

Title, author, keyword..

All Languages

from *The Marshal Absolute*

Pierre Jourde



Artwork by Jiin Choi

Give me another piece of venison. It's the frozen stuff, but it does the trick. Come on, go ahead, don't cry your lungs out; really, you'd think we were going to run out. As if we were under siege. You smell the sauce? The strong wine, the hidden herbs? Open your bushy nostrils nice and wide. Do you catch that whiff of humid forest darkness, that whiff of the moon, of a porcini sprouted overnight, of smoking entrails, of a corpse? Breathe in for me this melancholic joy, this force, it's enough meat to kill you; this, my little Manfred, my big old Célestin, not every stomach can take it, it takes a lot of life and death in a person to host such a guest. These virile blessings are unknown to you, you water-drinker, you chewer of margarine-scraped biscuits; at least you don't cost me much to maintain. Here, give me another drop of Hermitage. There's another one the rebels won't be having. We still have the wine cellars, enough to drink for a hundred years.

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I hardly sleep anymore and you know it, you old fossil. I mull

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Read translator's note [+]

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Pierre Jourde is a novelist, literary critic, and university professor. He has published some forty works, among them narratives (*Pays perdu*, *Festins secrets*, *L'Heure et l'ombre*, *Paradis noirs*, *Le Maréchal absolu*, etc.), criticism and literary theory (*La Littérature sans estomac*, *Littérature et authenticité*, *Littérature monstre*, etc.), and poetry (*Haïkus tout foutus*, etc).

Alexander Dickow is associate professor of French at Virginia Tech. He is a writer in French and English, a translator, and a scholar of modern and contemporary French and Francophone literature, as well as being the author of *Caramboles* (Paris: Argol Editions, 2008), a collection of poems in French and English; *Rhapsodie curieuse* (Mugron, France: Louise Bottu, 2017), a hybrid work in French; and *Trial Balloons* (Corrupt Press, 2012), a chapbook in English. A new collection,

things over, I devise plans, I rehearse the past in my little shadow theater. I can hear you snoring in the adjoining room, all night long, uninterrupted, and it gives me the impression of returning to the time when I slept in my grandmother's bed. You have the same snore as she did, bountiful, powerful, self-assured. A long silence like a vacuum, and the rumbling unfurls again, the great primeval voice rolling amidst the nasal vegetation. It sounds like the ocean. It rocks me back and forth: my thoughts, against the background of this surf, take on a fluidity unknown to daylight, and I wander off toward the past, the length of your grand sinus infections.

But you resemble my dear grandmother in many other ways; the hair in your ears, for example, and that clubfooted gait that seems to threaten collapse at every second, and makes one dread having to collect the bones crumbled to pieces in the fall.

Well, in reality, I've never had a grandmother, but I imagine it must be like that; you make an excellent surrogate grandmother, you furnish me with the one I didn't have. I feed on semblance, Manfred-Célestin; for me, since the beginning, there is nothing true, nothing substantial. I know I'm pouring my confidences into an ear that's infinitely hard of hearing, and into brains harder still, but do me the honor of receiving them. I know everything is false, but let's continue as though it were true. Won't you? Don't you want to go on playing?

I wander amidst the ghosts. You are yourself merely the most ghostly, the most pitiable of my specters, aged shade at the end of your rope, simulacrum of a revenant. Generals, ministers, armies, vain appearances, painted cobwebs I grope my way through, their paunches and their old wrinkled jowls crumble at the slightest touch; what will resist me; in the end, what will show itself to be somewhat solid, to have some consistency, like the bread and butter that the child devours?

And the more they rip each other apart, the more I get tangled up in it, I grapple with sacks of dusty tatters, I stir, I struggle, their inconsistency envelops and drags me down, all the rotten theater curtains, now they collapse upon me and transform me in turn

Appetites, is forthcoming from MadHat Press in 2018. His scholarly works include *Le Poète innombrable: Blaise Cendrars, Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob* (Paris: Hermann, 2015) and *Jacob et le cinéma* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Jean-Michel Place, forthcoming in November 2017). A translation by Dickow and Sean T. Reynolds of works by the Swiss poet Gustave Roud is forthcoming from Seagull Books in 2018. Alexander Dickow is originally from Moscow, Idaho.

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into a grey shadow, into a dancing shadow rattling in incomprehensible movements.

Sometimes I say to myself that that's doubtless why I like meat so much, and wine, tripe, game, black sauces that weigh you down and remind you of crepuscular hunts in the depths of endless forests, in the rain and the scent of secret mushrooms; that's why I like these living and elusive things tracked in the fog for a long time; that's why I like blood, murder, everything that bares what's inside bodies to the sky; everything that causes spurts of stench to rise up; everything that opens cavities, reveals depths; and flesh that's nice and red, nice and blue, and steaming.

You see, you worn out old ass, deep down, the Supreme Marshal is only a philosopher who wanders in the kingdom of shadows, a fretful seeker hoping for a door to the real, a door that opens at last onto daylight, onto the blue fullness of the sea. If I open so many bodies, it's because it seems to me that the door is there, somewhere, behind the liver, between the ribs. You may well kill them, but they slip out of reach; you make them suffer, to seize them at last, to collect a bit of the spume of reality, but they won't even do you that service, and with their rictus they look like they're fucking with you. I only kill them so that they finally become something, you see, do you see? All of a sudden, at the moment of death, in anguish, in suffering, it seems like they may finally reach reality.

No, I can see by your lifeless eye, by your mouth opening onto an eternal absence of teeth, that you don't understand. No one has understood that my reign fulfills the mystery of incarnation: if one kills, it is so that bodies become true bodies. How many ministers, how many generals have I beheld at those moments, gazing into the depths of their eyes to seize the second at which, accomplishing their incarnation, they would finally come into the world. I await the instant, but the instant never comes, it is nonexistent. At the very instant it's going to be that instant, they vanish, leaving me nothing but their sacks of skin. Nothing doing: you may well kill them, they insist on dying.

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I have nothing, I still have nothing. I could reign over the universe and all would obey me without a murmur and without resistance, nothing of this world would give itself to me, in all simplicity, as I dreamed as a child that it would soon do, yes, I felt it, it was imminent, the storm that burst over the river told me so, the droplets that ran from my hair and that I gathered on my tongue told me so, the taste of this world would be given to me fully.

I desired absolute power. It was not for me, not for those of my kind and of my origins, destined since before their birth for menial tasks. But I obtained it, and I wanted to conquer the world. I wanted to appraise, as I surveyed the map, the immense territories over which I held sway, and to realize that in every mentioned location, for each of its inhabitants, I was the leader. I wanted for there to be no consciousness I did not haunt, whether in hatred, dread, or devotion; I wanted to foster nightmares; that through propaganda, my image, my word, my body should suffuse the whole territorial body; that people should come touch me in order to heal and beseech me in order to live; that the death, the happiness, the unhappiness of millions of beings should depend upon my whim alone; that I should decide the laws which police them, the contours of the roads they take, the shape of the buildings in which they live and work, the content of the newspapers they read, the price of what they eat; that I should become at once the Father, the permanent guest at the family dinner, the Great Ancestor, the portrait above the table, the secret fiancé of all young girls, the children's dream, the deepest self of anyone at all; that by dint of spreading itself across the country, of penetrating and filtering into it, my spirit should become flesh.

But there's no point to it, Manfred. On the contrary. The further the reach of my power, the more abstract it became. I reign over wretched papers, faxes, telephones. I reign over numbers. I remain ignorant of the sun's warmth on the skin, the noise of the river, the play of shadows between the leaves. As a child, I did not know why these things remained foreign to me, why they would not give themselves completely to me. At present, they have grown indeterminably distant. Where are they, Célestin? Even the wine that you pour every evening into my glass is wary of me. It

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wouldn't want any part of me either, even if I drank until I fell over.

By dint of omnipotence, I am nothing but a shade, my old familiar specter, the shadow of a reflection that is itself no more than the shadow of another shadow, which is the image of somebody or other, a legend, a dubious story, a name. I don't even believe in my own existence.

Listen to me, for you are the absolute confidant. Always nodding your head with approval, always attentive, and yet nothing that you hear shall ever escape your empty bosom. One would like to tell you everything, to fill your hollow belly with confidence-goodies and secret-meats, a great Cockayne puppet. I am myself only because I knew I had to keep my secrets, and most of all my reputation as a proprietor of secrets, but what use is it being myself, and even the only self in the nation worth anything, if everything that makes up that self is not known in its innermost recesses?

[. . .]

You see, my old beef jerky, I've always given free rein to my propaganda ministers. Since the beginning, they sell a bon vivant marshal to the people, a sort of likeable ogre. Gaspaldi upholds the tradition. The people like it, apparently. I do what I can, as you will have noticed, to conform to my image. I've cultivated my fits of resounding laughter. I've memorized my tasteless jokes. I'm famous for my temper tantrums; the spontaneous obscenities and grammatical errors carefully prepared by my speech writers are quoted insatiably. I am credited with innumerable mistresses. I am supposed to adore all greasy-spoon dishes, calf's head in *sauce gribiche*, tripe, breaded pig's trotters, salted pork with lentils, and I do like them, quite naturally; I devour rare steaks and mountains of fries for the cameras, which are at once touched and frightened by such a Homeric hunger.

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What else could I be? And you, do you know what else I could be?

And I may very well chew on my sapper's apron with conviction.



never tastes of anything but the words of which it is made. Go figure why I'm telling you this, right, you don't know about these torments, you're not expensive to feed; a crouton lasts you a whole day, you gnaw on it indefatigably. Or else a really itzy-bitsy bit of dried fish that resembles you, with its barren eye and its marred skin; when you suck on it, it looks as though you were swallowing your little brother.

Sometimes in my night, while you snore, stretched out across my doorway in your trestle bed, I find myself thinking that once, long ago, before being this virtual marshal, this very old tyrant who's little more than a word, I was real.

Do you remember, in the old days, before all this shit, when I would go to see Mommy? She was fond of you, Mommy was; she would always set aside a piece of pound cake for you; once, dig around in what's left of your brains, she even embroidered a doily for you all by herself; in fact it was on TV, she could be seen putting the doily in your already wrinkly hands, a humble gift from a little old lady to a little old man, it's not much of course, but it's heartfelt, it's the thought that counts, boy, many a hearth must have been mighty touched. Did you keep that doily? You don't have any idea anymore, you don't give a shit, and you're right. The propaganda ministry had snuck it to Mom the night before, she never could embroider anything, not to save her life. I hope I'm not disappointing you. Since you're being told that it was heartfelt, and it's the thought that counts.

We would dine in the cool evening air, in the little garden under the climbing roses, just like when I was small. Mom had made a veal blanquette, just like when I was small, a tasty blanquette provided by the palace kitchen, she never could cook a blanquette, not to save her life. We would smoke a cigarette while listening to the cicadas. In the fragrant woods, you could hear the secret police scratching themselves in their hideouts. Sometimes, you recall, I would even stay overnight.

Looking for a new way to experience world literature? Join the Asymptote Book Club! (/book-club/) I've never slept anywhere but there, in the little white bedroom on the upper floor that smelled like rest and childhood, and all my



other nights I passed remembering those nights, trying to soak them up in order to bring the sleep back to the surface inside me, out of the drowned spaces of the past, pardon me, I'm becoming sentimental myself as well, in my old age. But Sleep, how I held it close in the little white room; I clasped its tender, supple body in my arms; it had nothing to keep from me. I would wake up happy, in the dim light and the cool, to birdsong. The smell of coffee rose from the ground floor. I would stay a little longer under the covers, enjoying that suspended moment between day and night, that absolutely empty moment, and then I would see the medals shining upon my uniform hanging on the chair.

I positively had to have a mommy, why wouldn't I have had a mommy like everyone else, right, you antediluvian fossil? Does it still mean anything to you, the word mommy, mom-my? Try to remember, I know it's difficult; one uses the word less often after age one hundred and twelve. Did this thing ever exist, in the depths of centuries: someone for whom you were a pink and laughing baby, all full and tender flesh, someone who would wrap you up and feed you with a bottle; I have difficulty imagining it; try as I might, I always already see you as you are, a pickled herring in an old coat, an anthology of arthritic joints, a little sack of flaccid skin trembling and crying for its bottle from an excessively hoary mother.

And then Mother died.

Well, died in a manner of speaking. You didn't know her, did you now, my dear arthritic baboon. Here's what happened with Mom. She had already made a few boo-boos; the secret service had collected her two or three times in her kitchen, her bun all crooked, soused on cherry kirsch. But this dying thing took the cake in the fuck-up department. Well, it was about time, she had been past her expiration date for ages; maintenance was becoming expensive. Taking her down promised to be easy.

Poisoning her might have worked, but she was on her guard, the old meat-sack, sniffed at everything, concocted secret dishes for herself, or used herbal treatments, what do I know; in any case,

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after several attempts, nothing. Her guts must have been made of steel. Gris was becoming impatient. He sent a secret service agent to smother her with a pillow, or throttle her with a garrote, according to taste and opportunity.

The oaf got burned. She let him have a wallop in the nose, and then took off. You should have seen Gris' face when he came and told me, Gris, the most capable of capable men. One of his men of steel gunned down by a hag. And on top of that, a potential scandal on the loose out there. Because Grandma could have blackmailed us. We waited a bit, but either she was afraid or she had gone and croaked in a corner somewhere. In any case, we couldn't leave things be, can you imagine? The supreme Guide's mother, a fugitive. So we decided to bury her all the same. But not for real. If the other one, resurrected from the dead, ever showed her face, we could always try to make her keep quiet, take her down, if need be denounce her as an impostor. In short, sorry to be letting you know so late, my dear detritus, but it's another hag that was buried, with a touching sobriety, in place of Mother.

I still cried over the bitch; what an idea to perform these funeral rites for her, such simple ones, in the country, with bouquets of flowers; son of a bitch, it was so moving, I cried real tears, I'm capable of it; I cried real tears for my mommy, my own mommy; I certainly had the right to have one like everyone else. ✦

translated from the French by Alexander Dickow

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