

## The Exquisite Corpse

It was a magical time in Paris that year, of course with hindsight, we recognise the names, and their subsequent achievements, but then they were iconoclasts, ignored or disliked. Society felt them to be irrelevant. I first came upon the Exquisite Corpse in a letter, the handwriting was of course appalling, and the french demotic, and everyone knows what the Exquisite Corpse signifies. But on re-reading the letter it became clear to me, that these words had been chosen carefully. There was an additional Exquisite Corpse beyond the famous poem. There was just this single reference, but on checking what else had been written, diaries of the time, it became clear to me, that Eric Satie, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Giorgio De Chirico, had met on numerous occasions that summer. Either altogether, or in pairs, they had met in a variety of places, and times, it seemed almost as if there was a deliberate surrealism to their choices and methods, A man carrying a fish, seeks out a woman carrying a knife prominently, There was a phantom project, something that was completely unsaid, but once postulated, it was clear that they had been working on it together, it explained everything so perfectly. Of course no one would believe me, no matter how exquisite the scholarship, no matter how detailed my conjectures, it remained a pack of cards built upon a shifting sand. No one believed, because no one wanted to believe. The iconoclasts had been neutered, we embraced their iconoclasm, their rebellion, but now they were safely dead, and in a box, their iconoclasm was safely dead and in a box. But no, they had this last surprise for us. I had already immersed myself in the period, the subject, beyond any reasonable definition of scholarship. Now I went beyond that, it was beyond obsession, I moved to Paris, I assembled together everything of the period, living in a pension belonging to one of my sainted triumvirate. I printed out papers of the time, established entire streetscapes that they passed routinely, spent a day sitting as Satie had in a gallery of the Louvre, at an evening reception I rushed into the garden to relieve myself. I became an insane amalgam of my surrealist heroes. The brutish looking Apollinaire,

following some absinthe, and an inadvertant collision with a car, my head was shaved and bandaged, ramrod straight I was starting to look like a former military man, fresh back from trenches. These things always end badly, I was losing my grip on reality, and gripping tight onto the smell of something else, a fiction, the fiction, a mythical surrealist novel. The more obsessed I became, the more I could smell and hear the cadences of this work of fiction, my life would reach a drunken crescendo when I finally tracked down this missing work, amidst the rotting piles of papers, smeared with remains dried and discoloured beyond any recognition. I ate little and that obsessively, I slept fitfully, my night-time thoughts seemed significant beyond words, but their insights were lost to me when I woke. My thoughts were in vernacular french, peppered with phrases from the previous century. The shouts of shopkeepers, and drunken songs of the era pervaded my thought as my eyelids drooped. I would have given my very life to track down my mythic treasure, the surrealist novel that was unread and unknown, the product of some of the greatest minds who had ever lived. My cash was nearly exhausted, as was the patience of those around me, when ... I recollect it as clearer than a memory, that sort of hyper-reality you get in an accident, when time seems to slow down. Perhaps I was asleep, perhaps I dreamed, but it was more real to me than anything that I had ever experienced, truth that cut through my body, grabbed me by a tender throat. Before me stood the three authors of the Exquisite Corpse, Guillaume, Eric and Giorgio, they sat easily in the wooden chairs of my kitchen, and handed me the roughly bound manuscript that I had for so long sought. I read through it with a mixture of feverish excitement, and childlike grace, trying to ration out the pleasures, as a child slowly opens presents. It was all that I had expected, it was life, it was death, it was passion and lethargy, it was a life hard lived, it was a life easily given. The book was perfection, it was truly the mythic work that he had sought. In no time he had finished it, and he knew, like he recognised gravity, that there was only one thing to do, and looking at his two friends, he knew that they knew too, the idea of the book was more powerful than words, the concept of the book was

invincible, the reality did not disappoint, but it was prosaic, it required translation and explanation, together the three surrealists, lifted the lid from the woodburning stove, gently folded the manuscript and pushed it down into the embers of the fire, it caught, the smell of burning paper filled the room, light smoke caught in their throats, they threw back their heads and laughed like surrealists at the magnificent insanity of it all.