

Abel Quentin

The Seer of Étampes

I

The Winner Takes All

“We are all children of immigrants” ... Does that mean anything to you? Do you really think that you can feel a tenth of what an immigrant feels? Don’t you think that it was time to let them speak, these “children of immigrants”? To no longer steal their voices.

Jeanne, my daughter’s new friend, had a stern look, a pinched mouth. She reminded me of a Puritan who would have lived in Iowa in, let’s say, 1886. Her jaw was contorted as a result of continuous suffering.

It was eight PM and the evening had started badly. When I ordered a Suze, the waiter gave me a questioning look: evidence that he had never heard of it. I had to make do with a cucumber cocktail with floating sesame seeds. *Like dwarf mice droppings*, I sniggered, without succeeding in loosening up the mood. A cloying tension reigned over the table – it was difficult to create, in a few minutes, bonds of cordiality between human beings. Only Léonie seemed to be relaxed, noisily drinking a Sichuan pepper tea, listening to us talk. This simple and good young woman could not imagine how two people she loved could not form, automatically, a mutual friendship.

I mumbled an excuse, trying to explain myself by recalling that Harlem Desire, the co-founder of the SOS Racism movement, was of Dutch Antilles descent. As for Julien Dray, I was not certain. I needed to look, but it was not impossible that he was something like an Alsatian Jew. Or maybe from Algeria. I promised to look it up.

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We were three around the table, me, my daughter Léonie and her friend Jeanne. This was, in itself, a small revolution. For the last five years I had established the ritual of a family face-to-face dinner with my offspring. A third party was not welcome. I had followed the advice of my ex-spouse, Agnés, *to preserve a father-daughter moment*. Agnés, with invaluable advice, whose wisdom I missed terribly since our divorce now that I had to make my own way.

Léonie lived in Pontoise, in the neighborhood of Saint-Martin, which extended its straight and wet roads around the train station. She had never invited me to her place,

and I had come to terms with it: no doubt she feared my sarcastic remarks when I would discover that she had arranged the decor of her *butch* candy box in exactly the same way, after she relocated, with her posters of Christine and the Queens and its aroma of incense. It was terrible to encourage such a feeling in one's child (instead of being the refuge, the sheltering gaze.) In fact, these sarcastic remarks that escaped from me sometimes were without doubt aimed at myself. I was annoyed that Léonie was so much like me. My daughter had inherited from me a certain propensity for failure, even though it was unaccompanied by the paternal sharpness with its sinister lucidity: she was happy as a lark. She worked as an inter-personal coach related to the business world, one of these jobs that proliferated like pilot fish (blood suckers, Mark would say) around industries and services in market economies, profiting from the rise of the hypocritical concept of the *social responsibilities of businesses*. The idea for these companies converting to SRB was, more or less, to convince the public that they were actors of capitalism in human guise: that their gluttony, their cynicism, their brutality knew certain limits, and that they were concerned about the well-being of their salaries (and even, why not, of their carbon footprint). To give it skin, one paid (badly) the outside service providers who taught people to speak to one another, to liberate speech in "open space." It is to this that Léonie applied herself, every day, in overheated conference rooms in the neighborhood of the Défense. In concrete terms, this entailed organizing little games in which the appalled or amused managerial staff had to participate, and to distribute several PowerPoint slides which very seriously explained that "an evasive look, in nonverbal language, is a sign of defiance from the speaker." Sometimes she dispensed advice remotely, on Skype. Anyway, it was a stupid job, and it would have been funny to laugh about it a little with the concerned party, among good friends. But Léonie was one of those beings incapable of taking an honest good look at their failings; the same way she had pretended to no longer tolerate the Parisian life in order to explain her move to Val-d'Oise, even though it was a secret to no one that she no longer had the means to pay the exorbitant East Paris rent of her apartment; that she had claimed that her partnership with Maeva, her previous girlfriend, wasn't going anywhere in any case anyway since this last person had left her for a trainee; that the circumstances of this break up would reveal the love of her life on a new day, and that the departure of the aforesaid Maeva with a slut with big hoop earrings and sandals was finally the best thing that had ever happened to her. In the same way she had dressed these emotional disappointments in shimmering colors she also ended the story of each of her resounding failures: "It's the best thing that could have happened in my life." To listen to her, each tumble was a tremendous godsend.

I liked being pampered by this happy young woman filled with immeasurable kindness. Léonie was one of those everyday saints who did not shine with any miracle, any

spectacular action – to heal a man gripped by the illness of brittle bone disease, to shed tears of blood like a statue of the holy Virgin. There was therefore no chance of the bishop of Pontoise launching an investigation by the diocese in view of her beatification. Since my divorce five years ago, she had taken my side in a surprising way. She had just come of age, free to live with the parent of her choice, or to make herself scarce. It was obvious her life would have been nicer in the penthouse of her mother who was a consultant at Bain & Company, but she proved her loyalty to me, she sacrificed herself because she knew I was in a bad place (we speak of a dark time where I listened to my Motorhead albums on a loop, in semi-darkness, and surfaced each morning as if waking up from an amputation.) Léonie did not have the heart to leave me alone and I did not have the courage to refuse these alms. I accepted, selfishly. We were roommates for two years, before a university exchange sent her to spend a year in Copenhagen. Maybe, after all, she did well with us living together: her mother had a regrettable tendency to crush Léonie with her own dreams, her demands of a hammering workaholic. Agnés was always demanding that she excel, she introduced the world to her as a jungle where you had to pursue each victory by the teeth. That was fair enough, and totally stressful. For my part, I was not exactly the overwhelming patriarchal figure who watches over his clan: this role had naturally been taken by Agnés. My ex-spouse endured my rapport with Léonie as always: without flinching.

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Jeanne, Léonie's new girlfriend, had insisted on choosing the restaurant. Maybe it was a way to mark her territory, or to at least to engage in hostilities on ground where she had an advantage (I seem to remember hearing Marc mention an old Chinese strategy on this topic, something like: "He who ignores the nature of the terrain is unable to advance his troops"). We met at the Renaissance, a small hip eatery located in the neighborhood of her office, near Halle Freyssinet. Jeanne was the founding partner of a startup; I had not grasped the exact nature of her activities, I only understood that she was involved with internet solutions. She was older than my daughter, and, probably, financially stable. I was happy to know that Léonie was safe from a woman with precise ideas and an iron will, at least for a little while. Reassured and worried, too: Léonie was destitute, vulnerable with her love which already felt intense, thanks to this older, battle-hardened young woman. She had to protect herself. She must, in concrete terms, demand certain guarantees. I promised myself to speak to her about trivial matters, sometime. If they decided to marry, I would persuade Léonie to opt for the arrangement

of community property. I had not done this with my ex-spouse, and I regretted it, bitterly, every day of my life.

Léonie, good girl, had tried to build me up for her new conquest. She tried desperately to make me likeable and launched me on my militant years in the eighties. She had perhaps pressed a little too hard.

You know, Jeanne, Papa was very active in SOS Racism, at the beginning of the organization in the 1980s.

She pushed me on the spot gently: go on, Papa. Show us what you know how to do. I did my little spiel that she knew by heart, telling the legend of the eighties, the North African protest march, the beginning of the organization, the mob scene at 10 rue Martel, the huge concert at the Place de la Concorde, my fashion style of the post-punk dandy; I recounted that, at the time, I smoked cigarettes and held them between the ring and little fingers, and after the House of Chemistry high masses, the squabble with the “Stals” of the Movement against Racism and for Friendship among Peoples, the adults seated at the table with the “patrons” Coluche and Simone Signoret, *the extraordinary freedom of those years*, topics that I enclosed in a story so stereotypical that I really didn't know anymore what I really thought, nor if it had really happened. The story had come between my memories and myself; like a blurred film, it had modified them, and they had become muddled. I concluded, with a note of humility, *I am not at all nostalgic, one would have to be a little bit of an idiot, I am not here to talk about myself, your generation is more mature, and it also has its challenges*, and even then, I really didn't know what I truly thought, or maybe I knew too much.

Jeanne didn't buy it.

Whatever caused her repressed anger I would not understand until later, after the Affair. What Jeanne wanted to say in accusing me of “stealing the voice” of those whom we defended I know today, now that I am *awakened* (*woke*, as they say) : she was fed up with the allies who asked for medals, she was fed up with the compunction of self-satisfied white males, she was fed up with men who wanted to be congratulated because they *didn't catch women by the pussy*, who wanted to be applauded because they had pounded the pavement with a black friend thirty years ago, she was fed up with the toxic masculinity of the old 68ers, she was fed up with paternalism of the Left, she was fed up with daddy's girls and maybe she was already fed up with Léonie, who looked at me as if I were Gilles Deleuze or Roland Barthes since I was an old buffoon of a boozier. A loser – and yet an oppressor, said Jeanne's wrathful look. And of the worse kind: that of the *White Saviors*, the latest reinforcements who unite with the New Powers while he feels the wind heading for his little white cisgender ass. But the New Powers

didn't need me anymore. It was too late to show my credentials, the only thing left to do was place the balls between the blades of the judicial pruning shears, and pay up, without complaining. All that I understood afterward but I could hardly have guessed it, that night, at the Renaissance.

One last time, I tried to justify myself: We never stole anyone's voice. There was no condescension. We were frightened by the outcome of National Front in Dreux, in the municipalities, in '83. Harlem Desire, Julien Dray were charismatic people, visionaries. We didn't want to give up anything. "We are all children of immigrants" was a battle cry. A cry of solidarity. Like "We are all German Jews" from 1968. We are but one youth and that pisses off the National Front.

Until then I hadn't made any mistakes; in any case, I hadn't said anything really embarrassing. I wanted Léonie to be proud of me. To be a dignified and presentable father. Jeanne was still staring at me, and the sweat was rolling off me. I had the impression that she was warning me: "Be careful of what you are going to say." At the surrounding tables young people crossed looks like one crosses swords. Their smiles revealed the healthy teeth of American quarterbacks. A large incubator had opened in the neighborhood, Jeanne explained to us, and all these young people worked in the thrilling world of "tech." They were half my age. Life came to them, filled with ripe fruit and mead. The era was their playing field, the world a vacation town. They moved with ease from Shanghai to London, from Paris to Johannesburg, wherever there was a 5G connection. Questioned about their projects, they struck dreamy poses to speak of a world where each square centimeter was irrigated by numeric flow. It didn't matter that this aforementioned flow transported the scrawny thoughts of the *digital natives*, the important thing was that this flow should never stop and that their network should always be more restricted – so that the internet becomes the respiration of the world. These delirious Prometheans maintained, for many, the position. The profound reason for their passion was the one which guided the world since the world had existed: to amass a maximum of dough in a minimum of time. Everyone beamed, and an incredible vitality emanated from their simple and direct words.

Jeanne had a large round forehead, and I noted mechanically the damage that it could do, projected at high speed, if she decided to break the bridge of my nose. I changed the subject and questioned her on her work. She responded in an obscure new language, speaking of *antagonizing*, and *disrupting*, of the myth of "*winner takes all*." Léonie listened to her friend, lost in admiration. The young Puritan was animated by flawless goodwill. She was thirty years younger than me, but it was clear that she was the only adult at this table.

I questioned her:

How do you do it, Jeanne? I mean, how do you never give up?

To not be distracted by life, that's the key. Twelve hours of work a day, two hours of exercise. Boxing, marathons, cardio. Slow sugars and big glasses of mineral water. A little sleep. Four hours, five hours, maybe.

These stories of icy showers sapped me of my last strength. Agnés was right: the world really was a heartless jungle. Neither Léonie nor I could ever follow Jeanne's pace on the Darwinian path for the survival of the capitalist class, we were both the last two losers behind the rope. How to fight with such freaks? This morning, when the financial markets opened, I noticed the lack of coffee filters, so I made do with a packet of instant coffee. I jerked off joylessly in front of a video where a Russian woman cavorted with someone who was supposed to portray the role of a teacher (I'm afraid, a secondary school teacher), a math or geography prof, it wasn't very clear, there were equations on the blackboard and a world map on the table where the two actors fornicated, it was open for debate. I almost envied my daughter and her capacity to ignore reality: she sheltered it from of a lot of setbacks.

"Slow sugars," Jeanne had said. I clenched my teeth in order to present a brave front, muttered something like *that's impressive, hats off*, but I felt something snap inside me. I was 65 years old; I had spent 35 years teaching history of the Cold War before a public who showed, towards me, a polite indifference. Already obscure for my first generation of students, the subtleties of the Truman doctrine and the twists and turns of the blockade of Berlin were downright difficult to understand for the generation which I had known in the 2000s: most of them were in diapers when the Wall fell. I had grown, thickened by beer, a flabby paunch that I couldn't even hide anymore under extra-large sweaters. It protruded from the fabric, glaring witness to my resignation. "It's the gut of someone who has resigned from life" Agnés told me, Léonie's mother, a couple of weeks before she ditched me. She was right. She said it without any malice, she wanted nothing more to do with me, and the disappearance of the last hints of reproach in our exchanges spelled the end of our life as a couple: she made her peace with it. She had finished by admitting that I was truly that man (and by that you have to understand a man with a greedy will, and limited resources.) She had understood that it was unrealistic to summon the memory of the guy who had seduced her in the middle of the 1980s, unrealistic and even unfair because my true nature was there, at the bottom of age sixty, at the bitter moment of the first insolvency, and it had to be respected, or in any case accepted, without tormenting me uselessly – except that it was up to me to be someone else.

Léonie yawned. The lights of the restaurant were extinguished, and the next table sang happy birthday, soon taken up by everyone in the house. I felt there was nothing left but to go with my natural inclination. Acting as if I didn't care I ordered my first gin.

I was awakened by a merciless sun: I had forgotten to close the blinds. Obviously, happiness didn't mean much. If I were 20 years old, if I had been the young mischievous militant with his oversized jacket and his asymmetric haircut, the brilliant heartbreaker, this debauchery of light would have been a beneficial godsend. I would have been able to appreciate the exuberance of this precious spring, this red sun. Its rays would have accompanied my steps like a bugle corps. Yes, at the dawn of the 80s, at the height of my splendor, I would have welcomed them as one welcomes a tribute certain that they were meant for me. Nature's fraternal greeting to one of its proudest representatives of the human race, the greeting of one star to another star. I would have gone out and I would have loved to smell the sun-ripened, blazing town, all my senses on the alert. Proud to put my supple body to the test, buffed by a couple of gym moves. This light would have been my best ally, nourishing me without overwhelming me, making girls' shoulders glisten.

Nostalgia is a cancer. I was 65 years old. I was stretched out at the foot of my bed, my head feeling like mush, bile on the edge of my lips. It was my destiny and my thankless vocation to be Jean Roscoff, the unfulfilled promise. Of whom someone enumerates the qualities before adding in a deep voice: what a waste. To be an unfulfilled promise, that's my only horizon, my immense burden. I drank, I paid. I had made my own bed. "You drink, you take the rap," threatened a huge prevention campaign, orchestrated by an organization which proposed partially reimbursing the care of people affected by alcoholic cirrhosis. In fact, I had taken the rap to the max. I was not in the position to curse heaven or to demand anything. I would have only wished that the sun would dim a little.

A white ray travelled directly across the back of my retina. I raised my neck. At my age, a night on the bare floor was unforgiving; my spine was severely paying for it. The worst was the headache. It felt like a sadist scraped out the internal walls of my skull with a carpenter's plane. In the street a jack hammer emphasized its dismal pounding. I sat up

with difficulty, with a minimum of movement. At my feet, the remains of a kebab lay in a yellow polystyrene carton. With the stench of samurai sauce, a memory rose to the surface: me, guzzling the sandwich drunkenly, hands shiny with grease, on a wide sidewalk.

Why had I continued my quest after the dinner with Jeanne and Léonie? I was already pretty drunk when we left the restaurant, my daughter was sad, Jeanne looked me up and down with a harsh look; like something she would have given to non-recyclable waste, or to an item with an expiration date. They shoved me into a taxi, giving my address but I had jumped ship, a wary pirate, headed to a bar where I had several routines.

My friend Marc joined me. We had talked about this mysterious generation, children who slip away from you. We stirred up some memories from the golden years, resuscitating the unforgettable evening of June 15, 1985, the concert of the century, the masterpiece of Julian Dray and the organization: 300,000 people, a human sea at the Place de la Concorde, overflowing onto the Champs Élysées and the rue de Rivoli. With his national office membership Marc got me backstage, in the restricted area where the headliners pranced like purebloods in their stalls. We ended up smoking fags with Coluche and Alain Baschung, everything was unreal and even Marc had managed to let go, he ditched his tactical arrangements for a second, forgot the question from the representative of the guys from UEJF (Union of the Jewish Students of France), as for national entreaties, his *personal agenda*, he had given up an evening to deliberate on the next move to enjoy the June warmth and the surrounding fever. Even clever Mark had cast off the moorings. That night I hit on everything that moved, passing myself off as the singer from Indochine. My friend was not to be left out, he pretended he was the drummer from the Fine Young Cannibals; touting an English accent, he had even succeeded in getting a blow job between two cars. Later on, he crossed paths with the real drummer. He thanked him, laughing, and the guy had looked at him wide-eyed. It was a night which hung on, our apotheosis, the guitars had roared until three in the morning and the bongo drums took over at dawn.

We had summoned the memory of our excesses. Me, stupidly moved, Marc with a more distanced happiness. He spoke without bitterness: how for Julian Dray this evening had been his launch pad, the beginning of an adventure. He had capitalized on this crazy success.

It was almost two in the morning, our table was strewn with empty glasses – mine, basically. Why had I not just gone home when the evening had yielded everything it could? That's what Marc said to me with these few words: "It's time to go now," these

words that self-control and the triumph of free will spoke against weakness and tyrannical needs. Marc W., the unbearable friend who was always right. As if false reasoning were the cause of my alcoholic addiction. "You know, I like drinking as much as you, but there is a time when alcohol damages more than it brings pleasure." Sure, Marc, excellent Marc who never played the moralist, but applied the cost-benefits arguments with an implacable rigor learned (funny paradox) at the school of Trotskyist Dray, not really any different than those professed by the orthodox liberals of the Chicago School. Homo economicus who had gone through life armed with the weakest of compasses with the simplest of rules: in all circumstances, to *maximize* his satisfaction while utilizing his resources in an optimal way. Sure, Marc, happy owner of an apartment on the rue de Lisbonne, of a house on the Opal Coast, and another in Saône-et-Loire, founding partner of a law practice specializing in litigation, Marc with his suits from Cifonelli and his personal trainer, sure, it's no use destroying yourself. Thanks for the tip, Marc. Knuckleheads who pretend to believe that self-destruction cannot be a conscious process, and that all it takes is to show the drunk the counter-productive character of his behavior so that he can make adjustments. Sure, Marc, you were right! We had to leave because we had reached this last hour where intoxication had dispensed all the passion that it could dispense. Flooded by the spirit of wine, the nonsensical conversations and dim-witted arguments were silly. Time had relaxed its hold and we were once again the young swells, bright and charming, the tables moved together more closely. Marc had done his handsome old guy thing with his neighbor. Intoxication had given away all its wealth, all its poems. It should have held on to them, of course. The next moment, it would turn surly. There would only be droning solitude, the diction approximate, the minced words rid of consonants, the sermons of friendship for better for worse uttered in a robotic tone, eyes that can no longer see anything, obsessive monologues, senility. It was time to go, of course, after having taken everything that the evening could offer.

And I stayed.

Possessed, teeth clenched, like a player who is incapable of leaving his slot machine. I had tried to detain Marc, made fun of his lack of humor, his moderation as a *control freak*.

Come on! I raised my voice. Maybe Marc even shoved me a little when he split. I pulled my little routine of the boozer with a virulency where actual aggressivity was never far off, because the alcoholic hates nothing more than when a friend jumps ship. He then knows that he has been unmasked: the departure of the moderate drinker directs him to his own decline, to his maniacal addiction. There is jealousy in this anger, the desire of the possessed for the person who has command of himself.

At the university from where I had just retired my students made fun of me because I said PB instead of PHB and URSR instead of USSR. I looked out the window. Up in the sky a plane traced a line with its white plume. My heart tightened: I felt like it was abandoning me.

At the age of 65, each of my days started by a solemn sermon, the promise to make things right again. Each day ended with the same admission of powerlessness, the same deep boredom. My breathe came to me in uneven rushes of air. I rummaged in my medicine cabinet, unearthed an Alka-Seltzer and an anti-spasmodic; I needed to piss. I swallowed them and lapped up a little water in the kitchen from the sink faucet. I was knocked out by exhaustion. Nevertheless, I dragged myself, panting, to my work desk.

For several weeks, I had taken up an old project. I had decided to dive in again on a project started forty years ago on the American poet Robert Willow. Agnés encouraged me, but she would have encouraged any hobby that would have put me back in the saddle.

That is a great idea Jean, she said with the gentle look of a life assistant.

If that can prevent you from committing suicide, because I do not feel like dealing with that right now, she should have added. But was it really *a super idea*? There was, without doubt, a little bit of senility in it. When they feel close to the end of life, elephants take the road to the cemetery, moved by an ancient instinct. Men of my age take up their early works or become suddenly impassioned by the genealogy of their family. As if the completion of an aborted job forty years ago could make up for the missing link which would shine light upon an existence tossed about by contingencies, atrophied by indecision and laziness. *At least, I will have accomplished something*, I thought vaguely in retrieving the yellowed pages that I had typed, at the time, on an old Olympia. Decided upon, in a moment of exhilaration, this project was *a priori* a bad idea. But as soon as the fever returned, I rediscovered intact the fervor that had pointed me to the misjudged work of Robert Willow, the unclassifiable and misunderstood poet. Jazz musician, turbulent companion of the Communist Party, exiled in France during the early 50s in order to escape from the insanity of McCarthyism, Robert Willow took

advantage of his last days on Earth to write two collections of splendid poems in French which would not be published until after his death – one night in October 1960, a plane tree folded his Peugeot 404 in two after he had lost control of the vehicle, on a minor secondary road zigzagging between Barbizon and Milly-la-Forêt. So ended an existence which had begun in the city of Durham, North Carolina, in a working-class environment where the two sustaining nourishments were the Democratic Party and the Free Baptist Temple – a society where faith in the future lit American hearts. It was mangled by a debonair plane tree in the Île-de France bristling with religious statues and old church towers, overgrown with incredibly old forests.

At the age of twenty, I was blown away by his strange and sensitive verses, inexplicable creations by an American child. How could a young Yankee, who had been stirred by the exploits of the Los Angeles Dodgers, written these songs from another age? He had tread upon the pebbles of Coney Island, eaten ice cream while grabbing the waist of a *date* with swaying breasts and calculated dreams, haunted the jazz clubs of Harlem, and yet his last poems seemed to be plucked from a *vielle* from the Middle Ages, a disciple of Villon or of Charles d'Orléans. What had happened? The enigma of this life, brought down by a stupid tree, had never really concerned literary critics. It has to be said that Robert Willow had left McCarthyism for something else: the blacklisting of Jean Paul Sartre was well merited by the House Un-American Activities Committee, the parliamentary committee of anti-American activities enacted by Joseph McCarthy. At the time, the intelligentsia of the left appreciated very little of the *chanson de geste*. The only acceptable idealism was that of engagement – Tchen throwing himself under the wheels of Chiang Kai-shek and Boris Vian singing *La Java des bombes atomiques*. You have to get involved, dive into the cauldron of forums and circles, march elbow to elbow singing that the International will be the human race. When he arrived in Paris, Robert Willow was tossed head over heels into the centrifuge of Saint-Germain; he was received with open arms, like his pal Richard Wright was received, and many others. The neighborhood was living and breathing all things American. The hotel La Louisiane was packed with Yanks, jazz musicians, writers of crime thrillers, crooks, or sons of good families who had crossed the Atlantic to slum it in the cellar nightclub of the Lorientais where the ex-cool cats were stuck on Charlie Parker.

Meetings in apartments, chain petitions, anti-imperialist protests, chance love affairs, brazen dogmatism: Willow rediscovered more or less the vibrancy that he had loved so much in Harlem. Jean-Paul Sartre introduced him to his mother in the small apartment on the rue Bonaparte, also said to be the rooftop of the world. Willow's broken voice enchanted, his dimpled chin like Kirk Douglas's sealed the deal: the girls streamed by,

bewitched by the *boy*. A big guy with an open smile, it was a switch from the typical French male students, poorly turned out and feverish, who wrapped themselves in oversized trench coats trying to look like Humphrey Bogart. Willow was a little like Kessel – in some ways so little French, so American. The aviator and intellectual type, in shirt sleeves, who refused to play a game of tennis before employing his Remington. And then, one day, a disappearance. He returned the keys of his furnished apartment and rented a small townhouse in Étampes, the house of a prominent person which smelled like garlic, with Second Empire furniture under their white shrouds. The *boy* from Durham deserted La Rhumerie, the cellar jazz clubs, and the writing to bury himself alive in a novel by Mauriac. He made no staggering statements, he says nothing, he rented the house in Étampes and started to write. No one knows a lot about those years for the simple reason that he didn't see anyone anymore. Only his love poems are known, altarpieces of an immobile purity. *All the Beautiful Archery, Songs of Love, To the One Who Doesn't Wait for Me, Étampes and Words.*

Only his friend Nancy Holloway, the young translator of *Don't Go Like That*, was permitted to visit him in Étampes. An expatriate like him, a nice young woman, a pop singer fluttering from one hit song to another, she was his only Parisian connection to not revolve around the Sartrian orbit. Did they have a love affair? It is not out of the question that Willow could have fallen in love with her. He was 40 years old when I envisaged consecrating my thesis to the poet, I got in touch with the ex-singer in an effort to reveal this affair, but Nancy Holloway was tired, she refused to meet meso and satisfied herself with an evasive answer: *Bob was always so handsome, but he lived in a shambles of old books, some medieval stuff. I cannot say that we really talked about it. He held my hand, telling me that I had a pure heart, something like that. He seemed happy but, in my opinion, he became completely nutty. The others never forgave him.* The others were surely the existentialists, the small rue Bonaparte group, the students with their long scarves. In his last poem in English, *Until Further Notice*, Willow clearly distanced himself from the Party. In turn he dismissed America, with its "dreams of *Reader's Digest*" and the Soviets with their five-year plan.

*Missing until further notice
And beyond
To all the meddlers
I will not sing your cadastral love
Refrigerators overflowing
Supersonic missiles
Dreams of Reader's Digest
I left
I am going to the bell in the woods
To sleep in a sling of stars
I will not sing your five-year plan.*

Rue Bonaparte had liked it fairly well. Sartre was not himself a member of the Party, he had always been a critical companion who didn't hesitate to speak his truth to the apparatchiks from the Place de Colonel-Fabien. He even had harsh words concerning them on diverse occasions, and the Stalinists were not left out: in 1948, the head of the soviet delegation treated him like a "typing hyena" during a congress. But Sartre never categorially dismissed Moscow and Washington. He had always noted a difference between the American "way of death" and the perfectible Soviet Union. In France, the Party maintained an enormous prestige. Emphatic criticism was suspected of playing the game of the capitalist bourgeoisie. The practice of Marxism-Leninism left a lot to be desired: there was nothing less for the philosopher, "the unsurpassable horizon of our time." It was a demanding lover, but it was a lover who had said one day that "all anticommunism is a dog." From this point of view, the relativism of Willow was intolerable.

The rest of Willow's work had sealed his disgrace. To isolate oneself to write about courtly love in a small town in l'Essonne was a working-class whim, a provincial fantasy. For an American, it was totally grotesque: Willow in his exile was worth no more than the old Californian millionaires who washed up on the banks of the Riviera and brushed seascapes taking themselves to be Matisse. One suspected a conversion to Catholicism, Nancy Holloway didn't remember much, but she told me a story about a chilling incident. Someone had told her about the reaction of a Sartrian to whom someone had reported the young man's death: "At least, Camus died in a sports car. But a Peugeot 404, really."

In doing some investigating, I reconstructed some meagre facts. Robert Willow was buried in Étampes. Nancy Holloway followed, alone, the hearse that rolled along to the small cemetery. Richard Wright appeared at the last minute to accompany him. He came on the sly, ravaged by remorse to have abandoned his expatriate friend. They gathered afterward at the poet's house. Did they observe a moment of silence in the house cluttered with manuscripts? One can suppose that the author of *Black Boy* and the pop icon lit up a cigarette in the garden, without attempting to speak. That Nancy Holloway, practical soul, broke the silence to send a telegram the family, and negotiated a delay with the silent partner before emptying the house. We know she stuck everything she found like old papers into large boxes dug up from a shopkeeper in the neighborhood, and that she tied them up with raffia (this was told to me by the elderly manager of the small hardware store who had not forgotten the path of the American tornado.) She put everything in the trunk of her Triumph and sped off to Paris on a tear. Richard Wright died a few weeks later, taken by a devastating cancer.

Four months had passed before Willow's cousin introduced herself to Miss Holloway at her home on the rue du Cherche-Midi. She was a real American, mother of a neat and tidy family with her polished nails and her voluminous bun. She said hello, took the manuscripts, and set off again for the United States to New Jersey. The manuscripts landed at the house of a small French editor from the East Side who had known Willow during his New York years. He was taken aback when he translated the songs of the ex-enfant terrible. This son of America, partying trumpet player with his square jaw and his loutish smile, had he written these texts?

They were published with the most complete indifference as three small collections, in a series by the obscure Philadelphia Booker Press. Twenty-five years after his death a French publishing house eloquently called *Arrière-Garde* looked into the Willow case. They decided to publish his poems in French, with an awkward preface. Was Willow a practical joker? An author of appropriations? Should he be taken seriously? Keep on reading, the editor basically said. Keep on reading and form an idea. It was during this time that I fell upon one of these little poems, simple and polished like pebbles. Everyone dreams of being a discoverer. I imagined myself the ferryman of a genius and prided myself in making sense of an unjustly scorned body of work all on my own.