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THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD BY PIERRE MICHON
TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY WYATT ALEXANDER MASON

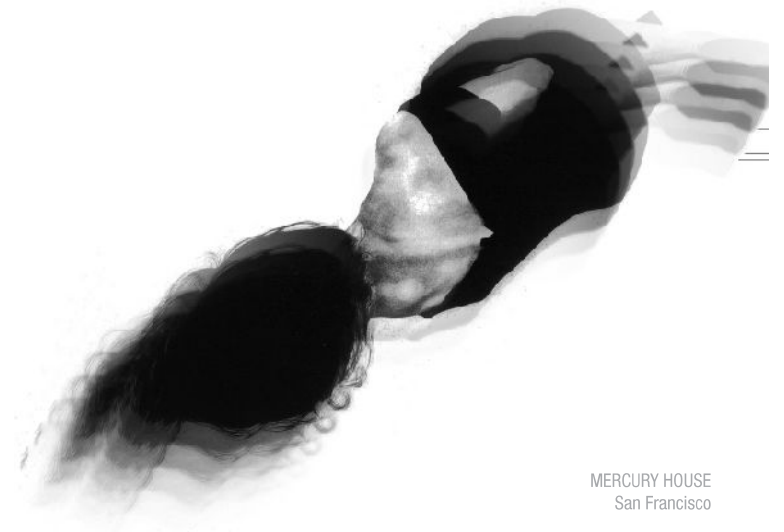
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BETWEEN LES MARTRES and Saint-Amand-le-Petit lies the town of Castelnau, along the Beune. I was posted to Castelnau in 1961: devils are posted as well I suppose, to their Circles below; and somersault after somersault make their downward way just as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

Three steps took you down into the bar; it was painted that blood red once called *rouge antique*; it smelled of saltpeter; between long silences, a scattering of seated drinkers spoke loudly of gunshots and fishing; their movements in

the low light cast their shadows over the walls; if you looked above the counter you would see a stuffed fox staring out at you, its pointy head turned violently your way but its body running along the length of the wall, as if in flight. The night, the creature's eyes, the red walls, these people's rough talk, their archaic words—all of this sent me back to some uncertain, pleasureless moment past, filled me with a vague fear that was compounded by the fear of soon having to face my students: this past seemed to be my future, these shady fishermen whose captains were loading me onto the rickety raft of adult life and who, reaching the river's middle, were stripping me and throwing me to the bottom, snickering in the darkness, in their beards, in their bad patois; later, they would squat along the banks and wordlessly scale enormous fish. September's bewildered rain was beating the windows. Hélène was as old and massive as the Cumaean sibyl, as pensive, but all dolled up in nice old clothes, her hair in a scarf; her fat arm and its uprolled sleeve wiped the table in front of me; her least movement radiated pride, a silent joy: I wondered how she'd come to run this red tavern presided over by a fox. I asked her for some dinner; she apologized modestly, for her ovens that had gone cold for the night, for her advanced years, and then served me a profusion of cold morsels that pilgrims and soldiers in stories are forever filling up on with before their bodies are run through with swords, as they cross a black ford full of blades. And wine, in a fat glass, to better brave these blades. I ate these haute-époque cold cuts; at the neighboring table words came infrequently; heads drew nearer, heaved with sleep or the memory of animals about to pounce, dying; these were young men;

but their fatigue, their hunts, these were as old as fables. My Wallachian brigands at last donned their hats, stood, and in their inky black oilcoats whose broken folds gleamed moved off bravely to perform the strange orders of boatmen, of the sleeping world; one of them, above his starry greatcoat, had turned his finely featured face toward me; he offered a complicitous smile, or perhaps it was only pity; either way, his teeth shined a bright white. You could hear the mopeds starting up. Through the open door, the night was turbid, moveless: the rain was galloping elsewhere; there was fog. "It's Jean the Fisherman," Hélène said, with a little nod of her head toward this fog through which the shrill motors flew; her gesture was so vague that she could just as easily have been naming the fog. She smiled. The wrinkles in this smile sorted themselves out perfectly. She shut the door, fiddled with some switches, the lights went out; rising I was already asleep; I was anywhere, in lands where foxes run through dreams, in the heart of a fog of fish one doesn't see leap from the water, falling back in with a hard flat noise, at the very bottom of Dordogne, which is to say nowhere, in Wallachia.

It rained all of September.

My students weren't monsters: they were children who were afraid of everything and laughed for no reason. They had given me the little class, not the smallest but the elementary level; it was composed of many little bodies that all looked alike; I learned how to name them, to recognize them during recess as they ran through the rain to the windy hollow beneath the covered playground; I would observe them from behind the high windows of the room, and then

all of a sudden I wouldn't see them any more; they would be huddled under an awning, beneath the blithe bodies of falling rain. I was alone in the classroom. I looked at a long row of pegs from which their car coats hung, still steaming from the morning rain as if drying in some bivouac, the belongings of a dwarf army; I named even these little castoffs, said them aloud with some emotion. And of course there were big blackboards on the walls bearing letters and syllables, words and phrases flanked by drawings, posters, all the predictable imagery, the naïve nothings that charm young hearts, hook them, while flogging them with times tables that make them cry beneath these innocuous lures, pictures of plump little boys laughing, of young girls with braids, of rabbits. Children move their feet when they think, when they cry: I could see the traces of this careful, sad dance beneath their desks, little circles of mud; and large inkblots on the white wood testified to the same rhythm, to the same piety. Yes, this moved me; I wasn't much older than they, I was twenty; and I was drifting away, I was barely even there.

What slept beneath the dust in a glass display case in the rear of the class came from a deeper beyond. The case was from the last century, from the era of socialist savants, of the three Jules, of yet another Republic, from a time when athletic curates of the Périgord would roll up their cassocks and crawl through caves in search of Adam's remains, a time when instructors, from Périgord as well, were themselves crawling around in the mud with a couple of brats in tow, making their way to remains that would prove once and for all that man wasn't born of Adam; such was the provenance

of the case's contents, as the labels affixed to each object attested, learned names calligraphied in a fine hand typical of the time, a beautiful hand, vain, rounded, cluttered, ardent, a hand they all shared, the fools, each group more modest than the next, those who believed in Scripture and those who believed in mankind's glorious tomorrows; but the case held artifacts from our century as well, however stingy by comparison; how the calligraphy had suffered at Verdun, how the calligraphy had fallen to ashes, to spidery scrawls, in the hells of Poland and Slovakia, in infamous camps not far from Attila's own but which made Attila's look like schools of philosophy, fields of beets and watch-towers that neither God nor man would have use of again; and despite Verdun and the Slovakian fog, the teachers, without this fine hand, had continued all the same, heroically in a sense, to put long names on little stones, with the faith that remained theirs, that of habit, which was better than nothing; and beyond just arriving from teachers of every stripe, the contents were gathered by other men as well, men who had made things, not just labels, men of whom we can no longer say whether they believed in something while making them or whether they believed in nothing and made them out of habit, but whom we rightly believe never demeaned themselves as deeply as those in the Slovakian Circles. These were just stones. What one calls weapons; harpoons, battle-axes, blades, though they seemed like stones that the ground spits up after rainstorms, which they were as well; these were flints, the fabulous silicates that had received the names of long-forgotten villages and which in return had saddled these villages with the

weight of history, had burrowed underneath an infinity of catacombs, older than Mycenae, older than Memphis, than Genesis with all its dead, and so convincingly that we ask ourselves to whom the Mayor of Les Eyzies was addressing himself on the eleventh of November, with his little piece of paper wavering in the North wind, standing before a monument to the dead; these crude flints, precious in their own way like the gold coffins in the Valley of the Kings; more precious; the noble flints with royal patronyms drawn from their parishes in Somme, in Lot, in Yonne, and which too carry first names of fishes and trees, of birds—*Willow Leaf of Solutré, Parrot's Beak of Madeleine, Great Dab of Saint-Acheul*—but which quickly acquired sobriquets—*the loveliest, the oldest, the most perverse*—each a shimmering jewel, and each of which nonetheless could kill a cow, impeccably. The display case sat there: we were right around the corner from Lascaux, the Beune flows into the old Vézère valley, the ground brims with these implements of slaughter, these obsolete grenades forever with pins pulled and bouncing through brooks, freezing in the ice, rising through the roots of fallen trees and leaping from ditches upturned by the plow, children collecting them on a road and carrying them to school under their bonnets, in their little Wallachian hats, and with a sweet smile offering them to a teacher well versed in such things, interested in them, held in their weak little hands, these bits of darkness. That accomplished, they sit, slip off their schoolbags, and unwind by shuffling their feet, tipping their braids and necks over pages where little rabbits show them how to read; and to make their parents happy, their teacher, and even they themselves occasionally,

they try to grow up unfazed by what looms behind them, in a display case filled with stickers. These stones rolled all the way to the Castelnau school and were waiting for the flood that would roll them elsewhere, remaining stickered this time so that they might be read by fish. There was another quarter hour to kill before the end of recess; through the window there was still this rain, this fog filled with people that Hélène called Jean the Fisherman; two little bundles below were attempting an outing in the courtyard, moving at a gallop, running with shivery, excited cries back to the playground; I left the stones there, their low weights; I was sitting on my desk; I was listening to their legs. I was giving myself over to another devotion, to another brand of violence. I was thinking about the tobacconist.

The Tabac was beneath the old arcade, on the fairground which is Castelnau's square, home to its businesses. I went in shortly after my arrival, after school, of an evening. And of course it was raining, my hair was soaking wet; the shop was empty. I looked vaguely at the revolving postcard stand by the door, saw the abandoned wolf of Font-de-Gaume and the great cows of Lascaux, the round bison, and the outrageous women from the same era that they call Venuses, their outsized figures, their long fine necks. Pictures like this are sold throughout the region. In this zoo, this harem, a strange image stopped me for a moment: it was a reproduction of a shoddily painted plaster statuette, a monk in his frock collapsed against the stump of a tree, to which he's nailed here and there by long arrows; his tonsured head is askew; the man is dead. Putting the card back, I read that this was the blessed Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, a Jesuit whom

the Chinese tortured to death around 1650, a native of Castelnaud. Although it was all a bit much, the tilt of his head nonetheless screamed loss, made it moving, a sort of resignation, perhaps even despair, which didn't quite look right on a saint, given he was dead. I heard the hit of her heels; I turned around and she was behind her counter. I saw her from the waist up. Her arms were bare.

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

head slightly, gold earrings brushing her cheek while she watched you or nothing at all, and this desire was open, like a wound; and she knew it; she wore it with valor, with passion. But what are words? She wasn't clay: more the beating of wings in a storm, and yet no flesh could conceivably have been more perfectly ample, more substantial, more bound by its weight. Packages of cigarettes haloed her in neat rows. I couldn't see her skirt; it was nonetheless there, behind the counter, vast, unliftable. Outside, hard rain lashed the windows: I could hear it crackle on this unsullied flesh.

My hair was still dripping on my forehead. This woman, her lips lightly parted, benevolent and mildly surprised, patiently considered my silence. She was waiting to hear what I wanted. I spoke in a dream, in a voice nonetheless clear. She turned around, her armpit appearing when she lifted her arm to the shelves, and her hand, smooth and beringed, opened under my eyes with a red and white box of Marlboros in its palm. I brushed it while taking the box. Perhaps to see this gesture again—the coins resting in her palm, painted nails joining and separating—I also bought the postcard of the arrowed saint. She smiled, broadly. “Would you like an envelope?” she said. Absolutely I did. Her voice was generous as well, words like gifts. Once more the white arm plunged, her fingers joined, her earrings caressed her cheek. When I left, the sky was just beginning to clear; the cobbles shone, rejuvenated; the rain had ended. Along the slope toward the auberge, toward the Beune, the sun appeared, the sky opening and the pale trees appearing indelibly against the sky; in my throat, in my ears, something plaintive remained, something powerful, like an unending

cry cut short, modulating, full of tears and invincible desire, a desire that rises from nocturnal throats, cinched tight but strangely free, like the word *honey* in a blues tune. In the bar chez Hélène, the sun could be seen setting over the Beune, dark black clouds bending over like maidservants, approaching; love that moves stars stirred the stars, dolled them up, made them look like Esthers, stripped them bare to white, instantly; sunlight caressed the red fur of the fox, little children in the countryside saw a rain-dipped pebble and it would be in a fist they would offer me tomorrow with something like love; up above, on the square, the tobacconist was already shivering from the brutal festivities of the night to come, her hand perhaps trembling briefly on a packet of Marlboros, her skirt caressing her thighs. *Honey*: when the sun goes down, when night comes, when the souls of women are as naked as their hands.

Did I dare think she could be mine? Of course, and feverishly, but only by some miracle, no more shocking after all than the miracle by which she existed in Castelnau, and that from her divine hand she could birth packets of Marlboros. I was of an age when one believed that one had nothing to offer, nothing one could exchange against such wealth. And what's more, I was of that ridiculous generation embarrassed by everything, that imagined a woman's desire was subject to one's ability to talk about notable, serious matters, pop songs or paintings, politics, some blob of nothing; or, if you can't talk to them, to at least make sure that they think you can. And I was a good-looking kid, charming enough, and I had enough to convince her—or would have, it will soon be clear, had she not already belonged to another, as they say.

So I didn't try a thing, I made no more move for her hand than to collect the little red and white boxes; and I added a dash of loftiness to the part by buying *Le Monde* every day, which I didn't read—she also sold newspapers—the copies of which piled up in my room above the great tangled hole of the Beune, and of course she didn't witness anything in my actions that would have won me any points, she couldn't have cared less. I went to the shop every day, out of my real passion for tobacco and my feigned passion for undigested newsprint, which were justification enough: we exchanged a few words, she always offered her smile and the warmth of her voice, she was patient, her skirt rustled, occasionally I saw her legs, and her heels, always high.