VINTAGE

THE MAP AND THE TERRITORY

MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ

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About the Book

Having made his name with an exhibition of photographs of Michelin roadmaps – beautiful works that won praise from every corner of the art world – Jed Martin is now emerging from a ten-year hiatus. And he has had some good news. It has nothing to do with his broken boiler, the approach of another lamentably awkward annual Christmas dinner with his father or the memory of his doomed love affair with the beautiful Olga. It is that, for his new exhibition, he has secured the involvement of none other than the French novelist Michel Houellebecq. The great writer has agreed to write the text for the exhibition guide, for which he will be paid handsomely and also have his portrait painted by Jed.

The exhibition – 'Professions', a series of portraits of ordinary and extraordinary people at work – brings Jed new levels of global fame. Yet his boiler is still broken, his ailing father flirts with oblivion and, worse still, he is contacted by one Inspector Jasselin, who requests his assistance in solving an unspeakable, atrocious and gruesome crime.

Art, money, fathers, sons, death, love and the transformation of France into a tourist paradise come together to create a daringly playful and original twist on the contemporary novel from a modern master of the form.

About the Author

Michel Houellebecq is a poet, essayist and novelist. He is the author of five novels, *Whatever*, *Atomised*, *Platform*, *The Possibility of an Island* and *The Map and the Territory*, which won the prestigious Prix Goncourt.

Also by Michel Houellebecq

H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life
Whatever
Atomised
Platform
Lanzarote
The Possibility of an Island
Public Enemies (with Bernard-Henri Lévy)

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THE MAP AND THE TERRITORY

MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ

Translated from the French by Gavin Bowd

VINTAGE BOOKS
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‘The world is weary of me,
And I am weary of it.’

Charles d’Orléans

Jeff Koons had just got up from his chair, enthusiastically throwing his arms out in front of him. Sitting opposite him, on a white leather sofa partly draped with silks and slightly hunched up, Damien Hirst seemed to be about to express an objection; his face was flushed, morose. Both of them were wearing black suits – Koons's had fine pinstripes – white shirts and black ties. Between them, on the coffee table, was a basket of candied fruits that neither paid any attention to. Hirst was drinking a Budweiser Light.

Behind them, a bay window opened onto a landscape of tall buildings that formed a Babylonian tangle of gigantic polygons reaching the horizon. The night was bright, the air absolutely clear. They could have been in Qatar, or Dubai; the decoration of the room was, in reality, inspired by an advertisement photograph, taken from a German luxury publication, of the Emirates Hotel in Abu Dhabi.

Koons's forehead was slightly shiny. Jed shaded it off with his brush and stepped back three paces. There was certainly a problem with Koons. Hirst was basically easy to capture: you could make him brutal, cynical in an 'I shit on you from the top of my pile of dosh' kind of way; you could also make him a *rebel artist* (but rich all the same) pursuing an *anguished work on death*; finally, there was in his face something ruddy and heavy, typically English, which made him look like a rank-and-file Arsenal supporter. In short, there were various aspects, but all of them could be combined in the coherent, representable portrait of a British artist typical of his generation. Koons, on the other hand, seemed to carry in him something dual, like an insurmountable contradiction between the basic cunning of the technical sales rep and the exaltation of the ascetic. It

was already three weeks now that Jed had been retouching Koon’s expression as he stood up from his chair, throwing his arms out in front of him as if he was trying to convince Hirst about something. It was as difficult as painting a Mormon pornographer.

He had photographs of Koons on his own, in the company of Roman Abramovich, Madonna, Barack Obama, Bono, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates … Not one of them managed to express nearly as much personality, to go beyond the appearance of a Chevrolet convertible salesman that Koons had decided to display to the world, and this was exasperating. In fact, for a long time photographers had exasperated Jed, especially the *great photographers*, with their claim to reveal in their snapshots the *truth* of their models; they didn’t reveal anything at all, they just placed themselves in front of you and switched on the motor of their camera to take at random hundreds of snapshots while chuckling, and later chose the least bad of the lot; that’s how they proceeded, without exception, all those so-called *great photographers*. Jed knew some of them personally and had nothing but contempt for them; he considered them all about as creative as a Photomaton.

In the kitchen, a few steps behind him, the boiler uttered a succession of loud banging noises. It went rigid, paralysed. It was already 15 December.

One year before, on almost the same date, his boiler had uttered the same succession of banging noises before stopping completely. In a few hours, the temperature in the studio had fallen to 3°C. He had managed to sleep a little, or rather doze off, for brief periods. Around six in the morning, he had emptied the hot-water tank to quickly wash himself, then had brewed coffee while waiting for the man from Plumbing in General, who had promised to send someone in the early hours of the morning.

On its website, Plumbing in General offered to ‘make plumbing enter the third millennium’; they could at least start by turning up on time, grumbled Jed at about eleven, pacing around his studio in a vain attempt to warm himself up. He was then working on a painting of his father, which he was going to entitle *The Architect Jean-Pierre Martin Leaving the Management of his Business*; inevitably, the fall in temperature meant that the last layer of paint would take an age to dry. He had agreed, as he did every year, to dine with his father on Christmas Eve, two weeks hence, and hoped to have finished it by then; if a plumber didn’t intervene quickly, his plan risked being compromised. To tell the truth, in absolute terms, it wasn’t that important: he didn’t intend to offer this painting to his father as a gift, he wanted simply to *show* it to him. Why, then, was he suddenly attaching so much importance to it? He was certainly at the end of his tether; he was working too hard and had started six paintings simultaneously. For a few months he hadn’t stopped. It wasn’t sensible.

At around three in the afternoon, he decided to call Plumbing in General again, but the line was constantly engaged. He managed to get through to them just after five, when the customer services secretary explained that there had been an exceptional workload due to the frigid weather, but promised that someone would certainly come the following morning. Jed hung up, then reserved a room in the Mercure Hotel on the boulevard Auguste-Blanqui.

The following day, he again waited all day for the arrival of Plumbing in General, but also for Simply Plumbers, whom he had managed to contact in the meantime. While Simply Plumbers promised to respect the craft traditions of ‘higher plumbing’, they showed themselves to be no more capable of turning up on time.

In the painting he had made of him, Jed’s father, standing on a podium in the middle of the group of about fifty

employees that made up his business, was lifting his glass with a sorrowful smile. The farewell drinks party took place in the open space of his architectural practice, a large room thirty metres by twenty with white walls, and a skylight under which computer design posts alternated with trestle tables carrying the scale models of current projects. Most of those present were nerdy-looking young people – the 3D designers. Standing at the foot of the podium, three forty-something architects surrounded his father. In accordance with a configuration borrowed from a minor painting by Lorenzo Lotto, each of them avoided the eyes of the others, while trying to catch those of his father; each of them, you understood right away, nurtured the hope of succeeding him as the head of the business. His father's eyes, staring just above those present, expressed the desire to gather his team around him for one last time, a reasonable confidence in the future, but also an absolute sadness. Sadness at leaving the business he had founded, to which he had given all his strength, and sadness at the inevitable: you were quite obviously dealing with a finished man.

In the middle of the afternoon, Jed tried in vain, a dozen times, to get through to Ze Plumb, which used Skyrock radio as its on-hold music, while Simply Plumbing had opted for the radio station Laughter and Songs.

At about five, he returned to the Mercure Hotel. Night was falling on the boulevard Auguste-Blanqui; some homeless people had lit a fire on one side of the street.

The following days passed more or less in the same way: dialling numbers of plumbing businesses, being redirected almost instantaneously to on-hold music, waiting, as it got colder and colder, next to his painting, which refused to dry.

A solution came on the morning of 24 December, in the form of a Croatian workman who lived nearby on the avenue Stephen-Pinchon; Jed had noticed the sign by accident while returning from the Mercure Hotel. He was

available, yes, immediately. He was a small man with black hair and a pale complexion, harmonious and fine features, and a rather belle époque moustache; in fact, he looked a bit like Jed – apart from the moustache.

Immediately after entering the flat, he examined the boiler for a long time, dismantling the control panel, running his slender fingers along the complex trail of pipes. He spoke of valves and siphons. He gave the impression of knowing a lot about life in general.

After a quarter of an hour, his diagnosis was the following: he could repair, yes, he could do *a sort of repair*, that would come to fifty euros, no more. But it would be less than a genuine repair job, only a makeshift one, really, that would do the trick for a few months, even a few years in the best-case scenario, but he refused to give any long-term guarantee; more generally, it was unseemly to make a long-term bet on this boiler.

Jed sighed and confessed he had half expected it. He remembered very well the day when he had decided to buy this flat; he could still see the estate agent, stocky and self-satisfied, boasting of the exceptional light, but not hiding the need for certain ‘improvements’. He had then told himself that he should have become an estate agent, or a gynaecologist.

Barely amiable in the first few minutes, the stocky estate agent went into a lyrical trance when he learned that Jed was an artist. It was the first time, he exclaimed, that he’d had the opportunity to sell an *artist’s studio* to an *artist*! Jed feared for a moment that he would declare his solidarity with authentic artists against the bourgeois bohemians and other such philistines who inflated prices, thus making artists’ studios inaccessible to artists, but what can you do. I can’t go against the truth of the market, it’s not my role. But fortunately this did not happen. The stocky estate agent just offered him a ten per cent discount

– which he had probably already foreseen offering after a mini-negotiation.

‘Artist’s studio’ really meant an attic with a skylight – a very nice one, it must be said – and a few dark adjoining spaces, scarcely insufficient for someone like Jed, who had very limited hygienic needs. But the view was, indeed, splendid: beyond the place des Alpes it extended as far as the boulevard Vincent-Auriol and the overground Métro, and further on to those quadrangular buildings built in the mid-seventies in complete opposition to the rest of the Parisian aesthetic landscape, and which were what Jed preferred in Paris, by far, in terms of architecture.

The Croat did the repair job and pocketed the fifty euros. He didn’t offer an invoice, and neither had Jed expected one. The door had just closed behind him when he knocked again very gently. Jed opened the door slightly.

‘By the way, monsieur,’ said the man. ‘Merry Christmas. I wanted to say to you: Merry Christmas.’

‘Yes, I’d forgotten,’ said Jed, embarrassed. ‘Merry Christmas to you too.’

It was then that he became aware of the problem of the taxi. As expected, ToAnywhere refused point-blank to drive him to Raincy, and Speedtax agreed to take him to the railway station, and at a pinch as far as the town hall, but certainly not near the Cicadas housing scheme. ‘Security reasons, monsieur,’ whispered the employee with a slight reproach in his voice. ‘We only serve completely safe zones, monsieur,’ said the receptionist for Fernand Garcin Cars with smooth self-importance. Jed felt more and more guilty about wanting to spend Christmas Eve in such an incongruous place, and, as happened every year, began to get angry with his father, who obstinately refused to quit that bourgeois house, surrounded by a vast park, that population movements had gradually relegated to the heart

of a zone that grew ever more dangerous, and had recently fallen under the complete control of gangs.

Firstly, the perimeter wall had needed to be reinforced and topped with an electrified fence, then a CCTV system linked to the police station was installed, all so his father could wander alone in twelve rooms that were impossible to heat and where no one came except Jed, every Christmas Eve. The nearby shops had long since closed, and it was impossible to walk around the neighbouring streets since even attacks on cars at the traffic lights were not unheard of. Raincy council had given him a home help – a cantankerous and nasty Senegalese woman called Fatty who had disliked him from the start, refused to change the sheets more than once a month, and most probably stole from the shopping allowance.

Be that as it may, the temperature was rising slowly in the room. Jed took a photo of the painting in progress, which would at least give him something to show his father. He took off his trousers and his pullover, sat down cross-legged on the narrow mattress on the floor that served as his bed, and wrapped himself in a blanket. Gradually, he slowed the rhythm of his breathing. He visualised waves rolling slowly, lazily, beneath a matt twilight. He tried to lead his mind to a place of calm; and prepare himself as best he could for another Christmas Eve with his father.

This mental preparation bore fruit, and the evening was a zone of neutral time, even semi-convivial; he had hoped for nothing more.

The following morning, at about seven, assuming that the gangs too had *celebrated Christmas*, Jed walked to Raincy station and got back to Gare de l’Est without a hitch.

One year on, the repair had held, and this was the first time that the boiler had shown signs of weakness. *The Architect*

Jean-Pierre Martin Leaving the Management of his Business had been finished for some time and put into storage by Jed's gallerist in anticipation of a personal exhibition that was taking a while to organise. Jean-Pierre Martin himself – to the surprise of his son, who he had long since given up talking to about it – had decided to leave the house in Raincy and move into a nursing home in Boulogne. Their annual meal would this time take place in a brasserie on the avenue Bosquet called Chez Papa. Jed had chosen it in *Pariscope* on the strength of an advert promising traditional quality, *à l'ancienne*, and this promise was, on the whole, kept. Some Father Christmases and trees decorated with tinsel sprinkled the half-empty room, essentially occupied by small groups of old people, some very old, who chewed carefully, consciously and even ferociously on dishes of traditional cuisine. There was wild boar, suckling pig and turkey; for dessert, of course, a patisserie yule log *à l'ancienne* was proposed by the house, whose polite and discreet waiters operated in silence, as if in a burns unit. Jed was a bit stupid, he realised, to offer his father such a meal. This dry, serious man, with a long and austere face, never seemed to have been taken by the pleasures of the table, and the rare times Jed had dined out with him, when he had needed to see him near his place of work, his father had chosen a sushi restaurant – always the same one. It was pathetic and vain to want to establish a gastronomical conviviality that had no *raison d'être*, and which had not even conceivably ever had one – his wife, while she was alive, had always hated cooking. But it was Christmas, and what else could you do? His father didn't seem interested in much anymore; he read less and less, and was utterly indifferent to questions of dress. He was, according to the director of the nursing home, 'reasonably integrated', which probably meant that he hardly said a word to anyone. For the time being, he chewed laboriously on his suckling pig, with about the same expression as if it

were a piece of rubber; nothing indicated that he wanted to break the lengthening silence, and Jed, being nervous (he should never have taken Gewürztraminer with the oysters – he had realised that from the moment he had ordered, white wine always made his mind fuzzy), looked frenetically for some subject that might lend itself to conversation. If he had been married, or at least had a girlfriend, *well, some kind of woman*, things would have happened very differently. Women are generally more at ease with these family affairs, it's sort of their basic speciality; even in the absence of real children, they are there, potentially, on the edge of the conversation, and it is a known fact that old people are interested in their grandchildren, whom they link to natural cycles or something. Well, there's a sort of emotion that manages to be born in their old heads: the son is the death of the father, certainly, but for the grandfather the grandson is a sort of rebirth or revenge, and that can be largely sufficient, at least for the duration of a Christmas dinner. Jed sometimes thought that he should hire an escort for these Christmas Eves, create a sort of mini-fiction; it would be enough to brief the girl a couple of hours beforehand; his father wasn't very curious about the details of the lives of others, no more than men in general.

In Latin countries, politics is enough for the conversational needs of middle- or old-aged males; it is sometimes replaced in the lower classes by sport. Among people particularly influenced by Anglo-Saxon values, politics is supplanted by economics and finance; literature can provide backup. But neither Jed nor his father had any real interest in economics, or politics for that matter. Jean-Pierre Martin approved overall of the way in which the country was led, and his son didn't have an opinion; however, by reviewing each ministry in turn they at least managed to keep the conversation going until the cheese trolley arrived.

Over the cheese course, Jed's father got slightly animated and asked him about his projects. Unfortunately, this time it was Jed who risked spoiling the atmosphere, because since his last painting, *Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons Dividing Up the Art Market*, he no longer felt much about art. He was going nowhere. There was a sort of force that had carried him for a year or two but was now dissipating, crumbling, but what was the point of saying all that to his father, who could do nothing about it. To tell the truth no one could; when faced with such a confession, people could only be slightly sad. They really don't amount to much, anyway, human relationships.

'I'm preparing a solo exhibition in the spring,' he finally announced. 'Well, in fact it's dragging on a bit. Franz, my gallerist, wants a writer for the catalogue. He thought of Houellebecq.'

'Michel Houellebecq?'

'Do you know him?' asked Jed, surprised. He would never have suspected that his father could still be interested in anything cultural.

'There's a small library in the nursing home; I've read two of his novels. He's a good author, it seems to me. He's pleasant to read, and he has quite an accurate view of society. Has he replied to you?'

'No, not yet …' Jed was now thinking as fast as he could. If someone as deeply paralysed in such a hopeless and mortal routine, someone as far down the path of darkness, down the Valley of the Shadow of Death, as his father was had noticed Houellebecq's existence, it was because there had to be something compelling about this author. He then remembered that he had failed to get in touch with Houellebecq by email, as Franz had asked him to several times already. And yet time was pressing. Given the date of Art Basel and the Frieze Art Fair, the exhibition had to be organised by April, or May at the latest, and you could hardly ask Houellebecq to write a catalogue text in a

fortnight. He was a famous writer, world-famous even, at least according to Franz.

His father's excitement had subsided, and he was chewing his Saint-Nectaire with as little enthusiasm as he had the suckling pig. It's no doubt through compassion that we imagine old people have a particularly good appetite, because we like to think that at least they have that left, when in the majority of cases the enjoyment of taste disappears irredeemably, along with the rest. Digestive problems and prostate cancer remain.

A few metres to their left, three octogenarian women seemed to be praying over their fruit salad – perhaps in homage to their dead husbands. One of them reached out towards her glass of champagne, then her hand fell onto the table; her chest was palpitating. After a few seconds she tried again, her hand shaking terribly, her face screwed up in concentration. Jed restrained himself from intervening, being in no position to help. Neither was the waiter himself, on duty only steps away, who was watching the operation carefully. This woman was now in direct contact with God. She was probably closer to ninety than eighty.

To go through all the motions, desserts were then served in turn. With resignation, Jed's father attacked his traditional yule log. There wasn't much longer to go now. Time passed bizarrely between them: although nothing was said, and the silence now permanently established over the table should have given the sensation of total gravity, it seemed that the seconds, and even the minutes, flowed with astonishing speed. Half an hour later, without even a thought really crossing his mind, Jed accompanied his father back to the taxi rank. It was only ten, but Jed knew that the other residents of the retirement home already deemed his father lucky: to have someone, for a few hours, to celebrate Christmas with. 'You have a good son …' This had already been pointed out to him, several times. On

entering the nursing home, the former head of the family – now, irrefutably, an old man – feels a bit like a child at boarding school. Sometimes, he receives visits: then it's happiness, he can discover the world, eat some Pepitos and meet Ronald McDonald. But, more often, he doesn't receive any: he then wanders around sadly, between the handball goalposts, on the bitumous ground of the deserted boarding school. He waits for liberation, an escape from all of it.

Back in his studio, Jed noticed that the boiler was still working, the temperature normal, even warm. He got partly undressed before stretching out on his mattress and falling asleep immediately, his brain completely empty.

He awoke suddenly in the middle of the night; the clock said 4:43. The room was hot, suffocatingly so. It was the noise of the boiler that had woken him, but not the usual banging noises; the machine now gave out a prolonged, low-pitched, almost infrasonic roar. He threw open the kitchen window, which was covered in frost, and the freezing air filled the room. Six storeys below, some piglike grunts troubled the Christmas night. He shut the window immediately. Most probably some tramps had got into the courtyard; the following day they would take advantage of the Christmas leftovers in the block's dustbins. None of the tenants would dare call the police to get rid of them – not on Christmas Day. It was generally the tenant on the first floor who ended up taking care of it – a woman aged about sixty, with hennaed hair, who wore garishly coloured pullovers, and whom Jed guessed was a retired psychoanalyst. But he hadn't seen her in the last few days. She was probably on holiday – unless she'd died suddenly. The tramps were going to stay for several days; the smell of their defecations would fill the courtyard, preventing anyone from opening the windows. To the tenants they came across as polite, even obsequious, but the fights

between them were ferocious, and generally ended with screams of agony rising to the night sky; someone would call an ambulance and a guy would be found bathed in blood, with an ear half ripped off.

Jed approached the boiler, which had gone silent, and carefully raised the flap over the control panel; immediately the machine uttered a brief roar, as if it felt threatened by the intrusion. An incomprehensible yellow light was flickering rapidly. Gently, millimetre by millimetre, Jed turned the intensity control leftwards. If things got worse, he still had the Croat's phone number; but was it still in service? He didn't want to 'stagnate in plumbing', he'd confessed candidly to Jed. His ambition, once he had 'made his pile', was to return home, to Croatia, more precisely the island of Hvar, to open a business renting out sea scooters. Incidentally, one of the last projects that his father had dealt with before retirement concerned an invitation to bid on the construction of a prestigious marina in Stari Grad, on Hvar, which was indeed beginning to become a celebrated destination; only last year Sean Penn and Angelina Jolie had been seen there, and Jed felt an obscure sense of human disappointment at the idea of this man abandoning plumbing, a noble craft, to rent out noisy and stupid machines to stuck-up rich kids living in the rue de la Faisanderie.

'But what is this place notable for?' asked the Internet portal of the isle of Hvar, before replying thus: 'There are meadows of lavender, old olive trees and vines in a unique harmony, and so the visitor who wants to get close to nature will first visit the small *konoba* (tavern) of Hvar instead of going to the most luxurious hotel, he will taste the local wine instead of champagne, he will sing an old folk song of the island and he will forget his daily routine.' That's probably what had seduced Sean Penn, and Jed imagined the dead season, the still mild October months,

the ex-plumber sitting peacefully over his seafood risotto; obviously this choice could be understood, even excused.

A little despite himself, he approached *Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons Dividing Up the Art Market*, which was standing on his easel in the middle of the studio, and dissatisfaction seized him again, still more bitterly. He realised he was hungry, which wasn't normal after the complete Christmas dinner he'd had with his father – starter, main course, cheese and dessert, nothing had been left out – but he felt hungry and so hot he could no longer breathe. He returned to the kitchen, opened a tin of cannelloni in sauce and ate them one by one, while looking morosely at his failed painting. Koons was undoubtedly not light enough, not ethereal enough – it would perhaps have been necessary to give him wings, like the god Mercury, he thought stupidly; there, with his pinstriped suit and salesman's smile, he reminded you a bit of Silvio Berlusconi.

On the ArtPrice ranking of the richest artists, Koons was world number 2; for a few years now, Hirst, ten years his junior, had taken his place at number 1. As for Jed, he had reached 593 ten years ago – but 17 in France. He had then, as the Tour de France commentators say, 'dropped to the bottom of the *classement*', before disappearing from it altogether. He finished the tin of cannelloni and opened an almost empty bottle of cognac. Lighting his ramp of halogen lamps to the maximum, he trained them on the centre of the canvas. On closer inspection, the night itself wasn't right: it didn't have that sumptuousness, that mystery we associate with nights on the Arabian peninsula; he should have used a deep blue, not ultramarine. He was making a truly shit painting. He seized a palette knife, cut open Damien Hirst's eye, and forced the gash wider; it was a canvas of tight linen fibres, and therefore very tough. Catching the sticky canvas with one hand, he tore it in one blow, tipping the easel over onto the floor. Slightly calmed, he stopped, looked at his hands, sticky with paint, and

finished the cognac before jumping feet first onto his painting, stamping on it and rubbing it against the floor until it became slippery. He ended up losing his balance and fell, the back of his head hitting the frame of the easel violently. He belched and vomited, and suddenly felt better, the fresh night air circulating freely on his face, and he closed his eyes contentedly: he had visibly reached the end of a cycle.

Part One

1

JED NO LONGER remembered when he had first begun to draw. No doubt all children draw, more or less, but as he didn't know any children, he wasn't sure. His only certainty was that he had begun by drawing flowers – in small jotters, with coloured pencils.

On Wednesday afternoons generally, and occasionally on Sundays, he had known moments of ecstasy, alone in the sunlit garden, while the babysitter telephoned her boyfriend of the moment. Vanessa was eighteen and in her first year studying economics at the University of Saint-Denis/Villetaneuse, and for a long time was the only witness to his first artistic endeavours. She found his drawings pretty, she told him sincerely, but she occasionally gave him a perplexed look. Little boys draw bloodthirsty monsters, Nazi insignia, and fighter planes (or, for the most advanced among them, cunts and cocks), rarely flowers.

Jed did not realise it then, nor did Vanessa, but flowers are only sexual organs, brightly coloured vaginas decorating the surface of the world, open to the lubricity of insects. Insects and men, and other animals too, seem to pursue a goal, their movements rapid and orientated, while flowers remain in the light, dazzling and fixed. The beauty of flowers is sad because they are fragile and destined for death, like anything on earth of course, but flowers are particularly fragile, and like animals their corpse is only a grotesque parody of their vital being, and their corpse, like that of an animal, stinks. You understand all of this once you have lived through the passing of the seasons, and as

for the withering of flowers, Jed had understood it himself from the age of five, and maybe before, as there were lots of flowers in the park surrounding the house in Raincy. A lot of trees too, and the branches of the trees shaken by the wind were perhaps one of the first things he'd noticed when he was pushed around in his pram by an adult woman (his mother?), apart from the clouds and the sky. The animalistic will to live manifests itself in rapid transformations – a moistening of the hole, a stiffness of the stem, and the emission of seminal liquid – but he would only discover that later, on a balcony in Port-Grimaud, via Marthe Taillefer. The flower's will to live manifests itself in the dazzling spots of colour that break the greenish banality of the natural landscape, as well as the generally transparent banality of the urban landscape – or at least in municipalities in bloom.

In the evening, Jed's father would come home. He was called 'Jean-Pierre', or that's what his friends called him. Jed called him 'Dad'. He was a good father, and was considered as such by his friends and associates; a widower needs a lot of courage to bring up a child alone. Jean-Pierre had been a good father at first, but was less so now; he paid for a babysitter more often, and frequently ate out (most often with clients, sometimes with associates, and more and more rarely with friends, for the time of friendship was beginning to decline for him; he no longer believed that you could have friends, that these friendly relationships could really count in the life of a man, or change his destiny). He returned home late and didn't even try to sleep with the babysitter, unlike most men; he would listen to the day's events, smile at his son, and pay the sum requested. He was the head of a broken family, and had no plans to mend it. He earned a lot of money: chief executive of a construction business, he had specialised in the creation of all-inclusive seaside resorts; he had clients in Portugal, the Maldives, and on San Domingo.

From this period Jed had kept his jotters, which contained all of his drawings. They were all dying gently, unhurriedly (the paper was not of very good quality, nor were the pencils). They might last two or three centuries more: things and beings have a lifespan.

Probably dating back to Jed's early adolescence was a gouache entitled *Haymaking in Germany* (quite mysteriously, for Jed didn't know Germany, and had never attended *a fortiori* or participated in 'haymaking'). Although the light obviously evoked high summer, snow-clad mountains closed the scene; the peasants loading hay with their pitchforks and the donkeys harnessed to their carts were treated with bright solid colours; it was as beautiful as a Cézanne, or indeed anything. The question of beauty is secondary in painting: the great painters of the past were considered such when they had developed a world view that was both coherent and innovative, which means that they always painted in the same way, using the same methods and operating procedures to transform the objects of the world into pictorial ones, in a matter that was specific to them and had never been used before. Such was the classical vision of painting, the one to which Jed had been initiated during his high-school studies, and which was based on the concept of *figuration* – to which Jed, during a few years of his career, would return, and which, even more bizarrely, finally brought him fortune and fame.

Jed devoted his life (or at least his professional life, which quite quickly became *the whole of his life*) to *art*, to the production of representations of the world, in which people were never meant to live. He could thus produce critical representations – critical to a certain extent, for the general movement of art as of society as a whole led in Jed's youth to an acceptance of the world that was occasionally enthusiastic, but most often nuanced with irony. His father in no way had this freedom of choice; he

had to produce inhabitable configurations, in an absolutely unironic way, where people were destined to live, and have the possibility of finding pleasure, at least during their holidays. He was held responsible for any grave malfunctioning of the machine for living – if a lift collapsed, or the toilets were blocked, for example. He was not responsible for an invasion of the residence by a brutal, violent population uncontrolled by the police and established authorities; his responsibility was mitigated in the case of an earthquake.

The father of his father had been a photographer – his own origins being lost in a sort of unsavoury sociological pond, stagnating since time immemorial, essentially made up of farmworkers and poor peasants. What had brought this man from a miserable background face to face with the first techniques of photography? Jed had no idea, nor did his father; but he had been the first of a long line to get out of the pure and simple reproduction of the same. Mostly he had earned his living by photographing weddings, occasionally communions, or the end-of-year fetes of village schools. Living in that long-since abandoned and marginalised area that is the Creuse, he had had almost no opportunity to photograph any openings of buildings, or visits by national polit icians. It was a mediocre craft, that paid badly, and his son’s access to the architectural profession was already a serious social promotion – without mentioning his later successes as an entrepreneur.

By the time he entered the Beaux-Arts de Paris, Jed had given up drawing for photography. Two years earlier, he had discovered in his grandfather’s attic a large-format camera, a Linhof Master Technika Classic; he’d no longer been using it when he retired, but it was in perfect working condition. He had been fascinated by this object, which was strange, heavy and prehistoric, but with an exceptional production quality. Slightly groping in the dark, he had

finally learned to master tilt and shift, as well as the Scheimpflug principle, before launching himself into what was to take up almost all his artistic studies: the systematic photography of the world's manufactured objects. He carried out his work in his bedroom, generally with natural lighting. Suspension files, handguns, diaries, printer cartridges, forks: nothing escaped his encyclopedic ambition, which was to constitute an exhaustive catalogue of the objects of human manufacturing in the industrial age.

If, by its grandiose and maniacal, in fact demented, character, this project won him the respect of his teachers, it did not enable him in any way to join any of the groups that formed around him on the basis of a common aesthetic ambition, or more prosaically an attempt at collectively entering the art market. However, he made a few friendships, although not very deep ones, without realising at what point they would prove ephemeral. He also had a few love affairs, none of which lasted long. The day after he graduated, he understood that he was now going to be quite alone. His six years of work had produced more than eleven thousand photos. Stored in TIFF format, with a lowest-resolution JPEG, they were easily held on a Western Digital 640 GB hard disk, which weighed a little under 200 grams. He carefully put away his large-format camera and his lenses (he had at his disposal a Rodenstock Apo-Sironar of 105 mm, which opened to 5.6, and a Fujinon of 180 mm, which also opened to 5.6), then considered the remainder of his possessions. There was his laptop, his iPod, a few clothes, a few books: not a lot, in fact; it would easily fit into two suitcases. The weather was fine in Paris. He hadn't been unhappy in this bedroom or very happy, either. His lease ran out in a week's time. Hesitating to leave, he made one last walk around the area, on the banks of the lake by l'Arsenal, then called his father for help in moving out.