

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Boris Vian**  
**- poems -**

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# Boris Vian(1920 - 1959)

Boris Vian was born at Ville d'Avray in 1920. He was trained as a civil engineer, receiving his diploma in 1942. He was also a jazz trumpeter, film actor, cabaret singer, translator, inventor, record company executive & Transcendent Satrap of the College de Pataphysique. Vian's extraordinary work mirrored his fascinating life. He wrote novels, plays, songs, scenarios & one short opera.

In his 39 years Boris Vian wrote 10 novels, 42 short stories, 7 theatre pieces, 400 songs, 4 poetry collections, 6 opera librettos, 20 translations of short stories and novels, and about 50 articles.

## <b>Early Life</b>

Boris Vian was born in 1920 into an upper middle-class family in the wealthy Parisian suburb of Ville d'Avray (Hauts-de-Seine). His parents were Paul Vian, a young rentier and Yvonne Ramenez, amateur pianist and harpist. From his father Vian inherited the distrust of the Church and the Army, as well as a love of the bohemian life. Vian was the second of four children: the others were Léo (1918), Alain (1921–1995) and Ninon (1924). The family occupied the Les Fauvettes villa. The name "Boris" does not indicate Russian ancestry; it was chosen by Yvonne, who was an avid classical music lover, after seeing a performance of Mussorgsky's opera Boris Godunov.

Vian suffered from ill health throughout his childhood and had to be educated at home until the age of five. From 1926 to 1932 he studied first at a small lycée, then at Lycée de Sèvres. After the Wall Street Crash of 1929 the family's financial situation worsened considerably and they moved to a small lodge near Les Fauvettes (from 1929 to 1932 the Vians rented the villa to Yehudi Menuhin's family). Shortly after Vian's 12th birthday he developed rheumatic fever and after a while he also contracted typhoid. This combination led to severe health problems and left Vian with a heart condition that would ultimately lead to an early death.

## <b>Formal Education and Teenage Years</b>

From 1932 to 1937 Vian studied at Lycée Hoche in Versailles. In 1936 Vian and his two brothers started organizing what they called "surprise-parties" (surprises-parties). They partook of mescaline in the form of a Mexican cacti called peyote. These gatherings became the basis of his early novels: Trouble dans les andains(Turmoil in the Swaths) (1943) and particularly Vercoquin et le

plançon(Vercoquin and the Plankton) (1943–44). It was also in 1936 that Vian got interested in jazz; the next year he started playing the trumpet and joined the Hot Club de France.

In 1937 Vian graduated from Lycée Hoche, passing baccalauréats in mathematics, philosophy, Latin, Greek and German. He subsequently enrolled at Lycée Condorcet, Paris, where he studied special mathematics until 1939. Vian became fully immersed in the French jazz scene: for example, in 1939 he helped organize Duke Ellington's second concert in France. When the WWII started, Vian was not accepted into the army due to poor health. He entered École Centrale des Arts et Manufactures in Paris and subsequently moved to Angoulême when the school moved there because of the war.

In 1940 Vian met Michelle Léglise, who became his wife in 1941. She taught Vian English and introduced him to translations of American literature. Also in 1940 Vian met Jacques Loustalot, who became a recurring character in several early novels and short stories. In 1942 Vian and his brothers joined a jazz orchestra under the direction of Claude Abbadié, who became a minor character in Vian's Vercoquin et le plançon. The same year Vian graduated from École Centrale with a diploma in metallurgy and also in 1942 Boris and Michelle's son Patrick was born.

### <b>Career</b>

After Vian's graduation, he and Michelle moved to Paris' 10th arrondissement and, on 24 August 1942 became an engineer at the French Association for Standardisation (AFNOR). By this time he was an accomplished jazz trumpeter, and in 1943 he wrote his first novel, Trouble dans les andains (Turmoil in the Swaths). His literary career started in 1943 with his first publication, a poem, in the Hot Club de France bulletin. The poem was signed Bison Ravi ("A Delighted Bison"), an anagram of Vian's real name. The same year Vian's father died, murdered at home by burglars.

In 1944 Vian completed Vercoquin et le plançon(Vercoquin and the Plankton), a novel inspired partly by surprise-parties of his youth and partly by his job at the AFNOR (which is heavily satirized in the novel). Raymond Queneau and Jean Rostand helped Vian to publish this work at Éditions Gallimard in 1947, along with several works Vian completed in 1946. These included his first major novels, L'Écume des jours and L'automne à Pékin (Autumn in Peking). The former, a tragic love story in which real world objects respond to the characters' emotions, is now regarded as Vian's masterpiece, but at the time of its publication it failed to attract any considerable attention. L'automne à Pékin, which also had a love

story at its heart but was somewhat more complex, also failed to sell well.

Frustrated by the commercial failure of his works, Vian vowed he could write a best-seller and wrote the hard-boiled novel *I Spit on Your Graves* (*J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*) in only 15 days. Vian wrote an introduction in which he claimed to be the translator of the American shooting star writer by the name Vernon Sullivan. Vian persuaded his friend Jean d'Halluin, a beginning publisher, to publish the novel in 1947. Eventually the hoax became known and the book became one of the best-selling titles of that year. Vian wrote three more Vernon Sullivan novels in 1947–49.

The year 1946 marked a turning point in Vian's life: At one of the popular parties that he and Michelle hosted he made acquaintance of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus, became a regular in the inner literary circles and started regularly publishing various materials in *Les Temps Modernes*. Vian admired Jean-Paul Sartre in particular and gave him a prominent role in "*Froth on a Daydream*". Ironically, Sartre and Michelle Vian commenced a relationship that would eventually destroy Vian's marriage.

Despite his literary work becoming more important, Vian never left the jazz scene. He became a regular contributor to various jazz-related magazines, and played trumpet at *Le Tabou*. As a result, his financial situation improved, and he abandoned the job at the AFNOR. Vian also formed his own choir, *La petite chorale de Saint-Germain-des-Pieds*.

### <b>Later Years</b>

The year 1948 saw the birth of Vian's daughter, Carole. He continued his literary career by writing Vernon Sullivan novels, and also published poetry collections: *Barnum's Digest* (1948) and *Cantilènes en gelée* (*Cantelinas in Jelly*) (1949). Vian also started writing plays, the first of which, *L'Équarrissage pour tous* (*Slaughter for Everyone*), was staged the year it was written, 1950. The same year saw publication of Vian's third major novel, *L'Herbe rouge* (*The Red Grass*). This was a much darker story than its predecessors, centering around a man who built a giant machine that could help him psychoanalyse his soul. Like the other two books, it did not sell well; Vian's financial situation had been steadily worsening since late 1948, and he was forced to take up translation of English-language literature and articles to get by. Vian separated from his wife, and in 1950 he met Ursula Kübler (1928-2010), a Swiss dancer; the two started an affair, and in 1951 Vian divorced Michelle. Ursula and Boris married in 1954.

Vian's last novel, *L'Arrache-cœur* (*The Heart-extractor*), was published in 1953,

yet again to poor sales and Vian effectively stopped writing fiction (the only other work that appeared after 1953 was a revised version of *L'automne à Pékin'*, published 1956). He concentrated on a new field, song-writing and performing, and continued writing poetry. Vian's songs were successful; in 1954 he embarked on his first tour as singer-songwriter. By 1955, when he was working as art director for Philips, Vian was active in a wide variety of fields, from song-writing to opera. He also wrote screenplays and several more plays. His first album, *Chansons possibles et impossibles* (Possible and Impossible Songs), was also recorded in 1955. He was also wrote the first French rock and roll songs with his friend Henri Salvador, who sang them under the nickname Henry Cording. He wrote "Java Pour Petula" (a song about an English girl arriving in France, written in Parisian argot) for Petula Clark's first concert performances in France.

Vian's life was endangered in 1956 by a pulmonary edema, but he survived and continued working with the same intensity as before. In 1957 Vian completed another play, *Les Bâisseurs d'empire* (The Empire Builders) (only published and staged in 1959); in 1958 Vian worked on the opera *Fiesta* with Darius Milhaud, and a collection of essays, *En avant la zizique... Et par ici les gros sous* (On with the Muzak... And Bring in the Big Bucks), was published the same year.

### <b>Death</b>

On the morning of 23 June 1959, Boris Vian was at the Cinema Marbeuf for the screening of the film version of *I Spit on Your Graves*. He had already fought with the producers over their interpretation of his work, and he publicly denounced the film, stating that he wished to have his name removed from the credits. A few minutes after the film began, he reportedly blurted out: "These guys are supposed to be American? My ass!" He then collapsed into his seat and died from sudden cardiac death en route to the hospital.

# I Wouldn'T Want To Die (Je Voudrais Pas Crever)

Before having known  
The black mexican dogs  
Who sleep without dreaming  
The butt-naked monkeys  
Gobbling up tropics  
The silver spiders in  
Webs riddled with bubbles  
I wouldn't want to die  
Not knowing if the moon  
Behind its fake nickel look  
Has a sharper side  
If the sun is cold  
If the four seasons  
Are really only four  
Not having tried  
To wear a dress  
On the boulevards  
Not having peeped  
Through a sewer peephole  
Not having put my dick  
Inside weirdo corners  
I wouldn't want to end  
Without experiencing leprosy  
Or the seven diseases  
One catches over there  
Neither the good nor the bad  
Would cause me some sorrow  
If if if I knew that  
I would get it firsthand  
And there iz also  
Everything I know  
Everything I like  
That I know that I like  
The green bottom of the sea  
Where the seaweeds waltz  
On the rippled sand  
The burnt grass in June  
The crackling earth  
The smell of conifers

And the kisses of the one  
She's this and she's that  
The belle here she comes  
My bearcub, Ursula  
I wouldn't want to die  
Before having used up  
Her mouth with my mouth  
Her body with my hands  
The rest with my eyes  
I say no more one should  
Remain polite  
I wouldn't want to fade  
Without someone inventing  
Eternal roses  
The two hour day  
The sea at the mountain  
The mountain at the sea  
The end of pain  
Newspapers in color  
All children happy  
And so many other tricks  
That sleep inside the brains  
Of genius engineers  
Of jovial gardeners  
Of concerned socialists  
Of urban urbanists  
And of thoughtful thinkers  
So many things to see  
To see and to hear  
So much time to wait  
Searching in the dark  
And me I see the end  
It swarms and it comes closer  
With its ugly face  
And it opens its arms to me  
Like a cripplety frog  
I wouldn't want to die  
No sir no madam  
Before having tested  
The taste which torments me  
The taste which is the strongest  
I wouldn't want to die

Before having tasted  
The flavour of death...

Boris Vian



# Surprise Party

The turntable hacked up a melancholy blues  
The air was heavy with dust and odors  
Several zazous danced while holding to their hearts  
Short girls with spasmodic behinds

In a closet, an amateur obstetrics couple  
Delivered themselves to games full of art and naivete  
Another in a corner attempted with ardor  
Tonsil-coupling, to music.

Hands encountered one another under too-short skirts  
Drunk, two lovebirds—(what if I said: two dodos?)  
Looked everywhere for a bed; they were all full...

Let this happy youth screw itself  
Why eradicate from them this impure manure  
If their hope restricts itself to rubbing membranes?

Boris Vian

# The Deserter

Mr. President  
I'm writing you a letter  
that perhaps you will read  
If you have the time.

I've just received  
my call-up papers  
to leave for the front  
Before Wednesday night.

Mr. President  
I do not want to go  
I am not on this earth  
to kill wretched people.

It's not to make you mad  
I must tell you  
my decision is made  
I am going to desert.

Since I was born  
I have seen my father die  
I have seen my brothers leave  
and my children cry.

My mother has suffered so,  
that she is in her grave  
and she laughs at the bombs  
and she laughs at the worms.

When I was a prisoner  
they stole my wife  
they stole my soul  
and all my dear past.

Early tomorrow morning  
I will shut my door  
on these dead years  
I will take to the road.

I will beg my way along  
on the roads of France  
from Brittany to Provence  
and I will cry out to the people:

Refuse to obey  
refuse to do it  
don't go to war  
refuse to go.

If blood must be given  
go give your own  
you are a good apostle  
Mr. President.

If you go after me  
warn your police  
that I'll be unarmed  
and that they can shoot.

Boris Vian