WEST (OUEST)

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It is hard to believe that two images, let alone two people, could meet and create a strange mixture, perhaps even an explosion.

One day your family sends you some very old photographs, of the kind that are a faded black and white, somewhat blurry. You glance at them, a casual or bemused glance, your little ancestors, nothing more.

But one of them, all the same, intrigues you for a moment, not long: a scene in the countryside, an imposing fellow armed with a rifle and, at his side, a black dog, all muscle, rearing up on his hind legs.

You think: it's odd that three or four generations would have wanted to keep a photograph and pass it on when it is so clearly botched: the main subject is poorly framed, off balance: his dog prevented him from striking the expected pose. And that's it.

But that's not it. The next day, a spring morning in 2004, you pass by a newspaper stand and what do you see displayed, or what do you think you see…well, do you see it, yes or no? There it is, your family photo, there, everywhere you look.

You say to yourself: no, that's impossible, stupid. You buy a pile of papers and dive into them. It may not be your photo, but it looks an awful lot like it. In any case, it's exactly the same dog, the same posture, the same bulging muscles, the same black muzzle, pointed, reaching forward. Reaching toward what? Toward a naked, terrified prisoner. You've happened on one of the first published images of the prison of Abu Ghraib.

You could leave it at that: one dog looks like another. But something compels you to go back to your little cardboard box of photographs, over a century old now, to compare them; just to compare.

In the beginning you find it amusing: the two animals truly could be superimposed—the same size, the same allure, a powerful mongrel, both caught by the lens in the same movement, an identical ferocity in their jaws, their eyes.

And then you don't find it so amusing any more. It seems as if—something you've never experienced until now—the meeting of the two images has caused a mutual reaction. A sort of explosive mixture: the more recent photograph colors the older one with a new light. Where you once thought you were looking at an innocent rural scene—a gamekeeper from the old days, with his proud black companion—you now see a dangerous scene: a man looks as if he is fighting off a ferocious beast who suddenly sprang into the photographer's field. Despite the blurriness of his features—or because of them—his fright is obvious, as is his anger, ready to explode; a scarcely restrained violence.

You say to yourself that you are exaggerating, that you would never have interpreted these details in such a way if it had not been for the Abu Ghraib photographs. Your gaze is simply under the influence.

No doubt; but then before long you recall what people used to say about the gamekeeper, who stayed in their memories as the most impressive member of your family: a man who nearly went mad, at the end of his life, shouting at imaginary dogs, weeping and begging they be kept from entering his room.

So you say, Thus, my new way of looking at this picture is not as out of place as I thought. A gamekeeper who ended up being frightened of dogs.

You put the two images down side by side. You note that their encounter continues to have its effect, the encounter of two dogs who have become one, above all, with the weight of fear that the dog will bite, the most frightening threat of all, more frightening than a man, about whom you can assume that he would always, at the last moment, regain control; not so, with the animal. And you feel the threat, you are that naked prisoner, you are that gamekeeper armed like an American soldier.

You would never have thought that two images could meet in this way, changing each other, virtually transforming your way of seeing things, perhaps your life.

You say to yourself: the story of Abu Ghraib, the prisoners, the torturer wardens, the dogs: here it is, at the heart of things, in all the papers, the trials, wherever you look, we're all familiar with it, it's our story. And what about the story of that man, so angry and fearful, next to his dog?

The poorly framed gamekeeper is called Lambert. His little plot of earth, confined on the photo, is a place I know, it's where I come from, the West. The West for Lambert in the photo, his stories in the time of the dogs, it all started with the château. The name is on the back of the photo: Château des Perrières. Whoever wrote that detail on the photo was proud of the fact, you can tell. Châteaux have maintained their influence over people's minds, long past the Revolution. Lambert is not the lord, obviously; he was in service at the château.

When he started there, it was still in the days of the old Baron de l'Aubépine des Perrières. Lambert's mother had served at the château—chambermaid—for five years during her youth, and the masters viewed her kindly, before she got married to a former Revolutionary soldier. People didn't like that kind of past out there in the West, but the man was cunning enough to make them forget. And he had the good sense to die young. When the estate gamekeeper died, Lambert's widow found out and she encouraged her son, just look at this fine lad, lungs fit to make an entire kennel quake with fear. No need to force things, the Lambert boy, son of the Fournier girl above all, they were trustworthy folk.

There he stands in front of the pack, twenty hunting dogs, capable of setting out on their own and bringing back the entire forest to lay at his feet, if they felt like it: they were given orders on principle, they knew what to do. That was the problem, they knew only too well, it left you with the feeling that they were going over your head, obeying a dead man, the old gamekeeper.

He brought in some new blood, so there would be some who would obey only him, and anyway most of the dogs were getting old, like the old master who wasn't long for this world, or the

old gamekeeper who was already dead. He barely had the time to bring in the new blood, a few years or so, you can't get rid of the dead just like that, before there was new blood at the head of the estate.

The young baron, that is: forty years old already, hadn't spoken to his father for at least fifteen. People no longer really knew whether the father had driven the son away or whether the son had fled his father. Their discord, at least, was fact. De l'Aubépine the Elder had taken a dislike to the Younger very early on. He was a man from the old days, affable as can be, loved by all, but he had this strangeness about him, he hated his son. If the opportunity arose—at table, during the hunt, on a walk—to put him down, he never missed it. You're utterly worthless… No point in asking that fellow for an opinion, or a favor, or any sign of wit or heart…You'd come up with nothing. And he was a sickly sort as well. A lad that age, constantly ailing…It couldn't be anything other than ill will. A sickly constitution? And why? No, no, it was pure nastiness, that's what I think. People sometimes said he was exaggerating, called the old man a crusher of sons. You could understand, too, when you saw the boy walking around with that moping expression on his face, and the way he looked bored in company was more like scorn. Could be he was not a man, that odd creature, as his father said over and over: You're so low, you don't even reach the height of a clog on the most humble peasant in the West. They're strong lads, they're all above you, in height and complexion and strength. You put me to shame. Not a one of them would want you at their side when I'm leading them.

Monsieur de l'Aubépine had been a leader of the Chouans from the time of the Revolution right up to the last Chouan resistance in the Maine, in 1831; an energetic man, and proud of it. So to have a puny son who spent half his time in bed, running away from people, to be sure it was cause for despair. Despite the similarity in the shape of their nose and mouth, he was not past openly expressing his doubts as to his paternity. The mother was no longer there, already, to protest or defend her child. The Elder humiliated the Younger for over twenty years, obliging him to hide away

in a dark corner the moment he said he was sick: I don't want to see it. You'll come back when you've got the health of a man. That was his idea of medicine. Over the years the child labored to hide the signs of illness. The father was no fool, he always arranged things so he'd have his son well in hand. He gave the orders for everything, telling him over and over that he was incapable of doing anything on his own. The boy wanted to study? Art? Art history? Tastes for sickly sorts, out of the question. Law, at a pinch. He failed? No surprise, worth less than nothing. The son endured, said nothing for a long time, but those who knew him back then said they sometimes came across him in the woods, screaming, breaking branches, smashing the log refuges to bits; or over at the farms kicking the pigs, with the same anguished cries; and after all that, back at the château, he'd hang his head, broken, oblivious to the insults and the inevitable slurs. In the end it was the father himself who imposed marriage upon him. You're of age, and you are, alas, the only one to bear my name, I have someone for you. At first the son ransacked a chicken coop over at the Gerzeau place, in Clos-Morin, people thought an exceptionally large fox had put a spell on the hens. The Gerzeau lass had seen him, she told her father, they preferred not to get involved with the squire's business. The son had barely had time to brush off the barnyard feathers. His father called him into the library, to inform him of the details of the wedding, date, future life, money: he gave in. She's too good for you, said the father, dismissing him; it's a great privilege I'm granting you. It's not for you, it's for the name.

Talk about a privilege, a woman like that, his cousin thrice removed, from the Labrunie branch, Jeanne, as tough as the old Chouan leader, the same tone giving orders. It was said that she became the father's eyes upon his son, a crusher of husbands. When the quarrel broke out, the Younger rebelling at last, beginning to resist his father, spending time away from les Perrières, or driven away, his wife didn't just let him go like that. She needed to exert her authority, he still

accepted her. You never knew if he was going to break a window or a banister, in Paris, to find some relief. In any event, they were held to be a strange coupling. The oddest thing of all, Madame de l'Aubépine continued to visit her father-in-law, alone, at the château des Perrières, and she'd leave again with her orders, dominating Monsieur de l'Aubépine the Younger, back in Paris, in the name of the father. The advantage of this arrangement was that, thanks to her, the son continued to enjoy the use of the family fortune; but he paid a heavy price for his money.

Lambert came later to the Perrières estate, and he had the opportunity to meet this lady several times, towards the end; she wasn't ugly, but she was brittle, severe; she would spend a week or two at the château three times a year. The servants would murmur, smiling, that at least the old baron had something to share with his son. Gossip, perhaps, but everybody witnessed a confirmation of sorts when his daughter-in-law died unexpectedly, and as they were wont to say in town: Monsieur de l'Aubépine didn't outlive her by more than three months. A coincidence, granted, but to what degree. It was said that he didn't recover from her loss, and particularly the funeral: the son had managed to forbid the father from attending. No one could get over it. Something had changed for certain. The crusher of sons never recovered. It was a simple thing, in the end. People wondered why the lad had put up with it for so long. There was nothing really to understand, that's the way things were among the gentlemen. And then the father, he was so well-liked hereabouts, a real master of the West, hard but fair, maybe it's best not to lift the lid on the stewpot, not even a touch, when it's on the fire.

Monsieur de l'Aubépine the Younger underwent a change with these deaths one after the other and the pleasure of his new-found freedom. As quickly as he could he came to take stock of his inheritance. He assured everyone that he'd never stopped loving the Perrières estate. He decided to settle in his own home, it truly was his home, so he said. You got the impression he wanted to take his revenge.

It was already an ordeal for the house servants to see him arrive. First of all, they were no better than dogs, they'd rather obey a dead man than a living one; and then they'd always felt the father was in the right, by principle, he was the master after all, and what a master. But the son was coming home, nothing to be done, it was his château, his woods, his pond, his three farms, two in the west, where the land was better, and one in the south. You had to either leave or just get used to it. Getting used to it was harder. Those who'd known him closely in his youth preferred to go find work elsewhere. The farmers didn't have such close ties with the château, they wouldn't just up and leave their farms like that. The only ones in the house who hadn't known Monsieur de l'Aubépine the Younger were the Lamberts, so they were prepared to wait and see. They tried not to mind all the gossip…Fifteen years had gone by, people change…They made an effort. In spite of all that, they couldn't help thinking from the start that he was a strange bird: he didn't know how to handle himself at times, the way the old lord would have. In the lands of the West you couldn't ask too much of people, even sixty years after the Revolution they would have preferred for the young masters to be replicas of the old ones. The masters at Perrières, the father and son feuding for over fifteen years, you could understand that they were different from each other, but how far could you take your understanding? You've got the pride of your trade. And what does the gamekeeper expect from his new master? What does he expect from him the day of his return, or even the next day? He expects him to ask for a thorough visit of the kennel, show us our dogs, Lambert. And then? The lord, after fifteen years' absence, ought to stroke this dog, rub the chops of that one, check the cold nose on this one or that one, touch the silky red fur, guess the age of each of them, admire the drape of the ears, if they fall well, the flair of that little one, there, run the Artesians. Show he's master of the entire estate, and the hounds with it. But nothing; who could believe, not even turning his head when he walked by the dogs, by the entrance to the outbuildings, and they're making such a racket behind the fence. He even asks for the big watchdog to be taken in when he walks by, that's

Rajah, a fine monster, well it's clear, he doesn't want to see him either, he's afraid of him. Lambert is beginning to understand the crusher of sons.

So the master doesn't want to know about his dogs. So what else might he like to see instead? His servants. How they are housed in the manor. Their conditions, as he puts it. And should it matter, their conditions? He arrives, asks to visit the gamekeeper's lodge, a hundred yards from the château, a place his father would never have gone. But this one wanted to know how Lambert's wife, Eugénie, managed her kitchen, poor woman, she hardly got any notice he was coming, she thought she'd die, it was like standing there naked. In he comes, takes his hat off, but no good day or good evening; he takes the tour, pushes open the door at the back, the second room, Eugénie would fall to her knees if Lambert weren't holding her up; it's dark in there, fortunately; the master comes back out, not a word. Their daughter walks by, seven or eight years old at that point, Magdeleine, he stops her, takes her by the chin, wriggles her jaw, to the right, to the left, taps her on her head, the way he ought to have done with the dogs, that's what he was doing to the little girl. He didn't say, Good dog, but it's every bit as if he had: She's got fine skin, how odd, and white. She's not like a local girl. He looks at her a bit overlong, it's embarrassing, but that's all. No, it's not all. Before going out, he stares intently at Eugénie's belly: she was expecting the boy. It's due Christmas-time, says Lambert, but her condition doesn't stop her from being a brave woman. The baron raises his hand as if to say, What do I care. That's not a master's gesture, either. It worries the gamekeeper, he tells his wife they're off to a bad start with a man like that, an odd bird, that's the truth, and this is only the beginning.