

Willow Sheridan Rode Voltaire

Willow Sheridan rode Voltaire through the woods and swamps and along the white dry roads whose powdery puffs of dust, aroused by the precise jabs of Voltaire's hooves, made her think of a woman making biscuits. Entering the meridian of the day from the no-time of the swamp was like going into the heart of a firecracker forever arrested at the zenith of its flare: summer did not smite her, or whomp her on the skull, or sting her pores with sudden sweat; it burnt her white, clean down to her bones, in an attack too swift for sensation; it recorded her upon itself, within itself: the negative of a thirteen year old girl without shadows so that it was she who happened to the heat and not the heat that happened to her. Voltaire, insulated against such phenomena by the lack of imagination that is ultimately the greatest wisdom, neither slacked nor hurried. His left eye contained the static picture of food, his right eye was a blank reserved for the registration of snakes. That the burden of his back was summer-bleached bones sporting wild red hair was not a thing he could ever know, anymore than he could ever know that the bones sometimes thought of themselves as being named Ivy instead of Willow; anymore than he could know that, on days of a special aura, he carried the bones of Willow to a trysting place, a ten mile journey, and returned with the bones of Ivy. Willow knew that he did not feel the difference on those special days, and, as Ivy returning, it grieved her: she saw it then not as the lack of imagination which is wisdom but as the lack of perception which is death. As Ivy, she would speak to him in a different, older voice, would sit him in the manner of an earlier time, would think thoughts of fear about a lover maimed in a

World War and hanged in a child's swing, and about how her mind exploded the wall between sanity and madness when she found him dead; onward Voltaire marched into the swamp, the perfect soldier intent on duty, her explosiveness slung on his back more reassuring than anything else to him.

At Corinth River, which summer had leached through its ashes until only a distillate liquor remained held in the basins of rocks, Willow, dismounting, testing with a hand newly fleshed by the shade and an eye once more positive, chose a pool of comparative coolness through which the current—the river's living blood—still coursed. Ritualistically—for nature was her religion—she drank from a cupped hand, sprinkled the remaining drops on her traitor's hair, and directed Voltaire to drink too but not too much.

From the river she led him to a lane as weedy as a phalanx of widows (at that juncture her thoughts always became a commingling of terms of death and war, frequently subtle beyond her everyday competence, as though the person whose emotional dictation she took did not recognize that war had survivors or that death occurred by any other means) and they parted with their feet the burdock and polk and milkweed and wild rose briars and bent aside the Queen Anne's lace as carefully as though they searched for a marker among a grave-gardener's thoughtful cultivation.

The lane opened into the ruins of a garden predominated by blowzy roses that thrust faces as outlandish as a Capuchin monkey's from the low thick foliage of trees. The groundcover once consigned to the base of a fountain wandered, orderless as an amnesiac, over paths whose gravel, too long the sun's flint, had succumbed to the lure of darkness perpetual; from its dense billows of green, spiky poddy things stood apparently on point, tensile as swords. The effect of the garden was of a weapon only half-sheathed, its blade emiered on the wheel of weather. Willow was committed to the garden so that even its horrors were homey to her, if not truly beautiful, but its most bizarre fixture, a sundial protected forever from duty by a branchy evergreen, was to her the garden's essence made concrete: if time could not advance here, and since time must have motion to be a dimension, might it not go backward? She always put it forth as a proposition, formally, for the garden's approval; it was like the reading of anti-minutes, a calling of the meeting to disorder.

From the ruins, the house rose steep and white as a painted

mountain, its state of perfect repair a symbol of man's unchanging reproach to profligate nature. Willow and Voltaire skirted its chilly slope, following a grassy alley marked off on the south by a line of poplars—a bowling green in the eighteenth century. At the rear of the long, high house Willow led Voltaire through a gate of iron-bound oak, hinges muttering of age, into a little garden like a room with brick walls. The grass was long and juicy there, with no weed among it; only the little brown husks of last year's apples, insect hollowed and wind-dried—small shelters with no clue as to their architect—and a few hard green knobs of this year's crop like wind-droppings. She left him there, freed of bridle and bit but saddled, and saw, with familiar, melancholy satisfaction, that he cropped first at the grass around and beneath the child's swing as if the yield of that place were darker and sweeter.

She went into the house, the purloined key dug from the jeans' pocket with the proper feeling for its, and her, shady statues, for once on the higher level of the first floor, which was really a half story above the gardens, she could see down the free sweep of the wide hall and out the front door's sidelights to the NO TRESPASSING signs that swathed the house's public face like a veil of mourning. Walking down the hall that could be divided into thirds by heavy doors pushed back into the walls, feeling the initial awe of being home again, she chose as her focal point not the demeaning and vaguely frightening signs erected by her enemies but the one visible step of the staircase, the one foot it had to extend, because of its height, despite its grace, to mar the architectural perfection of the hall . . . the house's flaw, the glory of the house, for here the hall became a mere river in comparison to the sea; here it deferred and withdrew and one entered onto the sea itself and fell back, open-mouthed at the curling airy ravishing spume it lifted above its head—three stories of soaring foam up which one could mount: the sea's tribute to itself, water become air, air become jewel.

"Oh!" Willow cried, "Ivy! How could you leave it!", and she flew up the curving suspended stairway in swoops like a bird.

The house waited; seemed to wait; doors cocked like ears toward the sounds—at first choppy and rustly like a child's and then increasingly long and silken as though performed by hands grown narrow, with space to spare between the knuckles—that emanated from behind a door of the second story. Those within felt the waiting, and the turning inward of window eyes; they calculated their footsteps like actresses, measuring the

beats, and when they stood in the doorway the result was a compound of unflung curtain and battery of lights and the waiting and the artistry.

She ascended the steps, trailing bluegreen like a wake of water. Up she mounted, spiralling like a waterspout, calling only once, mockingly, "Ivy," to announce herself. From third-story room to room she went, swift and reassuring, showing herself, hearing the settling of tensed joists and furniture gone stiff from waiting. The easing plaster of the walls crackled like applause; inwardly she blew kisses.

Once again the second floor, the slow long tour, for here the rooms, fifteen of them, were spaced for greater comfort and quiet. Like spoiled aunts they waited—puffy in chintz, smart in satin, somber in velvet—for her greeting, tilting suddenly blasé cheeks for her kiss, sighing and fumbling with fans that stirred the air as faintly as tired ghosts.

Descending at last to the great rooms of the first story (Good Lord, the kitchens, sculleries and pantries below still to go!), she did so with the barely perceptible air of fatigue that ravished onlookers with the sense of her gallantry. Nodding, her smile their memory, she trailed through drawing room, music room, morning room, library-ballroom. But there she gave way and wept, looking onto the small garden where a black horse with a white-starred forehead nipped at the feet of her husband, her lover, seeming to doze in the child's swing until one noticed the rope twisting his neck; the rope-burned flesh, slacking beneath its captor in the passivity of death, proof that he had not hanged until dead of a broken neck, as the coroner said, but had been held like a baby—his crippled legs forcing the issue—and strangled.

Tears dried, survival uppermost in her thoughts, she turned away from the recurrent spectacle. Of the spectators massed in the lower half of the room exuding the odor of hermaphroditism—roses, lilies, nicotinia—and of vindictiveness, she asked, "Could I have held him there until death did us part? Held him with *one arm*, because the other hand was needed to tighten the rope, to hold it tight; tight enough to keep the air from his great, man's lungs . . ."

They parted for her, no more than that, and even as she fled she felt then closing behind her and twitched her long trailing skirt to save it from their vise. Out the front door she flew and down the right-hand curve of the marble stairs, avoiding the touch of the metal balustrade as though it had been heated to scar her. Down the garden she sailed, over the gravel paths

catching the moon in their mica. At the sundial she halted, her surprised train by-passing her and doubling back to lap her legs in embarrassment, a blue-green cat. Bending over the devil's device, its prick, even in sleep at the ready for the rape of beauty, she commanded, threatened, cajoled. "No more. No more." She raked the humic fungus beyond the gate, beneath the trees, with breaking nails and returned to the dial and calculated by the moon and raked again and planted. "I condemn you," she said, and then "I defy you," and then, sensing something of time's weight as the future touched her with one finger, lightly, and bent her to the ground, "Damn you," and "*damn you,*" and "DAMN YOU."

Willow rucked up the long chiffon skirt and perched on the moldering birdlimed wall. The cobwebby material of the bodice clung to her armpits as though to wounds, stanching the flow of her sweat. She was carefulest the other flow, recently begun, should soil the poignant dress, for in its skin she felt the meticulousness of its co-inhabiter and shared with her a resigned dislike of that particular profluence that marked the boundaries of the only innocence not recoverable: the mind could dam off, and by damming off, return to a condition of preknowledge, but the body, once red-joined, had its course set for it as a predestined vessel riding its own stream; one need not disembark at the ports but the vessel made all stops and one was forced to look at the wares in the dock-bazaar and smell the lure of their spices and hear the calls, soft as The Green Grass, rough as burrs, hot as nettles, sweet as rainwater caught in the rosy stones of Petra...

Perched on the wall, she tried to evaluate her experience that she felt was somehow too much of a performance, considering the number of times it had engaged her: since she was twelve, precisely to the day. That is, on her twelfth birthday she had received the first urgent summons to and by—not the house but what it contained; the events that it contained, behind its supercilious barricaded front like a woman hiding sex mania, calling out to her young, empty spaces so devoid of events that she had existed from age nine to twelve alternately expecting to cave in and to explode like a balloon, leaving a little rubbery scrap of pink freckled skin as the only trace that she had required a room of her own and meals on earth. Her parents, usually off somewhere—another bond with Ivy, whose parents had been killed when she was six—had not remembered her birthday until the day after and had rushed back with a carload of well-meant presents; well-meant from their viewpoint, which was to keep her a child exactly old enough to

be left with the cook without complaining and young enough not ever to have what her mother had called, apprehensively, "visible growing pains." When those appeared they would have to stay around to see what Willow did not hand them a black, red-headed baby, produced from her newly red loins. "My newly red loins," Willow said, telling the seedy, seed-full garden what she had not told the woman increasingly a stranger, her mother. As Ivy, she thought, "I didn't even know the woman; Bruce hadn't married when I left here to roam the world's surface."

Today's experience, then, had been enjoyable.