



*The River of Dead Trees*

Andrée A. Michaud  
translated by Nathalie Stephens

## Prologue

### The Work of Time

He sits at the top of the hill, so still that he might have been there forever and for always. A sparkle of light moves across his eyes, however, indicating the survival of the gaze, the perseverance of the soul beyond mortal ruptures and the collapse of worlds. Before him spreads a village that seems equally frozen, fixed in time by stone and by death, without fires in the hearths, without flowers in the gardens, just the dried remains of vines and rose bushes, petrified by last season's frost. All of this is nevertheless an illusion, the premonitory vision of the successive deaths of all things assembled into the final instant. It is therefore time that he sees, its confines and its work.

But it doesn't last. A gust of wind risen from the valley erases the vision, and the hieratic figure of the animal relaxes. A bird glides in the distance. A startled hare rediscovers fear, then the animal traces a large circle and sits again facing the village which has been entrusted to him by some force that escapes him. In fact, the animal does not even know of the existence of this force. He knows that he must remain on the hill and fill his memory with what time will destroy, with the unexpected help and haste of man. He is the one who sees, who records the simultaneity of certain movements, the collision of winds, the synchronicity of misfortunes whose advent could have been prevented by chance.

He sees an anxious man at the steering wheel of his car take the winding road that edges a lake. He sees him descend close to the lake, question its mute depths, then from the lake go all the way to

the river where the hours have stopped flowing. And the animal understands, from the man's trajectory, that this man wants to return toward the past. So he comes down. The animal comes down from the hill and goes to meet the anxious man, whom he must help to overcome the twists and turns of the path he is taking, whom he must guide into the forest where he will quickly lose himself, for this man who goes off toward the past, the animal also understands, doesn't know that he has forgotten time.

*To Harvey, wherever he is, with all of his suffering; to Hervé and Irving, dead for having wanted light to last; to Humphrey, who whispered this story to me; to my brother, who was with me the day my path crossed Humphrey's; to my three sisters and to my mother; to the ghosts of our house; to Maurice and Mauricie, whom I have never been able to tell apart; to Henri the timid, at last; and to the trees, the oaks, the alders of America, to the birds of the swamps and rivers, to the rivers' bulrushes.*



*'Tenebra Deus est. Tenebra in anima post omnem lucem relictā.'* ('God is darkness. He is the sudden darkness that invades the soul after all light.')

– Pascal Quignard, *Les Ombres errantes*



Part One

God Is Darkness





## I

The sun was setting on the horizon, faded by yellowish clouds that hesitated to evaporate. I had been in Trempes for only seventy-two hours and already I was under the impression that the sun would never stop its fall, that each day was a day that would decline from dawn on, without the promise of a future. Before me, the diagonal traced by the shadow of the hanged man indicated that it was four o'clock according to solar time, five o'clock according to the time of men, which was only important insofar as I maintained the illusion of a bit of daylight. Deep in a state some might characterize as contemplative but which was merely a form of numbness born of incomprehension, I watched it stretch slowly across the grass of the clearing, mixing with the shadow formed by the dense mass of oak where the body of the hanged man was suspended, barely moved by the wind that lifted his hair and brought to the ground the first leaves made prematurely brown by the frost of an early autumn.

'I will only agree to die the day I have proof of God's existence,' he had said to me in his own words some twenty-five years earlier, unconscious of the temerity of such a commitment and of the danger of fuelling in this way the anger of He whose law he defied. *This happened just before the events I will recount, if I am able to keep to the time of men, just before he concluded, in the dazzling light of another setting sun, that divine essence also drank from the springs of evil. By assimilating God and His opposite, he had at last obtained the evidence he had hoped for, that illumination of saints that had allowed him to leave with the certainty that the world of mortals was but the dawn of an inescapable eternity.* These were the last of his words that I had retained. A few months later, I left the village with my

parents, darkened by some obsession I couldn't name, and was never again in contact with this childhood friend, whose blood, despite it not having been my own, flowed nonetheless in my veins. I let myself believe that he had returned to normal, while I, left to my own devices, had experienced chaos. When I saw him again at last, after all these years of flight and obscurity, he hung from the end of a rope, at the edge of what I called the coyote's trail, near the river of dead trees, 300 kilometres from the place where I should have been, his neck gouged by the jute that had dug into his flesh a reddish furrow that marked an insistent boundary between the head and the body, the seat of the mind and that of the soul, where irreconcilable sufferings were perhaps at the origin of the need to strangle the breath animating both one and the other.

It was also possible that God's anger had swooped down on him, I told myself while watching the sun skim his sparse hair, revealing the waxy whiteness of the skin of a skull made anemic by a deprivation of light, or that he had solved the mystery that true faith did not seek to explain and wanted, now that he could no longer doubt the fact that the anarchy of the world was governed by divine will, the confirmation that hell existed also, and that all who committed the sacrilege of ending their own lives were precipitated there. Whatever revelation had led Paul Faber to the gallows, I myself had no doubt as to the existence of hell, which materialized before my eyes through the cloud of flies that bored, in an incessant drone, into the wound opened in his tumefied skin by the sharp beaks of crows.



*I have never understood, in fact, what might be sacrilegious about a gesture whose only goal is to hasten man more quickly to God. I always asked myself what could be sacred about the life of a mortal no longer able to consider himself a member of the living. I do not support the violence of certain feelings of helplessness, I only ask myself about the cost of life in relation to its weight, and I don't believe that this cost rises in proportion to heaviness.*



The river of dead trees extends its meanderings over roughly two kilometres of land that have been continually flooded for the past fifteen years. It's the first place I headed upon arriving in Trempe, unaware that this river, where floods, ages ago, had stirred only faint waves through a tranquil flow, had ended up abdicating, allowing its weary waters to invade its shores little by little and drown the trees that had sheltered it for so long.

When I parked the car near the little wooden bridge straddling it, I recognized nothing, and none of the memories from which I had hoped for a certain appeasement surfaced from this apparently immobile expanse of water. I had before me a landscape condemned by its languor, dotted with dark trunks on which subsisted here and there severed main branches, similar to amputated arms lifted to the sky in a gesture of useless supplication, since the sky would never return life to these statues decapitated by the water.

I remained there a few moments, subjugated by the beauty of this tableau where water had created its own desert and where death seemed imprinted with a calm the wind was incapable of reaching, then I walked around the bridge and sat on a pile of stones likely erected by children whose joy would anchor itself in these desolate surroundings, incapable, nevertheless, of revealing to me what I had been thirty years earlier, when I hid beneath the foliage with Faber to watch for semi-aquatic, semi-terrestrial monsters, swallowers of reflections and brown algae. *We had invented these monsters, I think, to justify the fear sometimes inspired in us by the disquieting silence of the river; then, unconscious of the power we were granting them, we imagined that these creatures were capable of pushing the wind and the clouds to snatch up our reflections, to swallow our stares riveted on the inexplicable eddies hitting the bulrushes.* It was here, near this now languishing river, that I had begun to lose my face, to doubt my identity in the shadow of Faber, who was still a few steps ahead of me, a few giant steps, standing in full light.

Faber's new shadow was already invading mine while I was absorbed by these thoughts, asking myself whether the river, at the end of its long renunciation, would consent to restore my reflection of old, when I was pulled from my daydream by the deafening cries of crows coming from beyond the peak of a group of scraggy pines the river hadn't altogether reached yet. I lifted my eyes and saw that, above the trees, seven or eight of them were tracing a tightening circle, as if they had sought to land on top of an invisible construction – tower, dungeon, church tower – but I was too familiar with the voracity of carrion not to guess at the feast that awaited them. In the space where the dungeon would have risen, there must have been the remains of a beast abandoned by its predators. To believe the agitation of the crows, it was surely a prey of considerable size, maybe an old deer that had taken its last breath after having been wounded and let itself fall against the ground with a feverish sigh, exhausted from having dragged its open flank through a now unrecognizable forest – unless it had been circled by starved coyotes and had abandoned its defence, preferring the rapid attack of those jaws to the shooting pain that would still have gotten the better of it.

I pictured the wet eye of the deer in its enormous head, the convulsions of its tortured body, the frightened eye of the deer surrounded by the growls of coyotes whose jaws became bloodied as the sacrificed animal's coat became bloodied, and I was overcome by a dizziness, which I now know to have been the resurgence of ancient fears, while my surroundings vacillated, just as the nebulous mind of the beast must have vacillated, madly erasing all the images of a hunted life in the explosion of gunfire that deafened autumn. Then, at the thought of the shooting, my mind reeled as well, and I became aware of the intensity of the pain that had brought me next to this river, more dead than alive, with a rip in my flank from which my own strength ran. *What to say about my pain other than that it is the pain of a man, of a child who became a man without realizing it, by dint of events that escaped him, distracted by the cries of birds, the buzzing of flies trailing him, the chirping, yes the chirping, of flies mixed with his own cry. What to say*

*about my pain but that it has no other cause than the senseless desire which finds man and drives him to those extremes that remain exclusive to him. It must have come to me one June night, I think, before the beauty of summer, the white beauty of girls in short outfits. And stretched to an October night. The bicycles in the distance turned in the night. The bicycles and their streamers, on interminable slopes where Faber had decided no longer to take flight. At that moment, a coyote bolted past me and crossed the road with the gait of a beaten dog, its tail between its legs, frightened by some apparition. In the distance, the crows continued to caw, indifferent to my torment and the flight of the coyote.*

I understood then that the remains around which the crows hovered couldn't be those of a deer or any other animal that had died naturally, that the coyote had preferred the hunger tormenting him to the vision that had drawn the crows. Without further thought, I followed his instinct. I returned to my car and set off again on the road leading to the city, knowing that I would return, that my retreat was a ruse, a simple way to push back the moment when I would have to confront what awaited me at the end of the coyote's path, my friend Paul Faber, whom I hadn't seen since childhood.



*I will need to make several more detours before ending up in the clearing of the hanged man, but I will make my approach slowly, tracing around this space concentric circles similar to those formed by a stone thrown into the water of a river.*

*Since I was moving toward the past, I would follow the wave of the undertow, I would move from the largest circles to the heart of the stone.*



I had covered only some fifty kilometres before stopping in at a motel where my room was as cold as the key placed in my palm by the greasy hand of the manager. I spent the night in front of the window, shivering while watching the headlights of cars, which all

seemed to move in the same direction, away from Trempes. Come morning, my decision was made: I wouldn't follow the headlights, I would return to Trempes, since it was in darkness that my life had unfolded. I retraced my journey backwards along the deserted road and went directly to the river. Unlike the day before, all was calm, the crows were gone, the wind blew gently and some tranquil birds sang in the foliage. Nevertheless, I took the coyote's path, which, if my sense of direction didn't deceive me, would lead me directly to the foot of the dungeon around which the crows had been agitating before nightfall. *Now, my sense of direction was not the only thing called into question. A lost scrap of memory, which I will call the instinctual part of forgetting, had led me near the river of dead trees, which I didn't yet recognize as such, and would have led me next to that path, regardless of the signs I would cling to to justify the inconsistency of my acts. As for the appearance of the coyote, it had simply accelerated by a few hours, a few days, another inevitable apparition.* I had barely begun to take the path when I saw before me a dark form, stretched across the middle of the trail, near a halo of pale sun. At first I thought it was an accident of the terrain, a pile of branches, an object abandoned by hikers, but when the halo was displaced by a sudden gust of wind, I recognized the coyote, dead of hunger or some strange unease, I thought, one of those ills of the forest whose virulence is unknown to us, that attacks the flesh, the entrails, the minds of sickly animals. I approached with caution, held back by the irrational fear that such an unknown ill would attack my own entrails, and saw what could result only from the barbarity of men. This coyote, whose survival instinct, no different than my own, had led him onto this path, had only three paws. The last was but a bleeding stump the animal had nibbled at to free himself from a trap whose jaws had closed on his run, and he had come to this familiar place, at the cost of pain I imagined to be terrible, with the hope, maybe, of reaching the stream that ran nearby in order to numb and wash his wound. His strength, however, had not allowed him to reach it, and he would die without having felt the cool water.