

***Extract from La Symphonie du Loup by Marius Daniel Popescu  
(José Corti, Paris 2007, ISBN: 978-2-7143-0954-9)***

*Pages 154-161*

They were not your friends, they were there as if on stage and the set was the set of a whole country. You are one of the witnesses to the misfortunes of the world, you have lived and you live to see, to hear and to tell.

You were a boy of thirteen and you sniffed people out and you sniffed out their habits. You used to come by foot to this ruined factory over the fields that linked the suburbs of the city to the trunk road.

They were the relics of the Party era, they were the have-nots of the new system. You let them treat you as their “boy”, from time to time they would send you to do their shopping.

The people who benefited from their services were, for the most part, people like them, poor and on the edge of the world, people that lived off scrap. They all wore the same bottom-of-the-range trainers. The laces of their shoes were stained with the same grease that stained their hands. You sensed in each of them a will for revenge, a desire to smash their fist into someone else’s face, or against a wall.

You had noticed their gentleness, their concern for the child you were. When you asked questions about the ghost factory, they explained everything you wanted to know, to the smallest detail; you would notice the softness in their voices, and their knowledge of a skill they could no longer use.

They were like sailors obliged to continue living on a disused naval base. You had become aware that the world

you perceived through your five senses was much more complex than the world of your dreams. You dreamt of your outings to the forest accompanied by your friends; you dreamt that you flew over your grandmother's town and you flew like one of the swallows whose nest hung from the electricity wire leading to the lamp on your grandmothers' patio; you dreamt of the fish caught during the day; you dreamt of your uncle's company car that you had already driven alone at the wheel; you dreamt of your girlfriend. But never did you dream of the hardest, the most extreme, most shocking, the most unexpected encounters in your life.

They had, for the twelve of them, several of the factory's hangers; they were at once the fictive owners of two clashing worlds and the employees of a carnival God, made of pulped cardboard, his veins drawn over his body with lipstick. You spent long hours there with them.

You made comparisons between the world of your homework and this world belonging to them, you compared secondary school equations with scrap merchants' gestures. You thought about forming an equation out of gestures and spoken words. You felt that looks and physiognomies could be put into an equation. You realised that equations could not contain the vibrations in your body, in your voice, when you saw these people, who welcomed you, screaming of their distress, their incomprehension, their ignorance.

They were cloistered between the walls of a mouldy cathedral, they swam in the waters of words without roots, you experienced these men as one might experience snails one watches crossing the road, being squashed one by one by the wheels of cars, by the steps of other people.

They had families to feed, each of them had children at home. They were at once angels and brutes, you knew them down to their slightest mannerisms, you knew they were capable of cradling babies in their arms, you knew they were capable of killing.

You had your own kingdom there, built of smells both delicate and foul, of images of saints and devils, the taste of petrol and of plastic, the noise of metal saws, the feel of sheet steel. You were a king. Because your great-grandfather was the administrator of the king's forests in your region, because I had narrated scenes of my father's life, at the age of thirteen you sometimes took yourself for a king. In your mind you transformed these twelve workers into your subjects and you gave them tasks to accomplish, duties, rewards and medals.

They didn't pay you much attention, they considered you an innocent strayed into their world, they saw you as a child without ties, they thought you clung to them and this thought was not altogether untrue. To some extent, all they thought about you was true: you wanted to live, to get to know the world outside of your family universe, your home, your street. You had ventured outside of your neighbourhood, outside your town.

They were on the outside. They were living the drama of a bruised country. You were a lad of thirteen and you smelt the odour that came off their trousers, you breathed their breath, their blunt words, their way of living their backs against a wall much bigger, much more impenetrable than any wall: a wall of solitude.

You were the only one amongst them who brought a flicker of nostalgia, of *joie de vivre* or a wish to cry. When you cried because your string bow made of high tension electricity

cable elastic broke, three of them came to you to ask what was wrong; you told them the matter, they listened to you, and then they made you the best bow you would ever have: with this bow you could go hunting deer in your childhood forest.

You always thanked them for their help, for their advice, their kindness to you. They sensed that you were not one of them, they sensed that you were not of the potential enemy's camp either, they loved you as one loves a kid that crosses the street his head held high, they loved you and you loved them as one loves whatever one happens upon in life.

The cast-iron stove factory no longer existed and the orchard that surrounded it for several hectares had not been kept up for years. The ground beneath the apple trees was covered with tall grass, the trees were no longer cut back, no one worked the land, the harvest was slender and the wooden posts that marked the edge of the farm property were rotting at the base and leaning to one side.

You spent hours in the workshops and in the orchard that surrounded them, the change from the smell of rust to that of the earth took place gently, like falling into sleep with your eyes open. You used to play at Red-Indians between the trees that had grown wild, or, you whiled away time watching the flowers, the blades of grass, the lizards. You scraped at the earth with sticks you found by your side, you lay on your back and watched the sky. You saw grasshoppers bustling around your immobile body, you heard the crickets and the cracking of branches that mingled with the far off voices of the workers.

They knew you played in the orchard, they had got used to seeing you running between the trees, you picked apples for them and you brought them to them.

One day, when you arrived at around four o'clock in the afternoon in one of the factory's hallways, you saw through the window a horse in the orchard and you knew it was the Gipsy's horse. You recognised the horse belonging to the Gipsy that lived a few houses down from your grandmother, you were happy to see it there, free amongst the apple trees, it was not tied-up and it moved around slowly.

This horse was another witness to the dead factory and to its last twelve workers. Its master had spotted the orchard when walking past, along the road, and he brought his animal here every morning, early, then he came to take it away in the evening, at sunset.

The Gipsy was a man of small stature, his back and arms were muscular from the labour work he did everyday in the town's goods railway station. He wore a moustache and the rest of his face was well shaven, he had a small brick house without any paint on the outside, where he lived with his wife and his four children.

Most of the workers did not like the Gipsy. They began to talk about him, saying at first: "That one with his horse, he's got damned all to do here!" then treating him as a chicken thief, as "jobless" and an individual of a "filthy race". You heard their unkind words, you noticed that their eyes sparked when they talked about the Gipsy in the black hat, they criticised him mercilessly, little by little this Gipsy became one of their biggest obsessions.

They considered the orchard their own, the Gipsy and his horse as intruders, undesired and lawless. They could not bear seeing that horse grazing on the tall grass in the orchard, they spat on the ground insulting a world they said was "badly made".

You did not know how things were going to turn out with the Gipsy, his horse and these twelve workers, you sensed a hatred that exuded from them each time they spoke of the horse. This hatred was a sort of fog that coated all the scrap-metal in the deserted factory, it transformed the hallways into a labyrinth, which made you think of a disused cemetery.

They wanted to fight against someone, against something, they wanted to revenge themselves on some enemy or other, they hated politicians and priests, they hated their poverty, they hated the Gipsy and his horse, who represented one of the roots of the ill.

This fog that came out of their bodies, their words and their gestures got thicker and thicker, you noticed how they had begun to walk as if blind through the objects that made up their day-to-day world, they exhaled this fog and cloaked it around themselves like a thick blanket one might wrap oneself in completely, they could no longer work without glancing out at the horse that lived in the orchard. You felt their tread heavy in their boots. Crossing through this fog made your eyes and ears sore, they spoke less and less to you, the fog coming out of their guts solidified itself on the walls and on the scrap-metal strewn about, like the green plaster of a war set or a suit of camouflage.

You entered the large hall to look for some ball bearings to use to make a scooter with, and the horse was there. They had dragged it into the enclosure with a rope, they had positioned it on a large slab of sheet steel and they had welded its hooves to the metal.

You stopped a few steps from the animal, immobile on its hooves. It wanted to move, it wanted to leave the place, it

could move nothing but its neck, its head, its tail and some muscles in its thighs. Most of the workers were drunk and they mocked the horse crying: “Go on, get on!”, laughing as the animal attempted to detach its welded hooves from the slab of metal, they were sat around the metal slab and they passed round a bottle of alcohol that they brought to their rough mouths. The fog was total. You could no longer move. One of them noticed you and said “Come here boy, come and do some riding!” Despite their apparent good humour, they were all stuck still, like the empty bottles you often saw on the side of the tracks you took across the fields. They were proud of their deed, the horse had become their living trophy, they were enjoying themselves in this fog heralding death and mourning, they wanted to show they were strong, invincible. They were fighting their own fog.

You had gone silent. Your words remained somewhere in your throat or escaped from your neck and your face in a wave of heat and perspiration. For the first time in your life, the world had become a theatre whose stage you had to cross.

Enveloped by the horse, the twelve workers, the Gipsy, the orchard and the scrap metal, you turned your back on it all, you turned your mind towards home, you took refuge in thoughts about your school books, you were then able to say a few words, you said, imperceptibly: “He must be hurting!”

When the Gipsy arrived in the hall, the sun was no longer in the sky, he saw his horse covered in a whitish froth and welded by his hooves to the slab of sheet metal, and he wailed. His wailing, his gaze to the ceiling, his arms spread wide, and then his hands falling to his head made each of the twelve workers step back, back up against the wall. There was a silence in which only the breathing of the weary animal

could be heard. Your childhood tumbled inexorably into a world previously unknown. At this moment you knew you were the freest and the most lonely of men. The twelve workers had not finished their massacre, you watched them circle the Gipsy and threaten him with death. They pushed him towards the door and with the welding tool, they sawed the sheet steel around the horses' hooves. The horse now had enormous searing hooves, it left trembling, with difficulty keeping its balance, the workers screamed with joy to see the Gipsy crying for his animal.

You had no weight, your body became a memory, the horse fell sideways onto some cast iron ingots, you saw its blood, you saw it get itself back up and move on towards the orchard, then it fell again.

The twelve workers formed a sort of procession around the animal and the Gipsy, who was trying in vain to hold up his horse; they walked on the traces of blood spilling onto the tarmac, they were saying "Get the hell out of here!", their faces were clenched and their eyes were bulging out of their sockets, like gangrenous wounds.

The horse died in the tall grass in the orchard and the Gipsy watched over it for the whole night. Its corpse decomposed beside an apple tree. The stench it gave off lasted for weeks forcing the workers to leave the place. They never returned to the old cast iron stove factory.

In autumn, apples fall on the horse's skeleton and on its hooves soldered to the sheet steel slabs. You are now nearly forty years old, your memory no longer sleeps, you often dream of the Gipsy.