second floor—of which the doors have been taken off, as have those of the bathrooms, to combat bourgeois egoism and self-regard—open onto the junkyard.

The stairway is wrapped around with a large fresco, the work of a comrade who needed to express himself (and I'm not mocking him, today it seems to me so respectable and so far off), where rigid, huge figures are immortalized in front of the unauthorized worksite.

This is the commune of Ivry. To rent the building, I had to borrow a vest and tie and put on glasses. I disguised myself as a bourgeois to no longer be one; you can't found the new utopia without one final ruse.

Below, where the living room once was, sits a long skinny sofa garnished with Afghan pillows. And an afghan itself, brought by Marc, the other comrade who rounds out the group.

Marc is a redhead, smiling, patient. Of all my comrades, it's him I confide in the most willingly. All of this work of community is above all for a desire to confide.

At night, under bare bulbs, in the decor that is so dreary you could cry—grey walls, ripped-off doors—we come together mostly to dream. Mostly from the big black block of hashish which Marc distributes generously.

O Marc! How could I have lost track of you? Are you an old ginger, still wise and crazy, or have you become respectable?

In the circle seated cross-legged, there is Michel and his girlfriend, a woman who worked in advertising but was ripped from her white varnished apartment in the 16th Arrondissement, an auxiliary revolutionary out of love.

Other than Jean-René, my brother and a few others, there are two guys, dead drunk every night, young Renault factory workers. Their proletarian position obviously gives them a moral superiority (even more since Antoine quit the factory after moving here, and the other started practicing absenteeism). They drink together, instead, straight from the bottle, and try in vain to offer some to their comrades.

The comrades smoke, the workers drink. Which doesn't keep them from smoking; it has less of an effect on them than on us, petit-bourgeois with long hair, painfully "peace

and love" in our comportment. For them, it's nothing but a self-serious yoga practice.

"And I say we have to take off the door to the toilet. It's the last private space here..." Antoine argues with pathos, shaking his fist. Only Françoise, the girlfriend of Michel, is impressed. Pretty woman, a fleshy blond with throaty laughs that leave her on her back, offered up, symbolizing the incestuous mother they all no doubt dreamed of having.

Me, I was in love with Michel. His lively Sephardic face, his acid-colored velour jeans, his convictions, so profoundly rooted in him—that we had already lost, but that we nevertheless had to act, in this time of reaction toward order and money that surrounded our little lost house, the only light among the dented steel.

Maybe Michel was right. Now that I draw up my accounts, this warning from my own youth rings terribly right. I was not beaten socially; the strong winds of recognition touched me with their horn of plenty. But against the daily fear of sensing the chill of death, this reflection of a half-century before fits me still today.

We changed location when Ivry became so ravaged it was uninhabitable. "Our workers" left us to continue their adventures with the unemployed.

(Never forget, beneath each of these phrases I write, the sole idea is: I will soon die.)

We changed location and our way of life. At Asnières, in a big English-style house, with radiators to heat us, the petit-bourgeoisie had retaken the ground. Already, these stories of community, of politicized chores, are leaving me.

Many years later—we had all become professionals in our forties—Jean-René, who now taught carpentry to students (you have read correctly: carpentry; he believed in the formative virtue of manual labor), called me with his innocent voice:

"We never see each other. Do you know who's in Paris? Steady yourself: Victor..."

"Which Victor?" I had to ask. In two years, Jean-René had called me three times, each one while excusing himself for not doing it more often.

And then this phantom of my past came back to me. Victor. In the seventies, which were already tending back to order, Victor was our guru. I had met him in university at Censier, where our group had its militant base. I held forth on the platform of the amphitheaters, glad to feel the gaze of the students on me.

Victor. Dishevelled hair, a Dylan-ugly face, a big, sad nose and a grey expression, at the bottom of which appeared to be dancing—at least for us, little French youths fascinated by America, its drugs and its delirious conflicts—a little demon flame.

"If you want, eye'll give you some elesdee," he promised me one evening after a meeting, in his Canadian accent, which was completely ridiculous and touching. "It gets rid of bad thoughts, narrow thoughts..."

There is something enormously arbitrary in a group's choice of a guru. When Jean-René called me, I understood that I had the unique occasion to compare my past dream with reality. Jean-René held a dinner of faces which no longer saw each other: besides him and I, Michel, who had become financial director of a small fashion house, whose young owner he was going to marry; Victor, with his liquid brown eyes and unchanged slenderness, in whose honor this resurrection of the past was held; and Marc, who never quite recovered from a hunger strike in prison, even years later, which our irresponsibility had let him continue right up to the edge of death.

The disillusionment was complete. Our old instructor, our poet, our bridge to the culture of the beatniks and hippies, had crumbled into himself, with age, like a tattered star that has exhausted all its radiance.

Only his accent hadn't changed.

Victor had become a sort of travel agent at the Chinese embassy. He gave us a defense of its bureaucracy, the organization, of Mao. We looked at each other, astounded:

Where had his surrealist keenness gone, augmented by the inadequacy of his language, which we thought we saw in him? And somehow this deception, this disillusionment, rejuvenated our weakened bonds, old combat buddies of May.

One should never go back to look at the idols of youth. Our past was drastically shrinking before my eyes, like our friendship, reduced by life to barely a dot. It was not only at what he had become that Victor disappointed us, a blinkered, slightly exotic functionary: it was the doubt he introduced about our past, about what we had personally lived through.

Because I had lived through some real experiences with Victor. A few weeks after our first encounter, he slipped into my hand, in a corridor of the university, a little scrap of blotting paper, on which a chemist had put a dry tear of LSD. But, wisely, he wanted to be there for my initiation. The first experience was spectacular. The smallest blade of grass, embroidery or minuscule fold in a piece of fabric, the veins on a leaf, everything became for a few hours the object of a marvelment which seemed to me to be filled with a secret, inexplicable wisdom. For that, I adore this drug (when this book finally comes out, my election to the Académie française will have long since been adopted or blocked. I risk nothing with this admission). For the

taste for detail, on its own, finally ripped from the context that naturalizes it, the flattening of our habitual manner, distracted and instrumental, of considering the things in front of us.

We—the group—all adopted acid, as a way of making the revolution in our heads, and as a way of maintaining truthful relations between ourselves. It was in a suburban garage, the garage that we were using for our session, that Victor took me aside and said:

"You are homosexual. It's not a problem."

On acid, this insight confounded me. I never spoke about it. But with the half-open infatuation with Michel that I had, these sessions on acid must have let slip some aspect in my attitude. (Though I never slept with Michel: he always refused.)

O, THE time of drugs. Time when time halted, when tomorrow's messes cease for an instant to weigh in the back of your mind, hanging insect which gnaws away at life. The time of drugs: We set ourselves upon acid with the same serious lightness and desire for risk that we had militated with. We felt in it the promise of a liberated world, finally present in a suspended time.

For a long time, after the onset of my illness, and even in fact after having seen what happened to Romain, who became a junkie, drugs had disgusted me. But this drug, we thought, wasn't like the others. You didn't take it to dull yours senses but to see more clearly. More profoundly.

Time of drugs, time of madness! We had, then, no concept of saving our energies, our young lives, flexible and unemployed. We detested the very principle. To not be selfish with yourself was the rule we lived. (Don't ask me now if we were wrong or not. Even though the discovery of drugs was not without its relation to the Sardanapalesque sexual life that I began to conduct, and which, in turn, brought about my illness and my unhappiness.)

And then, after some delirious months, the obsessions born in acid trips became violent and dark. Neither Librium or orange juice, remedies furnished by the helpful Victor,

could do anything about the anguish of the comedown. The worst moment of acid is when you come down in a world where the sun has set, like a parachute jump into the dark.

We tried everything and we wanted everything. A girl we knew went crazy one night, after having eaten a tab (thirty years later, the last time I heard news of her she was still fried). Of all of our efforts, the most extreme that I ever did was attempted by Marc and I with nutmeg.

In five decades, the rapacious, atrocious taste of nutmeg—which I never encountered elsewhere but in vomit-inducing peyote, as if strong drugs colluded to make themselves indigestible—has stayed with me in my mouth, making my taste buds stand on end. For such experiences, the word "bitterness" is a feeble approximant.

We had carefully grated seven or eight nuts and mixed the powder with white rum, to make it more palatable. As we started to come up, like acid, it was enchanting. And then, at the end of two days of total madness, the apartment torn up, disorder reigning in our heads and our furniture, Marc grabbed me by the shoulders, his handsome green eyes glazed over with a sudden anguish: "And what if we never come down?" It's probably what had happened to the girl who went crazy I mentioned. One time too many, sometimes the first, and you transform. (Perhaps I did in effect become crazy that day: without even realizing it.)

The time of drugs, when it seemed impossible for us to live without this continual excitement, this flood of vitality or death! We put together pop festivals—this form, today forgotten, of communal delirium. Stages erected on iron pipes in empty lots, delivering the metallic sound of giant loudspeakers to hundreds of thousands of participants. And we imagined, our eyes red with drugs, naked, that the whole human sea formed a single being, dancing in place on the matted grass, between Coke bottles and dirty plastic.

Today, this illusion that endowed drugs with magic, liberatory powers, appears to have firmly receded into the preceding century. But it was neither drugs nor music I saw behind the vague phosphorescence of the pop sound, portals that combat time, when the effect of the pill or the powder starts to creep up on your head, in delicious and terrifying pulsations, each one stronger than the last. It was something else I was looking for in those experiences, an absolute that withdraws itself so far in that each effort to reach it pushes it further away.

We left, the three of us, Michel, Françoise and I, eternal chaperone of the couple, for America. We bought old cars in the junkyards outside New York and sold them on the West Coast. I visited Berkeley, Haight-Ashbury, and was mostly disappointed by this placid street, with

its little wooden houses, surrounded by hippie boutiques. But something of the revolt of the People's Park fluttered on this pacific crowd, in the colors of the flowers, in the disheveled hair of these pregnant women, smiling, filthy as pigs, in flowered dresses falling off their shoulders on these Buffalo Bill-mustachioed men who greeted me with an affectionate "brother".

(Let the reader be assured. More than five decades have passed and pop marches on, and getting high—*flip*, as the English call this flight on a magic carpet—is still as far from me as from them, from us. Now, as for a long time, I save my forces. I no longer think of throwing them to the wind, of dispersing them, bursting them in a firework of unused vitality.)

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Letterpress printed by Sarah McCarry in an edition of 500.
Interiors printed at McNaughton & Gunn.

GUILLOTINE
POB 606
New York, NY 10276
guillotinepublishing.net

GUILLOTINE is an erratically published chapbook series committed to supporting radical work by groundbreaking writers. GUILLOTINE is a member of the Community of Literary Magazines & Presses. Publication of *The Amphitheater of the Dead* was made possible in part by a grant from New York State Council on the Arts.

Sous les pavés, la plage.