

# ARTHUR'S WHIMS

Hervé Guibert



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translated by Daniel Lupo

SPURL EDITIONS

## THE DREAM

It was at that indistinct hour – but it wasn't an hour, just a short moment that nevertheless permeated consciousness, gathered it, threatened it – it was in that difficult zone between wakefulness and sleep, right before you fall down a trapdoor, where you don't know whether you're yourself, or a fold in the sheet, or the soul of an animal, or your own fetus or corpse, or a sow's grunt, or somebody's death rattle.

A dream traced the full arc of his fate in vain. The story dissolved as soon as he moved his head; he could only grasp its opaque remains. Drenched in sweat, as he was about to lose his footing at the edge of a gutter, in that hazy moment when he could have believed he was the soul of a pig, he got out of bed.

Unable to sleep, he put on a shirt, breathed in the night air, made sure the slingshot was in his pocket. Walking through the deserted streets in the thick of night, he became much too hot. He took off his shirt, held it like a standard over his shoulder, and kept walking until he encountered a shadowy figure in a cloak. He wondered what that man could be doing out at that hour, and in a cloak in that heat, whether he was a lecher or a factotum, whether the cloak was a disguise or a uniform, and out of a sense of modesty he couldn't explain, he put his shirt back on and stopped himself from looking back at the man, who had passed by him, but not before noticing two sooty rows of oakum or tow over his eyelashes. He walked up to the spot in town where the main road opened out, that square he returned to every afternoon with his slingshot in his pocket to shoot two or three starlings. He situated himself beneath the thicket that was rustling the

most, from which he could hear the most mind-numbing squawks. At first he listened to them eagerly, as if gobbling them up, but after a while he felt like a victim of that noise. So he avenged himself: he looked up, stretched the elastic, and shot a stone into the chirping thicket. He loved seeing the falling mass, which still seemed to be flying in order to rise up one last time before crashing down with a feathery little sound. Because the taxidermist wouldn't want it, he immediately destroyed any bird with a shattered beak or whose coat was too badly bruised by the stone, as if he were annihilating a terminally ill child or brother or friend begging for death, leaving the soles of his shoes caked in blood. Or he just threw it in a garbage bag. But he loved touching the bird when it was still trembling, gripping it until he could feel the rush of its blood and its heart's dry farts. It gave him the pleasure of someone who's eaten their fill, followed by an intense disgust due to the temperature and dampness of the body, which led him to throw it quickly into his game bag, pick up another stone, retwist the string, and release it in one go. Sometimes, when he was a bit drunk, he fancied himself a musician while performing this dreadful task, since it involved strings and the will to change the sounds around him. But usually it wasn't he who filled the bag and scampered off to the taxidermist's – he had his apprentice, his beater, a depraved boy named Bichon. The taxidermist would weigh the birds like candied fruit, scrape off the sugars, the fat, with tweezers, and pay for them by weight. Then he would insert lightbulbs in the birds' bellies, making fairground lanterns of them.

Bichon wasn't there to see the three careless birds Arthur shot at dawn, to place them still twitching in his rags or sprinkle them with caresses in his linens. Arthur had never really looked at a bird before. He had to rely on his mouth. He placed his lips on the pink spot beneath the bird's beak where the stone had pierced it, then tried to make it fly again by stretching its wings and throwing it in the air. But this was just a cruel game. The man in the cloak returned



from afar to offer him money, but when he came near him Arthur growled like a mastiff, causing the cloak to spin around in a panicked about-face. Nobody could see him; he usually needed to hide in that spot because his job was illegal, like a smuggler's. (Bichon was still asleep beneath his yellowed sheets, his cheek pressed against the rancid stain on the pillow.) Nobody could see Arthur, but he didn't take advantage of that. He watched two birds creeping across the ground, flapping their little wings like amputees in order to escape him. He wasn't that rotten, he knew others who did worse, who had their hooks, their needles, their bottle openers, who tore out the eyes to make rings out of them. He collected the birds with pious movements, as if intending to bury or cremate them. With his three little victims stuffed in the loose pockets where he put his stolen food, he went back home to bed, lulled to sleep by the final quiverings of the birds against his thigh.

## BICHON APPEARS

In the morning, Bichon came into the room and watched him sleep. He brought with him a small bottle filled with a sticky substance. In one day they'd decimated an entire portion of the garden. After stretching out some lift nets they rented from some fishermen, they spread birdlime over all the branches they could reach, but the birds stayed away from the branches, and the paste tore off some skin from Bichon's fingertips. Arthur had fallen asleep without bothering to take off his clothes. Bichon was disgusted by his bulging, bloody pockets. Though Arthur often slept fully clothed, his body seemed too massive to Bichon, so powerful and tense even as he dreamed. Frightened, he ran out of the room.

The night before their great bird massacre, which would allow them to buy their boat, they were too excited to sleep. They prepared all night long, chewing on those foul-smelling roots the pharmacist sold on the sly to schoolchildren during exams. They tightened the mesh of the seaweed-scented nets using needles, dusted them off, and threw them over the treetops, which scared away most of the birds. Their hunt was pitiful. Only the drabest birds bit the lime; the taxidermist didn't take any that didn't have at least one bright color.

Arthur went to see his boat every day. Though it was by no means beautiful, he dreamed of owning it. It wasn't worth much, since its wood was rotting, but he would need a lot of birds to buy it, colorful ones, probably males. He still hadn't told Bichon the reason for the massacres. He lied to him about it, wanting to surprise him.

Bichon lived alone and never bathed. The grandmother who adopted him was no longer able to climb the stairs leading to his attic

bedroom, which he'd decorated with their unsold trophies and all the photos of Arthur he could get. The photos were rare, as Arthur hated getting his picture taken. He always refused to visit Bichon's place, though the door was open to him at all hours of the day and night. Whenever Bichon told him this with an almost wild look, Arthur would immediately call him a bird, and Bichon knew how affectionate Arthur was with birds once they were in his pocket.

Arthur finally got out of bed, unaware that Bichon had come by. He went right away to see Mr. Falconnet to ask him how much his fridges could accommodate in a week, thinking he could hasten the purchase of the boat. He and Bichon washed the nets in fresh water, but they retained that seaweed stench that drove the birds away. They had to return them, having spent nearly all their money on the rental. They thought of making large nets by sewing together the mesh grocery bags of all the mothers and sisters in town. At the market, they stole several bags filled with potatoes, which they dumped out in a vacant lot. They took a risk and spent the last of their money on a new brand of birdlime advertised in a magazine, and Arthur began dreaming up traps that didn't exist. He made several spinning slingshots riddled with fish hooks, then Bichon coerced Arthur into not using them. Bichon was an acolyte of disastrous tenderness.

## THE HIPPOPOTAMUS'S TUTU

Bichon's grandmother died (she wasn't his real grandmother, but another woman), and Arthur had an extravagant new whim. Having lost interest in birds, he started thinking about apes. He wanted to set up a breeding farm, perform transplants. Out of sheer mania he bought himself an ape mask, a horrible face made of pressed cardboard with strips of blue fur sewn onto it, like two goatees. Bichon tried to outdo him with a buttoned glove, a single, mysterious glove he made no secret of. Arthur hated gloves. To him they were meant for stranglers.

Just when he had enough money to buy the boat, Arthur noticed it was taking on water and its hull needed more than just a patching-up. He set his sights on another, more unusual object: a hippopotamus that a street performer had decided to sell to punish it for its gluttony. In fact, the hippopotamus was about to die any week and didn't have any vices; the street performer had searched for and found a sufficiently extravagant reason to chase away any suspicion of greed. But the hippopotamus wasn't transportable, and Arthur wanted to travel. So he went back to birds, bigger ones this time, whose warbling was highly valued in the capital cities. Armed with tealights, he and Bichon went to some forests where they could find them. Bichon had to spend several days trying out whistles and mounting camouflage helmets on branches. Hawks and eagles were their first targets. But before the great forest massacre, Arthur changed his mind and went back to the hippopotamus, thinking such an animal could, in any event, attract many onlookers. But he also thought that in order for the attraction to be amusing, the animal

couldn't be displayed in the nude, since he wasn't going to have it jumping through a hoop or just galloping around. He thought dressing it up in some castoffs would make people laugh. As it happened, there was a charity sale in the village that week: Lady Curlers, the mayor's wife, was selling the personal attire and stage costumes of a prima ballerina who had come back to her hometown to die. Going through the objects on display, Arthur became infatuated with a frayed pink tutu. He had Bichon take out some of the stitches so it would fit the hippopotamus (the ballerina had gained weight, but not to that extent). Unwisely, Arthur attached the hippopotamus to a cord that wasn't very sturdy. The animal didn't like its finery and kept turning back to tear out the last scraps of it, wetting it so much that it dripped onto the sand in the narrow enclosure Arthur had set up in the public garden. When the hippopotamus broke the cord, everyone thought it was going to escape, but it only took one step backward, and against all expectations, to the insurance agent's delight, it still didn't die. Arthur bought a switch to tame it.



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**Arthur's Whims** is the tale of "a modern saint," a love story born of a childhood dream of being "alone on a boat with a boy, a friend." Arthur and his beloved Bichon – a young man who, after drinking Arthur's tears, becomes pregnant with his child – drift through a stream of identities and circumstances: birdcatchers for a French taxidermist; sailors shipwrecked in an ice fortress; explorers of the Isles of Traitors, Babies, and Sadness; famous magicians in Oklahoma; religious and medical marvels. It is an anarchic, outrageous novel, now available in English for the first time. This edition includes Hervé Guibert's essay "The Bear," in which he compares his books to rooms in a house, writing: "*Arthur's Whims* would be the library of the house, and the bedroom of a child who will never be." It is "a true adventure novel in the tradition of the genre, or what I believed to be its tradition, with great journeys, disasters, shipwrecks, cataclysms."

**Hervé Guibert** was a French photographer, critic, and author. Born in 1955, he published works of autofiction, novels, short stories, and essays, including many on photography. His writing was often deeply personal, ironic, and centered on illness and the body. Guibert died from complications of AIDS in 1991, at the age of thirty-six.

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Fiction / French Literature

\$17.50

ISBN 978-1-943679-14-0



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