

# Five Dials



NUMBER 15

*The November Issue*

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*And announcing* THE FIVE DIALS TEN BEST NOVELISTS UNDER TEN

*and indeed much more...*



GAIL ARMSTRONG is a writer and translator.

EMILIE ANDREWES was born in Montreal in 1982. She is the author of three novels, including *Les mouches pauvres d'Ésope*, which was a finalist for the Prix Ringuet from l'Académie des Lettres du Québec in 2005.

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ROXANNE BOUCHARD teaches literature at a college in Joliette, Québec and is the author of a novel called *Whisky et paraboles* and a novella called *La gifle*.

ALAIN DE BOTTON is the author of, amongst others, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*.

MAXIME CATELLIER recently published his sixth book – a novel, *Le Corps de la Deneuve*. A former editor of the defunct arts weekly *Ici*, he now contributes writing and criticism to a number of literary journals.

RAYMOND CHANDLER was probably the greatest crime writer of all time, but he also wrote wonderful lists.

ANNE CLOUTIER has written two novels, *Ce qui s'endigue* and *La chute de mur*. Some of her favourite themes are identity, advanced modernity, feminism, sexuality and Québec.

LEONARD COHEN was born in Montreal in 1934 and published his first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, in 1956.

GIL COURTEMANCHE is the author of *Un dimanche a la piscine a Kigali (A Sunday At The Pool In Kigali)*, *Une belle mort* and *Le Monde, le lezard et moi*.

ROBBIE DILLON is a writer, living in Montreal, and trying to remember the last time he gave a shit about his bio.

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PETER HOBBS is the author of a novel, *The Short Day Dying*, and a collection of short stories, *I Could Ride All Day in My Cool Blue Train*.

REBECCA HARRIES lives in the Eastern Townships of Québec and teaches at Bishop's University. Next year her work will be published in *Missing Documents: theatre historian as film noir detective* in the Performing Arts Research series.

DAVID HOMEL was born in Chicago and left the U.S. in 1970. He later settled in Montreal, where he began writing. The author of eight novels, most recently *Midway*, he has also worked as a documentary filmmaker, journalist and translator.

CLAUDIA LAROCHELLE writes regularly on literature and theatre for the website Rue Frontenac and is a frequent contributor to many cultural publications, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio One.

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*La mort exquisite*, the third and last book by the formerly unsung author CLAUDE MATHIEU, who committed suicide in 1985, was re-issued by Les Editions de L'instant in 1988 and has since been recognized as one of the classic works of contemporary Québec literature. "L'auteur du Temps d'aimer" is reproduced by kind permission of his publishers.

DAVID MATHEWS is an illustrator.

GASTON MIRON (1928–1996) was a poet and one of the first generation of Québec writers to devote themselves to the recognition and celebration of a native Québec language.

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DANIEL SANGER moved to Montreal as soon as possible. After two decades as a journalist he became a traffic planner and political hack for the radical Green mayor of the Plateau-Mont-Royal borough. He has written a book about the Hell's Angels.

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MICHEL VÉZINA founded the publishing house *Coups de tête* and helps run a series of literary music nights in Montreal called 'Dub et Litté'. He is the author of five novels and two collections of stories.

OSCAR WILDE wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, amongst other classic works. He died destitute in Paris in 1900, aged just 46.

HEATHCOTE WILLIAMS is the author of, amongst other books, *Autogeddon*, *Whale Nation*, *Sacred Elephant* and the play *AC/DC*. He also wrote the song 'Why D'Ya Do It (for Marianne Faithfull)'. We are thrilled to welcome him to *Five Dials*.

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## On Our Québec Issue, And Young Novelists

‘THEN LET them go,’ said my friend’s father. And then, if I remember correctly, he shrugged his big shoulders. He was talking, yet again, about Québec. ‘If they want to go, then go, you know? Tell them to go,’ he announced. I can’t remember the exact contours of this conversation since it happened in 1996, but I can place it at a kitchen table in a pleasant family home in Vancouver, and I remember there was a two litre bottle of root beer sitting in front of my friend’s father. It was late and somewhere a guest bed had been made for me, or there was at least a couch with a sleeping bag waiting to be unfurled. Escape was near; good manners kept me in my seat.

While driving to my friend’s house earlier in the evening I had been stopped to take a breathalyzer test at a roadside check, and even today I remember those particular details vividly, right down to the fur-lined collar of the police officer’s coat and the feel of the plastic tip of the mouthpiece between my teeth. I thought, ‘Is it safer if I blow out of one corner of my mouth?’ Although I’d only consumed a single beer hours earlier I remember thinking that the beer had originated in Québec. They do things differently in Québec. I breathed out, perhaps a little slower than normal.

‘Then let them go,’ said my friend’s father hours later. ‘Just go.’ These ‘let them go’ conversations were familiar because I’d heard them for years. Where I come from in Western Canada many discussions about Québec end this way. There’s a type of Canadian who is always inferring exit, as if asking a 1,542,056 square kilometer landmass that stretches from Newfoundland and Labrador to Hudson Bay and covers the rough cobble of the Canadian Shield, and is cut through by the great watery slice of the St. Lawrence Seaway, could just be asked to leave a country, like one would ask a frustrated spouse to just leave a marriage instead of threatening separation again and again. You know the type – the husband who was still playing *that card*. Just go then, parts of Canada would say. Just go. We’ll be fine. This is one of the effects I saw Québec could have on the rest of the country.

I was discussing Québec with my friend’s father because I had announced to him I was moving there. When he asked why, I suppressed the urge to scream out that I would never end up like him, trapped in a creaky attitude. Besides, was there a more interesting place in the world? Copies of the Montreal *Gazette* in the local library held Classifieds unlike any I’d seen before. They were Classified of Great Wonder. Where else could you rent and live in a church for two hundred dollars a month? All the artists seemed to be moving in after the housing prices dropped following the 1995 referendum. They couldn’t all be mimes, fusion jazz bass players and members of the Cirque du Soleil. There was a space for me, preferably in one of Montreal’s old walk-up apartments. I was a bit drunk on my own fictional idea of Québec, mostly because I had read too much of Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*. My friend’s father was living under the influence of his own Québec illusions. In every news story he saw something to reinforce his views. We both watched politicians from our area, big guys with big guts and no-nonsense conservative policies, waddle east towards parliament where they were forced – mon dieu – to speak both official languages. My friend’s father felt aggrieved. I loved the sight of cowboys negotiating French, conjugating verbs, and speaking from both sides of the two solitudes.

‘Tell them to go if they want to go so badly,’ my friend’s father said. But then I knew he and others like him loved sport, loved hockey and found in themselves a conditional forgiveness for athletes from Québec when they helped beat the Russians, Swedes and Americans on the ice. Of course, these westerners would take slight revenge by pronouncing Lemieux ‘Le-moo’ and Cournoyer ‘Corn-o-yer’ but otherwise they were part of the team. Keep the puck moving. ‘That Boucher (Boo-shay) can speed skate, can’t he? He’s going to win us the gold in these winter Olympics.’

When I arrived in Québec there was a woman in the Provigo supermarket smoking in the produce section. She asked on a leaf of lettuce. Another woman leafed through a magazine at the checkout that

seemed to be entirely dedicated to Celine Dion and her ancient husband with his little well-kept white beard. At the gas station down the street there was a room in the back, a very cold room, with icy mist that swirled around cases of Fin du Monde, Boreal Russe and Boreal Blonde. It was interesting for a week, and then I stopped dreaming Québec and started living there and soon realized I should stop getting drunk on what I thought the province should be, could be or ought to be. I remember walking through a book shop in Montreal looking at all the spines of the great Canadian works that tried to decipher, solve, argue against, celebrate, denigrate or redefine Québec. Thankfully, *Five Dials* has the chance to do something different and ask Québécois writers to take on a range of subjects. We don’t have to make a great statement about Québec in this, our November issue, other than definitively announcing we still find Celine Dion’s husband’s beard a little creepy. In lieu of the grand, we have gathered a wide array of talented Francophone and Anglophone writers who will look at the mushrooms, bears, critics, literature, vocal tics, exotic dance clubs, and maple syrup of this place. We have freshly translated Québécois literature and some beautiful archival work, as well as contributions from Raymond Chandler, Alain de Botton, and David Shields. There is also one article on hockey. Somewhere in the midst of all this we might catch a fleeting glimpse of the soul of Québec as it skates past – still stylish, still mysterious, still adapting to the cold. I’m writing this from a guest house on Avenue de L’Esplanade in Montreal while the first snowfall swirls past the window. We’re feeling good to be here and thankful for the help we’ve received from André and Stanley from UNEQ, the Québec writer’s union.

We’re also debuting a new column in this issue entitled Our Town, about London, which is our town. And, perhaps most importantly, after weeks of consideration and months sifting through piles of manuscripts we are releasing our second *Five Dials* list of Top Ten Novelists Under Ten (or ‘Ten Under Ten’, or ‘Ten-Ten’, or as some of the writers themselves call the list: ‘Tintin.’) As you know, many of the writers we chose for our first Ten Under Ten list went on to things such as high school. Enjoy the issue.

—CRAIG TAYLOR

# The damned Canuck

Gaston Miron

translated by Gail Armstrong

We are many silent rough-edged rough-hewn  
in the fog of raw sorrows  
hard-pressed to dive head first into the root of our misfortunes  
a manger burning in the gut  
and in the head, good God, our head  
a little lost in reclaiming our two hands  
oh, we who are gripped by frost and so weary

life is consumed in fatigue without end  
a muted life loving the sound of its own lament  
with anxious eyes disguised as naïve trust  
with a clear-water retina on the mountain of our birth  
life forever on the edge of the air  
forever at the waterline of consciousness  
in the world with its doorknob torn off

ah, clang the bell ring the jingle of your bellies  
laugh and clink tuck into your fortune  
great men, masquerading class, who made of me  
the sub-man, the tortured grin of cro-magnon  
cheap way man, cheap work man  
the damned Canuck

only good on my knees only a step up to the podium

Nous sommes nombreux silencieux raboteux rabotés  
dans les brouillards de chagrins crus  
à la peine à piquer du nez dans la souche des misères  
un feu de mangeoire aux tripes  
et la tête bon dieu, nous la tête  
un peu perdue pour reprendre nos deux mains  
ô nous pris de gel et d'extrême lassitude

la vie se consume dans la fatigue sans issue  
la vie en sourdine et qui aime sa plainte  
aux yeux d'angoisse travestie de confiance naïve  
à la rétine d'eau pure dans la montagne natale  
la vie toujours à l'orée de l'air  
toujours à la ligne de flottaison de la conscience  
au monde la poignée de porte arrachée

ah sonnez crevez sonnailles de vos entrailles  
riez et sabrez à la coupe de vos privilèges  
grands hommes, classe écran, qui avez fait de moi  
le sous-homme, la grimace souffrante du cro-magnon  
l'homme du cheap way, l'homme du cheap work  
le damned Canuck

seulement les genoux seulement le ressaut pour dire

Gaston Miron, « Le damned Canuck » extrait de *L'homme rapaillé*, ΤΥΡΟ, 1998  
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Gaston Miron (1928–1996) was among the first generation of Québec writers to devote themselves to the recognition and celebration of a “native” Québécois language, his poetry a rallying cry to stand up to the imperialism of the French (from France) mother tongue and the English culture that surrounded them.

The poem *Le damned Canuck* originally appeared with a companion piece called *Séquences* – which contains the immortal line, *Damned Canuck de damned Canuck de pea soup* – under the title of “La batèche” Québec slang for *baptême* (baptism).

The story goes that, one night in 1953, Miron was in a tavern with a group of fellow poets, each one reading out his latest work. The tavern regulars had gathered around to listen. Says Miron, ‘Suddenly, one of them spoke up: “That’s not it; you’re way off. This is how people talk: *Crise de câlisse de tabarnak d’ostie de saint-chrême*\*. . .’ And in a flash, I understood one of the rhythmic elements of popular speech: curse words.’

\*‘God-damned chalice of tabernacle of heavenly host of holy oil. . .’ To this day, the Catholic Church continues to out-expletive scatology in Québec.

—GAIL ARMSTRONG



# Transient Beauty

by Madeleine Thien

IN MONTREAL, it is the women I always notice first. They are lithe, bold and astonishingly lovely. On the bicycle path, girls in tiny skirts float by, long hair curling, thighs spread, toenails polished. Necklines plummet and legs, shapely, tanned, long and beckoning, dazzle the boulevards. Even now, in the biting cold, the streets are filled with half-dressed beauties in shorts and diaphanous stockings. In the far-flung neighbourhoods, away from the escort agencies and strip clubs, restaurants *de serveuses sexy* are both naughty and workaday: ravenous men hunch over their breakfast specials while women, nude but for their clicking heels and a sheer scarf around their hips, wait tables.

‘Ours is not a landscape for the unassertive,’ writes Clark Blaise in his *Montreal Stories*. ‘Subtleties are easily lost.’

In a city creased with French–English fissures, seduction has become the default mode of communication. Montreal thrums with a youthful desire, a ferocity even. Among the circling staircases, summer swelter and delicate ornamentation, couples kiss and fight, and women swan in sweetness and in thrall.

Once I asked a friend, where do all the older women disappear to in Montreal? He looked surprised and then agreed that, yes, it was true, on the Plateau, no one ever seems to grow old.

Do they vanish into their apartments, I wondered, do they somehow become – like novelist Lise Tremblay’s pianist in *La danse juive*, an obese woman, too ashamed to take part in the parade of life in a city where ‘fat women are clowns’ – invisible? I think of Nelly Arcan. In her final novel, *Paradis, clef en main*, a young woman fails at suicide. Paralyzed, oppressed by her mother’s beauty, she remembers her body, ‘*ce que j’ai de mieux*,’ long, thin legs which

could ‘*rendre fous de désir les hommes et folles de jalousie, ou de douleur confuse, les femmes*.’ Arcan’s young women know that beauty and sexuality can bring them power, but what they cannot imagine are the qualities that will make them free.

Quebecers, people say, have always been more open and sexually adventurous than the rest of Canada. An old story persists here, one that revolves around *les filles du roi*, the young women sent to populate New France, their passage bankrolled by Louis XIV. Many Québécoise can trace their lineage to these impoverished girls, believed, in the popular imagination, to have been prostitutes. This detail is contested, but the story is a shorthand way of trying to explain – or perhaps highlight – the city’s sensuality, its devil-may-care attitude, which became big business during America’s Prohibition. Pleasure seekers found their way north, basking in the heat of drinks and girls. Fifty years after the Quiet Revolution, this social awakening is not merely celebrated but is a cornerstone of Montreal’s identity.

‘You are a woman,’ Montreal proclaims, ‘and you are liberated!’

Summer is fleeting here. Before the cold comes, with its formless winter coats and strangling scarves, one must act and act decisively.

‘I was a whore before I was one,’ Arcan writes. ‘Just one day in that room was enough to convince me that I’d done it all my life.’ In her third novel, she

coined the phrase, ‘*la burqa de chair*,’ the burqa of the flesh, of the body. When she died in 2009, a suicide at the age of thirty-six, this city lost one of its most provocative and disturbing writers. I mourn, like many others, the stories she might have written later in life, as she grew older, as life changed. Maybe the novelist Réjean Ducharme, in his seminal novel, *L’avalée des avalés*, describes our conflicted desires best: ‘I don’t want to feel, I want to act. I don’t want to endure, I want to strike. I don’t want to suffer.’

I’ve never lived in a place so beautiful and yet so strangely sad. This week, the province is debating Bill 94, a ban against wearing the niqab while accessing or dispensing government services (things like education and health care), the first such ban to be proposed in Canada. ‘Two words: uncovered face,’ the premier has said. I wonder where he hangs out because, in my six years of living in this province, I have never once seen a woman wearing a niqab.

Meanwhile, the young people stay for a few years and then leave to go to cities with better economies, better jobs. The



colleges are endlessly full of the newly free, the just awakening. On their brief visits, tourists remember the feeling of what it was to be twenty-one: all the mistakes they made, all the heartache, all the dizzying transgressions.

Montreal is a good city, a friend told me, to begin making art but if you

want to push yourself, you have to go away. Maybe art and sexuality have this question in common: what happens to us after liberation? What path will we choose once the seduction is finished? It's not only darkness that hides a city and makes it fade, but light, too. In Blaise's story 'Translation' an older woman

hovers, sublime, over a man, just before pleasuring him. 'You were a Québec Catholic once,' she says. 'Remember the consolations of melancholy.' Afterwards, he believes that he would have given away his soul for just ten or fifteen minutes of this intense, fleeting sensation, this transient beauty. ◇

CURRENTISH EVENTS

## Mushroom Man

*Daniel Sanger forages the fields of Québec*

TONTON Pierre and tante Danielle are a remarkable pair – he emerged from a dirt-poor background in provincial, post-war France to head one of the country's top scientific institutes, she was one of France's first female engineers; the two can hold forth intelligently on virtually any subject this side of gangsta' rap; she cooks like Escoffier – so it's not surprising that their friends would be remarkable too.

What was odd to learn was that one

such friend and his wife had abandoned a comfortable life in a village outside Grenoble, trading it for a bungalow in a small town near Thetford Mines. Stranger yet, Gérard Declerck and his wife Jannine weren't regretting a thing most of a decade later.

We've all heard of the dangers of radical life change after retirement; we all know a couple who, after being given the golf clubs and museum membership, lit out for Victoria/Aruba/Arizona only

to quickly pine for the subtle charms of Kanata/Mimico/Tuxedo, and come creeping home within a year or two. Because, after all, it's *home*.

And the French aren't famous for their tolerance of, or enthusiasm for, things that themselves aren't French. Case in point: my girlfriend's parents, Tonton Pierre's brother and sister-in-law. They came to Québec in 1970 or so, he to run a pulp-and-paper mill in a small Charlevoix town. Economic exiles initially, later tethered by their children's lives here, they've lived in Québec ever since, but always reluctantly. If they had their druthers, we'd all be living in *l'Hexagone*.

That's not to say that Gérard and Jannine didn't miss some of the quotidian



pleasures of France. ‘Cheese was, *effectivement*, an enormous problem,’ Gérard tells me when I visit one autumn day. ‘An enormous problem. We couldn’t find real cheese so we just gave up eating cheese.’

Bread, too – not for them the sliced, spongy stuff that is fresh for ever (if ever at all) and was pretty much all that was available in and around Thetford Mines in the late 1990s. ‘We looked for bread everywhere. There was nothing.’

Gérard – who came to Canada for reasons similar to why my in-laws stay here: a son-in-law’s job, a desire to be near grandchildren – is not, however, the kind of man to moan but make do with what’s available. He set about improving matters. His local bakery, he quickly learned, wasn’t interested in mending its ways or taking advice from a foreigner. Then he heard of a retired military man who was setting up a bakery in Mégantic, about thirty kilometres south of the Declercks’ village of Lambton. Gérard searched the man down and sounded him out – there was hope. The soldier had spent time in Europe and knew the joys of a good *baguette* and *miche*. But Gérard didn’t stop there: on his next trip back to France he visited his old baker and managed to coax from him a cupboard full of recipes, techniques and trade secrets which he then passed on to his friend in Mégantic. These recipes were quickly mastered – ‘We were saved,’ says Gérard – and the former soldier’s business boomed. He was soon selling throughout the region, including across the border into Maine and New Hampshire, and opening satellite operations.

Still, the Declercks didn’t have any cheese to put on their bread so Gérard decided to make his own. He’d seen it done in France and knew it wasn’t a hugely complicated endeavour. ‘So I began looking for someone to sell me [raw] milk. That’s when I began going in circles.’

Farmers would agree, and then back out at the last minute, fearful of being caught by the milk marketing police and losing their quotas, or worse. Eventually, Gérard was able to get his hands on a few gallons of unpasteurized, unprocessed, real milk – he’s vague about exactly how, but a transaction in a field under

cover of night is hinted at – and began making what he calls *tome de Lambton*. He presents me with a *rond*. Its smell is so overpowering I think that the Declercks’ old hunting dog under the table has cut a silent but deadly one.

By this time Gérard had also solved the problem of *charcuterie*. He’d bought a young pig and hired a farmer to raise it according to his instructions. (When it comes to the animals we eat Declerck makes a big distinction between *élevage* and *production*; his pig, he says, lived ‘a real life – for a pig.’) After it was slaughtered, the pig was delivered headless to the Declercks, and Gérard and Jannine were not happy – they’d planned to use everything but the teeth and the eyes in their sausages and patés. ‘We asked some questions.’

Gérard also embraced some of the local ways, particularly when it came to the raw materials for other *charcuterie*. In France he had hunted occasionally but mostly unambitiously – rabbit, partridge, ‘once a *sanglier*.’ In Québec he got into bigger game such as deer and the rare moose, as much to enjoy the outdoors as for the bloody bounty. ‘I like the hunting but not the killing,’ he says. ‘The season lasts fifteen days and I spend almost all of it in the blind. I only ever get my deer on the last day. I try to use just one shell per year.’

A love of walking in the woods drives another of Declerck’s gastronomic campaigns, one that has met more mixed results. Declerck describes his grandmother – affectionately and respectfully – as ‘a peasant’, her fixed assets ‘two goats and a few sheep. And some geese.’ As a child in wartime and post-war France he would spend long hours with her, ambling through the countryside, foraging for anything to supplement meagre meals, as well as plants for *tisanes* and herbal remedies.

‘I learned about mushrooms from my grandmother when I was only as high as three apples,’ Declerck says as we wander through woods near his new home. It’s the end of a disappointing season for mushrooms. One glorious autumn day a few years ago he and his family collected forty-six kilos of porcini in three hours but there’s been nothing to compare this year. A few good dinners of morels and chanterelles

in the spring and early summer (though Québec’s chanterelles are less tasty than France’s, Declerck says; something to do with the soil.) Not much since; certainly no surplus to dry and save for winter.

‘Mushrooms are like the human body,’ he says and pauses. I expect something profound, something proving an inextricable link between us and fungus. But Declerck, short and fit and spry in his wellies, is too down to earth for grand declarations. ‘Ninety per cent water,’ is all he adds.

In years like this in France, a person would have to be particularly attentive when keeping his favourite picking spots secret. In Québec, however, that’s never a problem – despite Declerck’s best efforts. Just as he was shocked at the quality of the bread available, he was astonished that none of his neighbours in Québec enjoyed the (free) fruit of the forest. And he set about to change that too. One by one he invited friends and neighbours over for meals built around local wild mushrooms. Those who tasted and enjoyed, he invited out to roam the woods with him. Some accompanied him more than once, learning the basics of mushroom identification.

Declerck says he knows about thirty-five types of mushrooms, of which he eats fifteen or so. ‘Now this one,’ he says, shortly after we’ve spent several minutes watching a very large beaver languidly swim around a very small pond, ‘someone who is not paying attention might confuse it with a chanterelle *gris*. But it’s extremely laxative. It won’t kill you. Just make you spend a very long time on the loo.’

Yet perhaps because of warnings like that, none of those who Declerck has mentored in things mycological have embraced mushrooming with the dedication he’d hoped for. Perhaps for a season or two they’d tracked the moon phases – first moon in May is morel time, first moon in July is chanterelles, first moon in August porcini – but soon they had gone back to buying button mushrooms in blue plastic cartons from Provigo.

And Declerck had understood that merging the best of the old world with the best of the new wasn’t always as easy as all that. ◇



# A Sunday At The Pool in Kigali

Gil Courtemanche on 'The Kiss of the Spider-Book'

WHEN MY publisher accepted the manuscript of *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*, I had no particular ambitions for my novel and no illusions. I did expect a certain amount of popular success and the type of newspaper articles that journalists who write books in Québec typically receive; such authors are usually considered usurpers who have capitalized on their position rather than on their literary abilities. When its popular and critical success was instantaneous, far outstripping my publisher's most optimistic predictions, I was happy with what I had achieved and subsequently I considered the book's career as having ended. Perhaps I was afraid of too much success for a first novel whose weaknesses were all too apparent to me.

Then, two years after publication, the book developed a 'buzz' around it, as the Frankfurt Book Fair specialists call it. Great publishers of this planet from different countries – Knopf, Canongate, Feltrinelli, Planeta – fought over the rights for a first novel written by an unknown Quebecker. In forty-eight hours, I had become a famous writer.

In Melbourne, London, Amsterdam and Rome, I led the life of a literary rock star. Five-star hotels, glittering cocktail parties, excellent dinners, ambassadors – enough to make your head spin. It's hard not to believe in your own talent when *The Times*, *New York Times* and *El País* declare that you're a genius.

I had fallen into a spider's web, and

I was the prey, though at the time I was unaware of it and happily self-satisfied. I was convinced that my publishers admired me and that the affection they showed me was real. I didn't know then that publishers, publicists and directors of marketing are forced to admire a book when it comes out, and that their expressions of warmth and affection, though at times sincere, are nevertheless tied to a particular title and not the writer, and even less the man himself who wrote it. During this period of unexpected and surreal success, the man who writes believes in his heart that he is both the writer *and* the book. He absorbs the smiles, the interest, the curiosity people show him as if all these things are the proof that he, a living being, is the true and ultimate object of these expressions. But soon he will discover his mistake every time he returns to the scenes of his former triumph. Without a bestselling book for sale in his suitcase, the smiles are stiffer and the meals of less excellent quality.

The man who has written the bestselling book will need a certain amount of time to discover that he is two people, and that, as Carlos Liscano put it so well, the writer is an other. No one ever received, admired, liked or courted Gil Courtemanche. Instead they admired and courted a conceptual being, an abstraction, 'the writer known as Gil Courtemanche'.

Yet once that illusion of universal affection has been jettisoned, the part of a person that still writes remains. And that part believes that the writer is loved, that

for his future he can count on the fidelity of his publishers who were so lavish with their compliments. Then they will discover that the publishing market does not acquire a writer, but just a particular book. It cares not for his qualities as a writer. He will understand this when publishers who were once so full of praise turn up their noses at his subsequent books. The writer will realize that these people bought the subject of his book, and its treatment, much more than they ever bought his talent as a writer. In Frankfurt, in the frenzy of an auction, publishers and agents have only one question: 'What's the plot?' Only later will they wonder if the book is well written. In this irrational kind of stock exchange, no one acquires a body of work built over time; everyone speculates on a title, hoping to make a fast buck.

Canongate, Knopf, Feltrinelli and Planeta displayed no interest in the three books I have had published since *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*, though I believe deeply that these latter three are better written, the characters more complex and interesting and the structure more original than the first. It has taken me ten years to understand and admit that, in that world, I am only 'the writer known as Gil Courtemanche'. Fortunately a few publishers in the Netherlands, Spain, France and Poland bought the work of the writer, and not just the first book. That reassures me on those autumn nights that smell of death, when rain washes the windows and the wine is bitter because I cannot find the right sentence. There's only one way to avoid falling into the trap of the spider-book: write a fourth novel that becomes an international bestseller. Then the first three will certainly get published, even if they're dogs. ◇

## THE LIST

### What Was It Like? I'll Tell You

*Similes, including comparisons, from a page in Raymond Chandler's notebooks*

1. As cold as Finnegan's feet
2. As cute as a washtub
3. As much sex appeal as a turtle
4. As cold as a nun's breeches
5. As French as a doughnut (i.e. not French at all)
6. As clean as an angel's neck
7. As shiny as a clubwoman's nose
8. High enough to have snow on him
9. So tight his head squeaks when he takes his hat off
10. Lower than a badger's balls
11. Longer than a round trip to Siam
12. Smart as a hole through nothing
13. A face like a collapsed lung
14. A mouth like a wilted lettuce
15. A nose like a straphanger's elbow
16. His face was long enough to wrap twice around his neck
17. He sipped like a hummingbird drinking dew from a curled leaf



# Into the Québec

*Niven Govinden dines and dashes*

WE WERE jittery and out of breath when we arrived at the Québec. He had taken me for dim sum at a sterile place near Manchester Square. The food was exquisite but the wait for the bill interminable to the point where I persuaded him to do a runner. It was our second date and I wanted to impress him; wanted to make good on the edginess he seemed to expect from me. Everything in his eyes as we ate told me that much.

‘The people at the door are not the same as the wait staff,’ I told him. ‘Just do as I do: get up and head for the exit. Nod and smile, and tell them what a lovely meal you’ve had; how the char siu buns defied the senses. Act like a man who takes delight in eating too much.’

‘But I have eaten too much,’ he said, patting his stomach with unease. He was ten years older than me, and roughly the same amount lighter in pounds. He fretted over food like a reformed binge eater. Still, he did as he was told: rose from the table and put his coat on with care. Nothing in his posture or facial expression denoted anything but calm.

Once we were outside and had passed the corner, silently, barely looking at each other, we sprinted up Wigmore Street, as fast as our full stomachs would permit. We were laughing with the recklessness of it, and wondering where else that kind of energy could be put to use. We ran through side streets until it felt safe, words forced out through harried breath, then striding casually from one junction to the next, disguising our poor fitness from the other. What had been an instant thrill expired to guilt the further we walked. Something clear and unavoidable. It was unsettling to know that I felt so deeply about right and wrong.

‘I need a serious drink,’ I said. ‘Like, now.’

‘There’s a pub I know around the corner,’ he said, disappointed in my lack of cool, but also somewhat amused, knowing that he’d play on this later. ‘They’ll eat up a young guy like you.’

His posture changed the moment we

stepped inside. His frame slouched, as if a teenager, and there was a cockiness in his movements, an imperative to take the lead as he approached the bar and ordered our drinks, his voice deeper and louder than it needed to be. It wasn’t hard to work out why. If I hadn’t been with him he would have been the youngest person on the place. Single men, in their fifties and sixties, dotted the bar and sat at the tables that lined the wall as far as the back. Just men, smoking and reading the paper, passing the odd comment to the barman; only getting up to claim another pint or relieve their bladder. It was bland and innocuous, no different to half the pubs this side of Marble Arch. So it took me a while to realize what kind of place it was; Nickleback on the speakers and the rather average look of the punters, initially uninterested and anything but libidinous, proving to be a curveball. Then I noticed the inappropriate snugness of jeans worn by certain customers, and paid closer attention to their facial hair and the bags that sat at their feet. I could be thick about these things sometimes.

‘This place is legendary,’ he said on his return, with a tray bearing two pints and a couple of shot glasses to settle whatever was triggering the nervousness in our stomachs, culinary or otherwise. ‘They call this place the elephants’ graveyard,’ his breath, hot in my ear, perfumed with scallops and lust. ‘It’s where all the old queens come to die. Whenever anyone young comes in, their eyes are on sticks.’

‘You seem to know a lot about the place,’ I said. ‘Were you a granddad’s plaything?’ He made a feeble joke about spending so much time here that he needed to be given CPR – louder than was needed so that our neighbouring tables could hear. I should’ve laughed but my heart wasn’t in it. I knew then that if I kept seeing him all I would think about was my stupidity, and about actions and consequences; how being at Catholic school had done what it needed to. Then he placed a hand on my leg and I felt an electrical charge run through

me, remembering why I wanted to spend time with him in the first place.

‘We need to pay up,’ I said. ‘Can you ring them tonight and give your card number over the phone, or something?’ Say there was some confusion. That each thought the other had paid.’

‘You’re really rattled, aren’t you? You haven’t touched either of your drinks.’

‘I don’t think they’re going to help. Don’t you feel it, this thing hanging over you?’

‘Not really. We’ve done it. Move on.’ His tone was light and uncompromising. He’d been dared and risen to the challenge. His eyes were still bright with self-congratulation, no thought of a neighbourhood restaurant being out of pocket, or of the deeper spiritual consequences. Doing a runner had put him in the realm of youth; it confirmed that he was nothing like the old poofs in the Québec, whose only options were simply to look or to pay for it. Energy had been restored. He was back in the game. I looked at the table across, wondering whether anyone in the room registered my loss of equilibrium, and how things could now only be stratified into two periods: before and after. But the man who sat there was only interested in watching the hand that rested on my leg, the other arm now around my shoulders and drawing me closer. He nodded as he finished his pint, pleased at the display. Several pairs of eyes were on sticks.

‘I need a piss. You going to be all right?’ I nodded, finding this easier than saying anything else. It was as much his morality as mine that I was questioning. It was something I’d never thought about before. But then, the situation had never arisen. At any other time I would have found the air of nonplussed voyeurism a rich and hilarious seam. Now I felt that it was the only place I was a fit for, and with the man I was currently with. I could see a jury of nuns behind me, whispering that it was divine and rightful punishment to be left burning in the Elephant’s Graveyard. He was taking his time in the loo. Too long. I left the drinks and walked downstairs, thinking it would cap the day off if he were to be found unconscious in a cubicle following a heart attack; or something worse and more canal: the physical realization of

all that they wished for upstairs. I was outside the door when I heard him; the arrogance of earlier replaced with a boyish fear. The breaking in his voice, a rambling, repeated cluster of words made

his nervousness clear. Instantly I felt absolved. I may have felt guilty, but never once did I feel that level of fear.

‘I don’t know how it happened. Such a dreadful, dreadful misunderstanding. I

feel sickened about it. I’ve never been in this position before. You have to believe me. I’ve been brought up to know right from wrong. But you see, it’s not the same for the guy I was with . . .’ ◇

HOW TO UNDERSTAND QUÉBEC #2

## On the Concept of ‘Us’

by Dana Bath

I HAD A friend who didn’t like Francophones. She’d grown up in a small town outside Ottawa, where we were both studying when we met. She was uncomfortable in the bilingual city. ‘The French aren’t like us,’ she said more than once.

I didn’t know what she meant by ‘us’. I was nineteen and from Newfoundland. I’d left home once before, to study French in Québec City for a summer. I’d been fantasizing about the outside world all my life, and Québec City had looked like

my fantasies: crumbly buildings; students with uncut hair smoking in the grass on the Plains of Abraham; cafés full of gesticulating, adamant people. In Ottawa, however, everyone, French or English, wore a tie and walked very fast.

When I graduated I left Ottawa, and my friend, to teach in a village in Bellechasse, Québec. The vice-principal of the school picked me up at the train station and drove me to her home, stopping on the way at the grocery store. We made halting conversation; my French was still poor. As

she placed canned tomato sauce and ground beef in her basket, she gestured to a bag of croissants. ‘Would you like these for dessert?’

They were factory-made, rubbery, each topped with a thick brushstroke of white frosting. Fleishy pink holes at the ends suggested *confiture* inside. If they’d been donuts, they could have appeared in my childhood corner store. I’d never seen anything like them in Ottawa.

‘Oui,’ I said.

That night after dinner, I started a letter to my friend. I wrote about the croissants. A single bite had been like milk of magnesia, cleaning Ottawa out of me. ‘This place is so familiar,’ I wrote. ‘When you were little, what did they sell at your corner store?’ But I couldn’t get the question right. I threw the letter away. ◇

HOW TO UNDERSTAND QUÉBEC #3

## On Bear-spotting

by Anne Cloutier

translated by David Homel

THE KIDS WERE bitching like the little brats they can be, and meanwhile I was running all over the house, trying to get the suitcases together. The kids fought, bit, pinched and spat on each other during the whole three hours that we were in the car (including forty-five minutes to get out of the city at rush hour). But in the end, they fell immediately in love with the house we’d rented in the Charlevoix mountains. There were video games (Wii, PlayStation, PSP), piles of high-definition DVDs (*Harry Potter*, *Petit-pied*, *Les princesses au bal* and *Avatar*) and an enormous spa in which they splashed for hours as if they were in a swimming pool, bare naked because I’d forgotten the swimsuits. My mother brought Oreos, Gatorade, Doritos and Froot Loops for breakfast, and they hadn’t eaten anything except dry packaged food since yesterday evening.

My mother, my sister, my brother and me. With the kids and the spouses: eleven of us sharing the house for just over thirty-six hours.

On Saturday afternoon, I walked down to the wharf. It was empty. I have nothing against family reunions, to a certain extent I think they’re even necessary, but they quickly get on my nerves. My sister talks too loudly and always manages to get everyone to pay attention to her. My mother asks too many questions, needs to know everything, corners us. I was happy to sit by myself on the rocks, somewhere on the Canadian shield, and look at the river; its very evidence. It was clear but cool, around fifteen degrees. I was wearing my fleece and my sunglasses. I thought of my work, of the week to come. I read a little, then dozed off.

The cold woke me. I rubbed my hands together, and breathed on them to loosen

them up. The sun was sinking behind the enormous, unmoving mountains that surrounded me. Here and there, long shadows finished their lazy progress towards the concave slopes. I stood up. In no hurry, I began to climb the deserted road that led back to the house.

Three quarters of the way up, the she-bear and her cub suddenly stepped out in front of me. By the time all three of us realized we were there together, they had covered two thirds of the way across the asphalt road, the little one bouncing along behind its mother. Just a little bit further and they would have crossed all the way, they would have reached what they must have considered the continuation of their usual habitat on the other side of the road. That would have been the end of the story. But the she-bear sensed something. She stopped still. She turned her head slowly and attentively.

Then she saw me.

They say we live our lives in frenzied rhythm, and that we mistake this agitation for a true remedy for our distress. Instinctively, I stopped dead still when I saw the she-bear; small

denatured urban animals have always been submissive before the larger ones. Now what? Now that I was motionless, what was I supposed to do? My mind raced. The warm presence of my iPhone in my palm, deep in my pocket. Perfectly useless. I had no sense of the wild beast's instincts. What should I do? Here and now, time stopped.

The snow, sprinkled with dry brown pine needles, hadn't even finished melting in the underbrush. The bear's fur hung loose on her sides. I took that in. She must be hungry. Her cub urgently needed to fatten up to survive. I imagined that was true, though I had no real idea. A scant 500 metres distant, I could see the house we had rented and my five-year-old son playing on the porch. Scarcely a minute ago, I had started to focus my attention on that scene and even project a certain sense of joy on to it, or at least domestic serenity. Now I saw my husband stepping outside to make sure everything was all right, gazing upon the porch with satisfied eyes without looking into the darkness, without seeing me, or the she-bear, or the cub; the way he usually does, phlegmatic, the kind of guy who doesn't see the thing that's going wrong.

I heard the screen door slam. Then the inside door, solidly closed shut. The house barricaded tight. Did my son go inside with his father? I couldn't see him. In my small backpack there was a Sigg bottle that held some 70 mls of warmish water, the April issue of *Châteline*, a few humid cookies in a Ziploc bag, a Vidéotron bill, my wallet and – yes! – a slightly sharp knife I had used this morning to slice apples for my kids; I'd forgotten to put it away. This mental census changed nothing of my powerlessness, I felt petrified in this attitude of waiting. Every second added to the one before. My fear increased, proliferated, gnawed away at my nerves like a cancer. The she-bear sat down on

her big behind. She waited.

I tried to meet her eyes. I didn't know if that was the thing to do or not.

Please. Don't devour me.

THE SUN was already gone when I heard the motor of a 4x4. The she-bear lifted her head, surprised. In the distance, on the far mountain, impassive headlights pierced the darkness and moved forward, barreling down the slope to the village. The valley echoed and amplified the engine noise that then began to fade and disappear, as the vehicle headed down to the river.



Silence. Not a single strand of fur moved. I tried to hold my breath.

Then the growling motor noise returned, heavy and insistent. It intensified; climbed towards me. My direction. The truck would run over all three of us any minute now, yet we still didn't move.

Then the she-bear stood up. When she moved, I cried out. Don't come this way! No! I raised my hands in front of my face to lessen my fear.

Not wasting a single movement or a single second, the she-bear stepped around her cub and urged it with gentle swipes of her paw towards the other side

of the road. I watched them disappear into the woods just as the 4x4 came skidding around the curve, swerving to avoid me at the last second, for I stood frozen on the road. The driver tapped his temple with his index finger, leaning hard on the horn, but didn't slow down. On the contrary – he accelerated up the steep incline. The next minute he was gone, disappearing for ever into forgetting and elsewhere.

Silence again in this lonely crater. The only sound was a plastic milk wrapper caught in a dry bush that hadn't grown green with spring yet. A shock to the nerves. Its fall-out. My limbs were trembling yet without strength.

I started running. Maybe it's not a good idea to advertise your presence to potential predators, but I ran anyway. I reached the house and sat down, trembling, on the porch.

Then I went in. My husband was playing chess with my brother. My sister was telling her life story to my mother, who listened half-heartedly. (Why does she ask us questions in the first place?) My kids and my brother's kids were crashed out in front of *Star Wars*.

'I saw a she-bear.'

'Really? What kind?'

'A brown one. I think so, anyway.'

'There are bears around here?'

'I guess so.'

'Checkmate!'

'Why, you little sneak! I played like shit.'

For a moment, I waited for something that did not happen. My daughter heard my voice from the living room. She came running.

'I'm hungry, Mom. Hungry.'

She drummed on my thigh so I'd go looking for cookies in the cupboard, so I'd feed her. I went to the cupboard. I rummaged through the box of cookies. My daughter dashed back to the living room. She began filling her face in front of the television. ◇



# Love Stories

by Roxanne Bouchard

translated by David Homel

‘YOU DIDN’T notice anything, I bet. You didn’t even ask yourself for a single second why I bought three dozen roses today! Why I went shopping, why I made dinner. Of course not! You don’t notice anything! You don’t live in this world! You live in your goddamn romance novels!’

‘Is that what you think? You think I’m dreaming that a tall dark stranger is going to kidnap me and whisk me off to a desert island, where he’ll break my heart by dancing with the voluptuous Bobby Jo?’

‘Maybe!’

‘Wow! And then, mad with rage, I’ll flirt with that no-good Dylan, but the tall dark stranger, Briand by name, will appear just in time to curse me out, pay me off, then force me to kiss him, and then, just as I’m being strangled by a mixture of anger and desire, I’ll ask him, “What about Bobby Jo?” To which he’ll respond, “She’s my cousin, you idiot!”’

‘Isn’t that what you want – to be the heroine of a romance novel?’

‘No way! You’re way off the mark, Big Boy! Because, in Québécois novels ...’

‘I don’t know anything about them and I don’t care!’

She sprang to her feet, standing like a bow ready to send its arrow flying. He retreated a step.

‘Well, that’s obvious, stupid! Because if you’d only read just a few, you wouldn’t come up with such stupid things. What the Québécois novel can’t do at all is love stories. Consider it: Marie Calumet’s wedding night ends in an attack of diarrhea, Maria Chapdelaine (whose lover freezes to death in the forest) marries out of patriotic duty, Angéline pays off the Outlander’s debts, and then disappears in the middle of the night, and Florentine, secretly pregnant by Jean who drops her, marries Emmanuel and settles for hand-me-down happiness the way you’d buy a second-hand car! You think that’s what I want?’

‘I ...’

‘And then, afterwards, when they’re married, it’s not exactly paradise. The couples in *Les beaux dimanches* are suffocating, Ovide

Plouffe is suspected of killing Rita (who was cheating on him, by the way), the Belles-Soeurs of the Plateau Mont-Royal complain about being their husbands’ slaves ...’

‘That’s not what I meant ...’

But the more she thought about it, the more upset she got.

‘Even the so-called liberated poets of the Quiet Revolution can’t seduce anyone. Godin calls his mistress “My steamship with breasts.” Miron drinks from “the empty gourd of life’s unmeaning.” Boisvert begs, “Love me.”’

‘Okay, enough’s enough!’

‘And nowadays? Men who don’t want to grow up and women who are objects.’

‘You never wondered why I bought you roses, right?’

‘So what – roses! You know what they make me think of? Gabrielle Roy telling the story of the dead little girl whose friends cover her with rose petals. At the end, the narrator says that ever since, she associates the smell of roses with death.’

‘You’re no fun! No more fun than the heroines of your novels.’

He grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

‘Hey, in the book I’m reading now, there happens to be a guy who gives roses to a woman ...’

‘I don’t care!’

‘No, no, you should, Big Boy! Since you’re accusing me of wanting to turn into the heroine of a novel, you should listen to this ...’

By the door, he stopped, turned around and looked at her.

‘This story’s about a guy named Lépine who’s absolutely crazy about Betsi Larousse. He’s into excess, completely extravagant, and he works as a horticulturist. She’s a cheap little Country and Western singer who wears sparkles and spangles. They’re at the Country and Western festival in Saint-Tite. When Betsi leaves after her concert, she sees an enormous truck that’s pouring thousands of red roses on to the sidewalk. Can you picture that? A mountain of roses! Lépine steps forward, picks up a rose and kneels down in the bloody heap, at voluptuous Betsi’s feet.’

‘Then what?’

‘The next evening, a starry night full of the promise of happiness, Lépine, whose heart is overflowing, sees Betsi again and begins to sing for her. All kinds of songs: folksongs from Québec and France ... He’s pouring out as many songs as there are roses, he’s dancing, his arms turning in the night, the sky a tapestry above him, caulking the room of their love-nest for his beautiful star. He ends his recital by declaiming Jacques Brel’s *La Quéte*: “Dream an impossible dream/Bear the pain of departure/Burn with an impossible fever/Travel to where no one ever goes ...” Can you picture that scene? The handsome stranger whose heart is overflowing, it’s magnificent! Him, the roses and alcohol, it’s so beautiful and absolute and immense under a starry sky for the drunken lover whose words stagger on his lips!’

‘Then what? What does she say?’

‘Betsi? She starts laughing.’

He retreated another step.

‘First she laughs softly, then feverishly, then she completely loses her breath in cold, mordant, capricious laughter. Then Lépine moves towards her (staggering in her direction, drinking from his empty gourd) and asks, “Why?” She’s still laughing. You know how she answers?’

He looked at her, almost wary. She opened the book at the spot her ring finger had been keeping from the very start. Then she said to him, ‘It’s just too funny. I mean, no, really, it’s too funny, I don’t even like roses, stupid, isn’t it? I mean, if there’s one flower in the world I really hate it’s roses, they give me the creeps. It’s crazy, I know, anyway, maybe it’s not so funny after all, and I shouldn’t have said that ...’

‘Fuck off!’

He slammed the door. Finally, she could go back to reading in peace.

Authors and books cited: Rodolphe Girard, *Marie Calumet* (1904); Louis Hémon, *Maria Chapdelaine* (1914); Germaine Guèvremont, *Le Survenant* (1945); Gabrielle Roy, *Bonheur d’occasion* (1945); Marcel Dubé, *Les beaux dimanches* (1965); Roger Lemelin, *Le crime d’Ovide Plouffe* (1982); Michel Tremblay, *Les Belles-Soeurs* (1968); Gérard Godin, *Les Cantouques* (1967); Gaston Miron, *L’homme rapaillé* (1970); Yves Boisvert, *Aimez-moi* (1994); Gabrielle Roy, *Cet été qui chantait* (1972); Louis Hamelin, *Betsi Larousse ou l’ineffable ecclésiaste de la loutre* (1994). Some of these works are available in English.



# The Party Was Over Then Too

*by Leonard Cohen*

When I was about fifteen  
I followed a beautiful girl  
into the Communist Party of Canada.  
There were secret meetings  
and you got yelled at  
if you were a minute late.  
We studied the McCarran Act  
passed by the stooges in Washington,  
and the Padlock Law  
passed by their lackeys in colonized Québec;  
and they said nasty shit  
about my family  
and how we got our money.  
They wanted to overthrow  
the country that I loved  
(and served, as a Sea Scout).  
And even the good people  
who wanted to change things,  
they hated them too  
and called them social fascists.  
They had plans for criminals  
like my uncles and aunts  
and they even had plans  
for my poor little mother  
who had slipped out of Lithuania  
with two frozen apples  
and a bandanna full of monopoly money.  
They never let me get near the girl  
and the girl never let me get near the girl.  
She became more and more beautiful  
until she married a lawyer  
and became a social fascist herself  
and very likely a criminal too.  
But I admired the Communists  
for their pig-headed devotion  
to something absolutely wrong.  
It was years before I found something comparable for myself:  
I joined a tiny band of steel-jawed zealots  
who considered themselves  
the Marines of the spiritual world.  
It's just a matter of time:  
We'll be landing this raft  
on the Other Shore.  
We'll be taking that beach  
on the Other Shore.

# Le droit chemin

by David Homel

**B**EN ALLAN hadn't yet discovered that writing something, even an insignificant piece of historical fantasy disguised as academic research, can ruin the writer's life. Every piece of writing is an ungrateful monster. Instead of being happy just to exist, it demands more and more of the creator's being. Never write anything if you can help it.

Ben had begun innocently enough. He wanted to defend the second part of the nineteenth century, the period he had studied as a student and about which he was now trying to give courses. But no one cared about his favourite century. So few students signed up that most times the college cancelled his class. A teacher's salary could not be attributed to such a meagre group. He was sent back to his Great Books class in a dreary amphitheatre in the college building that had once been a nunnery, and whose halls still echoed with centuries of despair and isolation.

*There is so much to love about the second half of the nineteenth century, Ben Allan began. The Elephant Man. Child labour. Jack the Ripper. The glory of consumption and the fear and strange longing for syphilis. Not to mention animal magnetism, the flow of magical fluids from one person to the other, from the dominant to the subservient who agrees to fall under the former's spell, to surrender himself, or herself, to that wild irresponsible moment of joy known as 'leaving the self behind,' or sometimes merely for the entertainment of the crowd. Everything we know today about the soul was written in that era, but with a primitive, urgent kind of poetry that came from a lesser degree of self-consciousness than we have today.*

*Consider the phenomenon of animal magnetism. What is it if not the power play of therapy? The great romance, the romance of our century — which is the helping relation — is the child of that era. But the animal aspect was stronger in those days. Instead of deriving inner strength and problem-solving abilities from the beneficial encounter with the therapist, the patient of those times would receive bodily fluids that mystically travelled from the therapist's body to his own. Or, more often, her own. No*

*one could explain how that happened. But when it came to the effects, the ones who received the benefits could feel them in their bodies. They felt no doubt.*

*It was as if science had no super-ego in those days.*

Ben Allan was really writing about the mysteries of sex of his younger years: when a person truly could become as one with another, before staunch individuation set in with its necessity for borders. But he did not know that. He just kept typing. Like the patients and practitioners he wrote about, he was in a trance.

*Of all the wonderful pathologies of the day, there was one that flared up, burned brightly then disappeared, all in the space of a few years. This disorder was called dromomania. A man — and it was always a man, there were no recorded female dromomaniacs, probably because the road was not yet open to women — would walk away from his home one day, leave his job, his life. The next thing he knew he was in Moscow. Or Istanbul, or Paris. He had taken the train. This was the great age of railways. But he did not know how he had arrived at his destination, since he had never had one in the first place. He did not even remember his trip. Getting there was not half the fun, since the poor traveller had been in a fugue state, a borderline zone where a man did not recognize himself or his intentions. Depending on how repressive the country he ended up in was, he might be thrown in jail on a charge of vagrancy — 'vagabondage', it was called in the poetry of the times. Or he might be charged with failing to purchase a ticket for the trip he never knew he had taken. But he had committed no crime except that of being in a deep state of unknowing.*

*Sometimes, the authorities in Berlin or Bucharest or wherever he found himself would understand that, and show mercy, and send him back to Bordeaux.*

*To Bordeaux, France. All dromomaniacs began their journeys in Bordeaux. The place was the dromomania capital of the world.*

*Bordeaux was the most resolutely middle-class city in France at the time, and that still might be the case now. A walk down one of its streets*

*would freeze the soul of anyone who ventured out, for the shutters were shut tight, and high stone walls protected the house fronts. There was not another person on the street; walking was an insult to good taste. All the facades were mute. Behind them stood dwellings of great prosperity. The seaport had made its fortune from the slave trade long before it began shipping wine. Barrels of fine claret were piled on the backs of African slaves, a fact that the city fathers expertly concealed. As with all dissembling, it came with a price. Bordeaux became a place where nothing happened outside of the accumulation of capital, where the uneasy consciences of the former slave traders floated on a sea of fine vintage.*

*It turned out that there was a Patient Zero, the first documented case of dromomania. His name was Albert Dadas. He was a minor official for the city's gas company whose job was inspecting other people's work, the installations that were part of the city's modernization plans. He was married. He had two children. He lived with his wife in a solid stone house that sat, along with its garden, behind a high stone wall. From the windows of the sitting room that looked on to the garden, M. Dadas could gaze out and watch Mme Dadas and the children cutting back the flowers that grew in great abundance, sheltered from the blustery Atlantic winds by the wall. Then one day, Albert Dadas took a wrong turn, though he did not know he was doing so at the time. He walked away from his successful life. Two weeks later, he turned up on a hard wooden bench in the train station in Vilnius, Lithuania, after journeying untouched and unaware through the mud and murder of Eastern Europe. This was just about the time when anyone with a brain in their head and strength left in their legs was heading west for America, and survival.*

*For some reason, Albert Dadas went east, right into the maelstrom. But he came to no harm. He was a Frenchman, and a madman, of the temporary kind at least — in any case, he did not belong to any group that anyone wanted to kill. The kindly railway officials of Vilnius sent him back to Bordeaux, where his wife awaited him, along with their two children, at the train station. Who knows what she was thinking? Who knows how she received him? There is no record of a divorce.*

*Women had hysteria. Men had dromomania. They were the same disease. In hysteria, women's organs travelled through their bodies. In dromomania, men's bodies travelled through space in the form of fugue. These disorders don't exist any more, and that's a damned shame. So much poetry was lost when psychiatry started cleaning out its house. ◇*

# Appalachian Spring

by Mireille Silcoff

THERE were seven failed surgeries and then there was one that was called a success. The neurosurgeon plugged up all of the holes that had erupted through my spinal cord, the tiny tears in the tissue that were leaking cerebrospinal fluid until I had none; no cushion around my brain, soft brain knocking against hard skull, and every shake or nod like a prelude to an aneurysm.

The neurosurgeon cut corks of flesh out of my left lateral dorsal muscle, and then he pushed and sewed and stapled those corks into my spinal cord. With these new dams in place, he said that for a few weeks I might even have a little too much spinal fluid, and that this would be a novel situation for my brain, which had become, as he'd put it, 'used to living in the driest skull this side of the Mojave.'

Within a few days I was wheeled out of hospital. It was the end of winter in Montreal, the sky the colour of overcooked veal, and I was encased in a zippered, full torso made of elastic and stamped BINDING COMPRESSION GIRDLE (POST OP) across its side. There was a gusset bearing appropriate slits for elimination. I stayed in the guest bedroom of the house I shared with my husband, a terraced Edwardian on a cul de sac which had, in my absence, turned on me with its multiple staircases and tapering horizon of neighbours with large windows. In the daytime, my father came over and sat in the den across from my bedroom, and nervously tapped on his laptop with his ears pricked. My husband was on night watch. In the evenings, the changing of the guard was ceremonialized with Bloody Caesars. I'd hear my husband and my dad talking in hushed tones about me over the drinks in the study downstairs. I heard my father weeping once. At first I thought it was because it had only been a few months since he'd lost his mother, my grandmother, but then I heard him saying, 'It's just, you know, when it's *your child* . . .'

The surgeon said that, aside from a few fringed nerves and the possible intracranial fullness, I was to be good as new inside

a few weeks. The baroque crotchless unit was soon replaced with a simpler corset, and I found that I no longer had the problems that had beleaguered me when I was leaking spinal fluid: the daily shutdown as my sagging, unsuspected cerebellum hit the hard saucer of my occipital bone. I was a woman alive. So there was frustration, in the family, that I still wasn't bouncing back to normality as I should have. I would pre-empt efforts to foist guests on me by putting yellow 'DO NOT DISTURB' notes on the bedroom door. When I did emerge from my room, clinging to the walls instead of using the metal cane assigned to me in hospital, I was observed so carefully that I came out increasingly rarely, and usually only to go to the bathroom.

The decision to leave came in mid-May. I know this from my credit card files. I had been in the bathroom, taking a bit longer than usual with a pee. 'Everything under control?' asked my father, through the door. I could hear him breathing in the hallway. Rigid on the toilet, I recalled a girl I had known in my late teens. One night she got so fucked up in a nightclub that she lifted up her skirt, pulled down her underwear, crouched in her high heels and began peeing on the dance floor. When I had first heard this story I thought that I had never heard anything more humiliating. I touched the hard wall in the bathroom. *I am in my house*. I leaned over and locked the bathroom door. *And when I leave this room, I will have a plan of escape*.

Earlier that week, I had read what I can now assure you, because I have since looked it up, was an unremarkable 600-worder in the newspaper travel section, a story about Ojai, California. In the article, Ojai is described as a place with a marvellous climate, a free-spirited classical music festival and an impressive pedigree among bohemian cognoscenti and various classes of seekers. The illustration is a photograph of the spiritual leader Jiddu Krishnamurti, who in the 1930s shucked off his fusty East

Coast patrons to become a freelance guru in Ojai. In the picture, Krishnamurti is wearing a suit and is sitting on a chair with one leg draped over the other. A few disciples are lounging on cushions at his feet, beatific in their peasant shirts and moccasins. The excellent Californian mountains make up the background. 'The Ojai Valley,' reads the photo caption, 'a Shangri-la of West Coast Enlightenment.'

Ojai instantly captured a singular spot in my mind's geography. It wasn't only that my brick house in Montreal instantly seemed the opposite of exotic in comparison, but also that Ojai was so different to the other parts of California I'd known. My father's mother used to winter in Palm Springs. She had a standalone unit at the anti-social end of a faux-pueblo condo complex where widows liked taking the sun together, playing pinocle by the pool. If there was an old lady who wintered in Ojai, I thought, she'd be of a different ilk. She'd be the type to wear a long grey braid and grow mums. You'd see her serenely comparing herbal tea boxes at the health food store. She'd have many friends and former lovers, she'd be an etcher, a potter, a weaver or an expert in Japanese calligraphy, a woman with a well-worn meditation cushion and an intriguing education, somebody *fascinating*.

I TOOK A metered cab the whole eighty miles from LAX to Ojai, fading in and out from the pharmacopeia I'd ingested for the cause of flying across the continent. I was using medical marijuana spray as if it were nothing more than a camphor inhaler. The blood vessels in my skull had begun feeling hotly blimped out, as if broiling calluses on to the edges of my brain. I could not feel the backs of my calves, and soon not my heels, and my left arm was like a phantom limb made flesh. The cab driver had a tattoo on his neck that looked like the sort of scripty thing you'd get in prison. He said he lived in Meiners Oaks, a less ritzy part of Ventura County. When he brought my bag into the house I'd rented, he peered into the hallway and said, 'Sweet place.' I answered, with what I felt to be superb casualness, 'Yes, we've always loved it here.' What royal we I had in mind I have no idea, but I didn't want this prison tattoo man getting the impression that I

was to be a solitary presence in this little house in Ojai.

I had rented the house back in Montreal at Bloody Caesar hour, in a five-minute crapshoot of heroic financial recklessness and internet faith. The rental ad had said 'Original 1930s California Bungalow', and the pictures had been vague. I was prepared for some seediness. But as the stone path leading to the house came into view, I was reminded of a feeling I'd had a few times, in what seemed a different life, when I'd been sent somewhere on a magazine assignment and the hotel responded with a room more lavish than anything ever expected. I remembered one overly modish hotel suite in Los Angeles. Entirely orange, with its own roof deck, it had a six-foot, slate-grey, plasticized foam sculpture of a foot in the middle of its bathroom. It was truly a design move for assholes – *Darling, my bathroom is so insanely big it can fit a six-foot foot in it.* On the hotel phone, I called the photographer who had flown in with me. 'You have to come up and see this place,' I said. I needed him as witness. I'd return to Montreal and no one would believe me.

This Ojai house was impressive in a better way. A square single-storey villa of pristine wood shingle with a red painted door hung with a ceramic knocker, it was bordered the whole way around by a stone verandah. The verandah led to an open, brushy field on one side, and on the opposite side to a garden whose main feature was a massive storybook tree with an octagonal bench circling its base and a wind chime hanging off a low branch. Out back was an orange grove hemmed by a white picket fence. The name of the hilltop street was Mountainview. The Topa Topa mountains shone pink in the close distance.

The inside of the house had been redone entirely. The bathroom was in an almost veinless marble and the kitchen was a sanitized Provencal with plates in slots over a giant country sink. There was a fridge the size of a walk-in closet and floors in buffed wide hardwood. There were French doors leading from the dining room to the garden with the ancient tree.

And how pristine it all was. So pristine that, after a few days, I was harbouring a persistent curiosity about the house's

usual inhabitant, an Ojai land broker named Beth Dooney. I put her in her late forties. She had mentioned more than once in our brief email correspondence that she was 'journeying' to Italy for the eight weeks I was occupying her house. She'd intimated that the trip was awfully well deserved, perhaps coming in the wake of personal crisis, by giving her emails headings such as 'gelato for breakfast here i come.' The house's interior certainly pointed to some kind of transition. It was full, but still oddly blank as a place to call home, lined with the kind of mid-range, blackish-brown wood furniture that comes in a collection called 'New Horizons' or 'West Contemporary'. Everything looked box-fresh. The plates were chipless white, the sheets and towels flawless white. There was no old ugly crystal vase from a dead aunt or bowl of pennies silted with lint and paperclips. The closest thing to a standard junk drawer was one in the kitchen that slid open easily to display corks in a zippered plastic bag, a pair of binoculars in a black nylon case and garden scissors in a spotless suede holster. There were no photos. On a sideboard I saw two New Horizons-ish picture frames, but they contained identical photos of sunsets.

I guessed that my lessor was doing Italia alone. I began forming a deeper back-story: the victim of a painfully dissolving marriage, her therapist told her to get out fast. Her energy healer concurred. Leave it all! So she walked out of her emotionally abusive husband's life and straight into Pottery Barn.

The bookshelves also looked like they had been stocked on a single trip to the mall. There were mainly self-help books: *The Power of Now*; *Your Life Now*; *The Present is a Gift*. A single row of CDs consisted almost entirely of the kind of music formerly known as 'whale', now rebranded as 'spa'. The only tangent was a Boston Pops CD called *American Visions*. I looked at the track listing on the back. The disc contained what I remembered as my grandmother's favourite piece of orchestral music, Aaron Copland's paean to big, open-air America, 'Appalachian Spring'. My grandmother first discovered it, I'm sure, because it's what the Plattsburgh TV station that she watched in Montreal used to play after

the national anthem when they stopped broadcasting at three a.m. When I was a kid, the music thrilled me as well because it contained a passage I recognized from a dog food commercial; terriers pulling Chihuahuas in chuck wagons.

I liked to put the Copland track on and stand on the verandah, looking out. I knew the Appalachians were not Californian mountains; still, the Topa Topas felt like a painted set for this exact piece of music. It did gnaw a little that I couldn't remember where the Appalachians actually *were*. Virginia? Colorado? I hadn't brought my computer with me and couldn't very well ask anybody. There were acres buffering me from my neighbours, and you couldn't see most of their houses from the road. Some properties had electric gates. There were never any strolling locals, just the occasional SUV whizzing by.

Before long I was relieved by this. I had arranged for a human event every few days – a delivery guy who arrived with bags of food from a shop in town that I'd found in the Yellow Pages – and I was even uneasy with him in the house. In setting up my account with the store on the telephone, I'd said I was caring for an old woman, a completely spontaneous and unnecessary lie. When the delivery guy arrived, I had to keep the bedroom door portentously closed.

'She's bedridden,' I explained, with the appropriate look of care-giving compassion on my face.

The delivery guy told me his wife also took work looking after the infirm, and I said, 'Oh, I don't do this for money.' Seeing the way my hand trembled when handing over bills, and then spotting the corset under my polo shirt, he said, 'Well you must be a very kind woman, helping someone when —' and he pointed his chin at my midriff. 'Must get tough,' he said, 'you guys up here by yourselves.'

My being alone seemed to be of universal concern to every person I had any contact with. When I spoke to anyone back home they had words about it, so many words that I soon remedied the situation by unplugging the phone and putting it in a cupboard, its wire neatly coiled and secured with a twist tie. The last person I'd spoken to had been my editor. I had tried to sound like an adventurous woman on a fabbo



mountaintop retreat. 'Are those *wind chimes*?' he'd asked, having none of it. I imagined him looking out of his plate glass window, on to Broadway, and thinking another one of his writers had lost the plot, or their mind, before managing to make anything big of themselves.

I was in no condition for any exploratory walkabouts in Ojai. I couldn't really bring myself to step beyond that verandah. The plugs and staples sealing my spinal cord had definitely screwed up some nerves. Since arriving, I felt like I was wearing rocking Dutch clogs. My left arm was a bloodless husk and my right hand, a rusty lobster claw. With my spinal cord continuously overfilled, the pressure in my head was a new world of weird. Any exertion that made my heart beat quickly made one of those magicians' wiener balloons blow up around my brain, squeezing stars into my eyes, bells into my ears and once or twice knocking me out from sheer excruciation.

The neurosurgeon had said I needed to be sensitive to what my body was telling me post-operation. One wrong move and I could pop his corks out, making bigger holes, worse leaks, geysers. But things were in such an uproar that I often couldn't tell pain from tingling and tingling from numbness. I would close my eyes, touch body parts and ask: *Can I feel this? What is this?*

Every so often a vision of my grandmother, a woman in nightclothes padding slowly through a condo, shouldering walls, teetering from too many pills, came into view. My grandmother died the same year my difficulties began. She'd only been buried three weeks when my spinal cord started ripping apart, three months by the time I was being wheeled into my first operating room, still with the impatience of the well, thinking vainly of scars and low-backed dresses. I had not properly mourned her, but I was not about to start right then, with my brain being squashed into crazy shapes.

For a few hours every evening, the spinal fluid pumped less, a small grace period from the bursting compression inside my head the rest of the day. I'd make a dinner of steak and drink a half bottle of wine and then I would sit in the dining room and keep company while

eating by talking to myself. Sometimes I'd pretend I was being interviewed. 'Loneliness,' I'd tell my interviewer, 'is the most fleeting of emotions. It's just a tunnel you need to get through, and if you make it through, you can find yourself somewhere quite *sublime*, like atop a mountain.' Other times I'd speak, brimming with generous wisdom, to friends who in the last year had disappeared in a miasma of transparent excuses: 'I understand. You were so busy. You just didn't know how to deal.' I'd convince myself of the power of these one-sided conversations to such an extent that I believed something about them was being transmitted. In Canada, ears were burning. Signals were felt. After my meal, I'd have a nightcap of medical marijuana spray and codeine with diazepam. I'd then listen to the Aaron Copland CD really, really loudly, thinking that my unseen neighbours would, from afar, admire my belief in the classic American dream. *Oh, Copland*, they'd whisper, getting up to gaze at the mountains that make such good sense with that music.

MOST DAYS, I busied myself with small repetitive contained tasks: folding and refolding my few t-shirts, arranging my comb and soap on one side of the sink and then putting them on the other side, wiping the table before my breakfast and again after it. I'd been annexed by the idea of keeping the house as neat as I'd found it, as if its owner could pop up at any moment from under the floorboards for a quick survey of its state.

I also spent a good deal of time in the shower. I liked showering because it felt progressive – a thing a normal person does before actually *leaving* a house – until the day I found that I was screaming, and quite loudly, under the water's spray. I caught myself mid-action, although it seemed barely an action, more an incidental practice, like twirling your hair while you're reading or tapping the steering wheel when stopped at a red light.

I removed myself from the bathroom wrapped in one of the house's extremely large white towels. I forced my brain and my feet into a temporary peace pact, an *entente* that would last at least long enough to get me past the verandah. I had been in California for two weeks. The plan had not been to fly to the other side

of the continent and act like a lunatic shut-in. The plan had been more along the lines of the Resurrection.

Outside, my feet were on a carpet of pine needles and dry brown earth, and my soles didn't know the difference. It was like I was lugging myself around on medieval chopines, or those stilted geisha thongs, inches above the ground. I went as far as the storybook tree in the garden and sat on its bench. The tree was so old, its trunk so knobbly, it had an almost eccentric look to it. I let the towel I was wearing droop and my stitched back touch the corrugated bark of the oak. It was a California oak. I knew this because my grandmother had a tree in the back of her Palm Springs condo and she called it My Banyan Tree. One day her cleaning woman told her it was not a banyan, it was a California oak. My grandmother continued calling the tree her Banyan.

I surveyed the thirsty-looking earth. Near the tree was a patch of stinky flowers, skin-coloured things with thick stems, almost grotesque. Ojai has that smell that you can find only in the hottest and driest parts of America, a soapy deserty sagey smell, entirely mouldless, what might be the healthiest smelling smell in the world. Leaning into these flowers offended that in an instant. I wondered if plants with such a harlot's panty aroma could possibly be indigenous.

I padded to the field at the opposite end of the property to inspect the ground there. I measured the distance in past life, *belle vie* terms: the equivalent to one downtown Montreal block in pinching platform stiletto sandals after a seriously abusive all-nighter.

I stood at the edge of the field. It had a trampled look to it, its covering a bramble of pine debris and earth balled into tarrish mud pebbles. I pushed at a mud ball with one of my toes. It flattened satisfyingly into a disc. Holding my towel around me, I walked a couple of metres, watching my feet hitting the earth, squashing pebbles into discs, pebbles into discs. I felt something move in the corner of my eye and looked up to find the entire field streaming away from me. It was not just one brush-coloured rabbit but dozens of them, maybe hundreds. Stealth bunnies – bounding and twitching everywhere.

Panicked, I dropped the towel and left it on the field. The circles of tar on

the soles of my feet were rabbit shit. I tottered in the direction of the orchard behind the house, where I'd noticed a garden hose looped through the white pickets, only to see a rat perched in profile on the fence, its rat's tail sticking straight out. It was enough. I was naked, limping, and who knew what other wildness lurked on this property? Just the night prior, I had been watching the mountains change colour from the dining room windows when a bird flew straight into the glass, splatting dead on the stone verandah. I hadn't gone out to sweep it up, but now, entering the house through the dining room doors, I saw that the bird was gone, without a single smear on the stones. I was sure that the bird had not been a dream, but there was no way I could be sure. I had not been keeping a diary. The only things I'd penned in days had been food lists and doodles, and one stoned midnight note that I'd found which read 'FUCK YOU MOTHERFUCKERS,' which I have no memory of writing.

I HAD ONCE asked my grandmother, who spent twenty-three out of twenty-four hours of every day alone on a bed clustered with television remote controls and transistor radios and copies of *TV Guide*, why she bothered with her trip to Palm Springs every year if she barely went out of the condo when she got there. She didn't play cards with the ladies at the pool and she didn't like the couples who went for earlybird specials and 'to die for' desserts in someone's big white four-door. She was usually recovering from one surgery or another, being cantankerous or snooty to the unlucky person sent in to care for her. Her reply to my question was that she felt different in California, and that that was *interesting* to her. I held on to this answer because it was a rare sign of introspection in my grandmother. Even as a teenager, I wondered about what went on in her head, what her thoughts went *into*. She had no hobbies besides watching TV. She didn't do her own housekeeping. She didn't read; she never lasted with crafts. I used to swipe drugs from her bedside to use as comedown pills after club nights on coke and ecstasy, the joke being that my grandmother's medicines were strong enough to pummel any street drug. Once, alone in my bedroom, I tried a neat

double dose of her medications to see if one could possibly grow wings from the pills in those prescription bottles. Maybe my grandmother's stonedness contained multitudes? But I just blacked out, waking up in my jeans the next morning with my lips glued whitely together.

The week after she died, I volunteered to clean out her Montreal apartment, because my father was too broken up to do it. She left behind a mountain of junk. Mystery groupings of things: 1,000 swizzle sticks; four cribbage boards; two decades' worth of Red Cross greeting cards; shopping bags filled with insoles or balls of synthetic yarn; piles of jewellery bought from infomercials. There wasn't a diary or a letter in my grandmother's hand. There wasn't an idea on a napkin or a line in a matchbook. There wasn't a further word as to how she endured. Under her bathroom sink, behind the boxes of fleet enemas and several sad flaking hairbrushes, and a secret ashtray that we all knew about, I found a stack of filled-in crossword digests, the easy kind that you can buy in an airport before your flight. I remembered my grandmother in the airport, crabbily commandeering the person pushing her wheelchair. She wanted some candy. A crossword. It was incredible that these were the only proof that my grandmother was a woman with handwriting. I threw them all away, along with everything else, including the metal filing cabinet packed with claims and records from clinics with names like The Desert Medical Center. I did it with no remorse, dumping fast, as if a spirit could live in any old thing, as if the best I could do for myself was get out cleanly and quickly.

THE DAY AFTER the bunny event, I spent most of the morning lying on the sofa in the living room, the house's deepest middle. Whether the force rooting me there was physiological or psychological was impossible to know. My brain was a sizzling skillet, frying synapses like tiny shrivelling smelts. It was best to keep my eyes on the most inert things. On the ceiling, the central beam of the house ran parallel to my body. It was a nice beam; solid, dark oak. When the afternoon sun sent horizontal light into the living room, it revealed a long, almost elegant crack in wood. I let my eyes follow the fissure. I stayed with it as it navigated knot and

whorl until it reached the spot just above my head, where I saw what looked like an inscription. I got on to my knees and, steadying myself on the sofa back until a headrush cleared, saw that, no, this was not some primitive love scraping, the kind of thing you find filed into a tree. It may have been a stamp of some sort. Maybe a craftsman's marking.

I went to the drawer in the kitchen where I'd noticed before the pair of mini binoculars. I focused the lenses and saw that there were two boxes of text. They were hand-carved and exquisitely executed in a squared-off, barely-serifed lettering, and framed by graphic, trumpet-shaped flowers and twining branches and vines. The first said:

THIS  
IS  
NOT  
A  
BEAM!

And the second, just as ornate:

MAY  
WALLACE  
OJAI  
1935

The 'M' in 'May' and the 'I' in '1935' shared the same long vertical line, making me unsure as to whether the person who'd carved this had done so in May 1935, or if the linking was only decorative, which would make 'May Wallace' the signature, a woman's name. Lacking my laptop, I could only speculate. I might have been satisfied with 'This is not a beam' as some builder's joke if the carving wasn't so beautiful and, in 1935, fashionably whimsical: Magritte's pipe transposed on to a bungalow's beam in the wilds of California. That connection excited me – *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*; this is not what you think – it explained a vibe that could be sensed in the house, coming up from between the perfect drywall and new floorboards, a seep of something scintillant but patched over.

I gave my curiosity time to settle, and when it didn't, I located the phonebook and found that Ojai did have a public library, and that it was less than a quarter of a mile away, in town. The idea of walking to an actual library in a genuine

town that would contain real people landed like an epiphanic vision. I did not want to take a cab. I didn't want to explain to any driver about why I needed a car for the distance most eighty-year-olds could walk in a footloose ten minutes. I also didn't want the connection between me and my purpose sullied. I trained for two days, walking slow laps along Mountainview. I found a good branch by the side of the road that I used as a walking stick. When I finally started into town, my feet didn't feel like wooden flippers any more, more like jelly in socks of pins and needles. It had occurred to me that this was not necessarily *better*, but moving down the mountain, it did feel like progress.

OJAI'S TOWN centre surprised me by being not at all like Palm Springs'. Palm Springs had that resort town peculiarity of being a magnet for both the very aged and the very gay. Ojai seemed more homogenous – full of people who cycled in head-to-toe cycling outfits and said boomerish things like 'Let's take a java break' and 'Sixty is the new fifteen,' referring, with much double-entendre, to sunscreen. There were some faux-pueblo buildings, and many in that Californian Mexicasa style with the red tiles, but there were also hints of genteel Anglicism: wood filigree and small gardens of lavender; stained glass on the side of a tea house with tablecloths in chintz. My grandmother would never have gone to a place like that. In Palm Springs, once in a while she took me to an old deli on Indian Canyon called the Gaiety, which had pastel murals of highly erect cacti and eighty-five-year-old Litvak owners who, trust me, had *no idea*.

The library was made up of two low, butter-coloured buildings aproned by a courtyard full of yuccas and St Catherine's Lace. I admired the garden for a minute, leaning idly on my stick and fancying what it would be like to be a local; just a native using the local library. I had a quiet feeling, the kind you get when you are about to enter a magnificent cathedral; you steel yourself for an upsurge of spirit.

Inside the library it was dry and comfortable, with plain wood tables and padded chairs in worn eighties office shades of rose and teal. There were only two people in the main room: an old

man in a bolo tie and slippers squinting at the Ventura County newspaper, and the librarian pushing a book cart.

'Can I help you?' she asked from behind her cart.

I wasn't sure how to go about this May Wallace business. I'd begun to question whether I'd imagined the carving in the beam. I felt weirdly transparent. My teeth felt transparent. My legs were dissolving. 'I'm looking for information,' I said. I could see my bangs separating at my eyelids, hairs shivering. I truly had no idea how I was coming across to this woman. Minutes before, approaching the glass doors of the library, I'd seen my reflection and thought, 'Hey, that old lady is wearing the same striped t-shirt as me. I wonder if she also got it in ... Oh. Right.'

The librarian dipped her neck down to catch my eyes. 'What kind of information?' she asked. She was wearing a t-shirt too. It read: 'OJAI POETRY FESTIVAL: SOUNDING THE CONCH.' She spoke so gently it could only mean that I looked like I should be in hospital, or in some kind of home, or at the very least lying down.

'Well, I'm writing a history of Ojai,' I said, the first thing I could think of. 'Maybe you won't have what I'm looking for.' The librarian asked me if I planned on beginning with the Native Americans, and feeling so far from anything I actually needed, a fool on an idiot's quest, I said that I'd find my own way around. 'Okay,' she said. 'Don't get lost on us now.'

The stacks contained the sort of strangely balanced collection that might come by inheritance of dead people's libraries rather than any great financial endowment: paperbacks, bestsellers in dustcovers, suddenly a huge expanse on birds here, a section on Romania there, and evidence that at least three donors were really into Karl Jung. I found the Art area and, expecting little, looked down for 'W.'

May Wallace, *The Pot At the End of the Rainbow: An Ojai Memoir*

Wallace, *I'm Astonished! A Memoir*

May Wallace, *The Pottery of Love*

Krishnamurti, Wallace, *Conversations with my Guru*

Jiesen Edwards, *Radiant Palms: A Biography of May Wallace*

Dennis, *American Dada Ceramics*

The librarian passed by again, pushing her trolley. 'Sorry,' I said, 'but do you know anything about this May Wallace?'

'Well, sure. Everyone around here knows a little about May,' she said. 'She's a famous artist. She lived just up the hill on Mountainview. Are you looking for stuff on her?'

The librarian motioned for me to come to her desk. 'She only died a couple of years ago. The whole town went to her funeral.' Installing herself at her computer, the librarian said that, in addition to Wallace's published books, the library was also in possession of Wallace's private papers and handwritten diaries. It would be a few months until it was all organized enough to send off.

'Where's it going?' I asked.

'The Smithsonian,' she said, her face beaming in the light of her monitor. 'But right now it's all in the resource room in the back. You interested in seeing it?' I nodded and the librarian seemed genuinely pleased. 'I'll sit you in the resource room, and you can have a look at everything nice and quiet. Now, I'll need to see a card, do you have a card?'

I gave her one of my old business cards. I still kept a few in my wallet for status emergencies. 'Nope,' she said, pushing it back across the table. 'I meant a library card. We'll need to get you a library card. Do you have an Ojai address?'

'115 Mountainview.'

'Oh, so you are in May Wallace's old house! Oh my goodness!' said the librarian. 'Tell Beth Dooney I say hi. Is she still remodelling?'

I SPENT WHAT must have been several hours at the back of the library, immersed in May Wallace's papers and books, all of it like pages out of a bohemian fairy tale. Wallace was among the first to follow the guru Krishnamurti when he moved west. She had a Whartonian New York family whom she passionately despised, a lucky inheritance that came early, and a certain aesthetic ease in reestablishing herself in Ojai as a potter – a woman open-legged at the wheel in twin turquoise cuffs and great Kahlo-esque circle skirts. For a time, her studio was in the dining room of her house. She described the pink of the Topa Topas exactly as I saw them from the windows.

The more I read, the more furious I

became with Beth Dooney. What kind of person buys a house that could be transported *whole* to the Smithsonian and then decides to whitewash the lot, fill it with a ton of generic New Horizonism and then abandon it to take up some depressingly middle-aged female *villegiatura* in Italy? It was entirely possible that her neurotic drywall had been standing between me and something approaching fate. Who knows what could have been inscribed on more reachable posts before the renovators arrived?

There were lots of pictures of May Wallace in and around the house, which she had packed with Navajo rugs, pictures floor to ceiling and cushion-festooned rattan. The place seemed to operate as a luxuriant way-station for passing fascinating people. There was a frilly-edged photo of Wallace breakfasting on the verandah in a kimono with a man who is definitely Dali and a woman who looks a lot like Anaïs Nin, and another of her coyly hugging the California oak while being hugged by Edgar Varese, who is identified on the picture's back. The most striking photograph I found was one of Wallace and a different man, both of them draped like ancient Greeks for a costume party, and tented under a massive, sparkling night sky. It bore an inscription on its front, written in silvery ink with music hall humour: 'Dearest May! I'll never forget the starry skies of "Oh, Hi!" Love, Double A.'

I rested my forehead on my arm and listened to my heart shush. Books and papers and pictures surged out across the table. I hadn't actually made great progress in getting through everything, but with this single picture bearing these two A's, I had found what I needed. I could have sought proof with a bit more foraging, a mention of Aaron Copland by full name, but had come up against an almost transcendental exhaustion. I packed my bag and, pretending I had no idea what I was doing, slipped the 'Double A' photo in with my own things, and then one of May Wallace's handwritten diaries, too.

In the taxi back to the house, the cab swinging up the mountain under a sky like sequins on black velvet, I had the rare feeling that where I was and where I was supposed to be had merged. If I had suffered an ever widening gulf between

me and my best destiny, I could now feel the gap coming together, almost by magnetic force. There are no meaningless coincidences, I thought. I had zero guilt about my pilfering. I was sure that everything that was happening – that had happened – was part of a pattern, that something was happening *through* me, and happening for a reason, and it felt enveloping enough to contain the whole Ojai night – the stars under my skin, the moon glowing from inside my ribcage.

THE NEXT MORNING I sat under the oak tree, reading. May's handwriting was spiky and highly capitalized, the writing of a woman penning only ultimates. I'd scored well with the diary I'd stolen:

*Aug 20, '46. They say it is the 'Hottest August On Record.' The ferocious heat made staying anywhere inside the House Intolerable. Night was welcome. As the Topas blushed pink, 'AA' and I Made Love in the Garden, by the Tuberoses and carried their scent with us for the rest of the evening. The most Divine scent on Earth. L and K dined with us. L asked, 'What perfume are you wearing?' . . . A Delicious Secret!*

I crouched to examine those skin-coloured flowers. I pulled one up by the stalk and inhaled its flower-bomb outrageousness. I carried the tuberose back to the house. From the dining room windows, the mountains were flashing pink and I took the fact as an opportunity. I sucked a few long draughts of my marijuana spray, the smell of the tuberose impregnating the mist. I put the tuberose under my left bra cup, over my heart, and propelled by a sense of a big looming *yes* of the life-changing sort, didn't care if I was acting like some nutso waif out of DH Lawrence. I put on 'Appalachian Spring,' pulled a sofa cushion on to the dining room floor and lay with it under my shoulder blades, so that I could hang my head off of it. Since the trip to the library, it was best to have nothing pressing against my skull.

I opened May's diary to the page where she and Double A do it, and placed the Copland photo in its seam. I then flipped the book over and laid it across my chest, like a little house, and closed my eyes. I did not know how to meditate. I was thinking, rather, of osmosis, of *absorption*.

I concentrated on vibrations. The bass was in the floorboards. The windows were open, and I heard the crunch of gravel outside, the patter of feet, but was not afraid of wildlife coming in.

My husband didn't use the knocker on the front door. He just walked right in. 'Hi,' he said. 'Um, are you sleeping?'

The voice was coming from behind my head. I lifted the diary off my chest as my husband bent down to meet me. The pores on his nose were the size of tea saucers.

'No one could reach you,' he said, 'and me and your father discussed it and —'

'How did you get here?' I asked, not knowing what else to say to this impossible vision.

'I flew,' he said. 'How else? I took a morning flight.'

I was afraid to speak. The words were coming out and hanging in the air like a bizarre holiday garland. I wanted to stand up. I wanted to get the tuberose out of my bra.

'Are you stoned?' asked my husband, inspecting my eyes. He looked around and frowned. 'Cowboy music?' he asked, heading to the stereo, turning the volume down, sniffing the air, wrinkling his nose. 'You know,' he said, 'it kind of stinks in here.'

FORTY-EIGHT hours later I was back in my brick house in Montreal. Only hours after my husband arrived, the pain lining my brain had turned too much. I had to make him strip the bed of everything but its fitted sheet so that I could sprawl flat on my stomach with nothing touching me, my nose bearing into the mattress. He didn't like seeing me so still and silent, like a corpse in a pool. He took a side table out of the living room, brought it into the bedroom, put the television on it and laid the remote by my bedside. He left the TV on all night in my room while he slept on the couch. He packed my things, and when it was time to leave, he carried me to the car, his arms under my shoulders and knees. 'We'll get you a wheelchair at the airport,' he said.

On the darkening drive to LAX, I told him about the day with the brown bunnies and I told him about Beth Dooney. My husband just drove, silent. 'Did you pack the diary?' I asked. I hadn't said anything about May Wallace. I



didn't have the energy for my husband's indifference. He nodded, not listening, but then caught himself. 'Actually, no,' he said. 'You mean that handwritten thing? I put it with the other books. In the house. It didn't look like it was yours.'

The weight of anticlimax was heavy on my eyelids; I watched the black and silver California sky tenting the highway,

a sky that would soon be lost to me. My chronically sick grandmother died; I became chronically ill: this would be my story, a plain one. I would live in a brick house in Montreal, and paradise would dwell beyond my personal horizon. My husband and I seldom spoke of Ojai after we'd left it, a chapter extracted. I still occasionally wonder if that diary stayed

in that house, or if it made it to the Smithsonian, or got lost in the shuffle of Ojai real estate. Now and then I picture a lovely young biographer in a Washington library. She notices that in all of May Wallace's passionately documented days, a block of time is missing, and for the life of her, she can't imagine where it may have gone. ◇

## Madonna of the North

by Niven Govinden

*Madonna's mother was born in Montreal. How would her life and work have differed if the Québécoise gene had dominance over the Italian-American?*

HOW TO UNDERSTAND QUÉBEC #5

## On Culture

by Robbie Dillon

MY GOOD friend Ian rings me up on a Friday afternoon. 'I've been in the shit all week,' he growls, 'I think I need a little cultural diversion.'

'Sounds good to me,' I say. 'I could definitely use some culture. It's been awhile.'

We Québécois are very serious about culture, even if we're not always sure what it is. As anyone who lives here can tell you (mainly because we are reminded with brain-drilling regularity), Québec is North America's most unique and distinct society with an exciting, vibrant culture that is somehow doomed to wither and blow away unless it is incessantly promoted and defended. To that end the government recently dedicated 1.9 billion dollars to the construction of a *Quartier des Spectacles*, a massive arts and performance complex in the heart of Montreal, where hundreds of thousands of foreign tourists will celebrate our unique and distinct traditions by attending the outdoor concerts of American pop stars and clogging up traffic through the downtown core for the next several decades.

Those in search of a more authentic

- Singing in a more convincing French accent.
- Performing with a Metis folk troupe at Live Earth.
- Photographed for the sex book at the Montreal Cultural Centre. Mostly clothed.
- Shot alternately making Gateau Breton and knitting a lace cap for a Dolce & Gabbana campaign.

- Rumours of a jazz album.
- *Vogue* renamed *Ceroc*.
- Cavorting on a gondola on the Saint Lawrence River in 'Like A Virgin'.
- A hook-up with William Shatner over Warren Beatty.
- Jesus Luz would be Inuit.

cultural experience would be better off heading for Ste. Catherine Street, as Ian and I do. Here, on the city's main commercial artery, within a few blocks of the *Quartier's* state-sponsored magnificosity, one can find, alongside the usual chain retail outlets and multi-national burger joints, dozens of establishments with names like Octopussy, Le French Kiss, and our destination, the infamous Super-Sexe.

We arrive to find a sidewalk greeter standing in the doorway, beneath a flashing neon mural that depicts several twenty-foot-tall naked female crime-fighters. We slip past him and head up a steep flight of stairs as he pours his spiel out over the passing crowd. 'Come on in/let's make a deal. Have a drink and cop a feel.' Inside, everything from *les stripteaseuses* to *le lap-dancing* and *le handjob* is on offer. Even *le full-service avec une pipe* (oral sex) can be discreetly arranged for regulars who have demonstrated a deep understanding of local custom by generously tipping *le doorman*.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the Catholic traditions on which it was founded, Québec has a long-standing

reputation for permissive moral attitudes. Back when Las Vegas was still a dusty, one-horse watering hole, Montreal was renowned for its ubiquitous *maisons des poules* (brothels), blind-pig speakeasies, and *barbotte* gambling dens. Today, the city continues to lure frat boys, stag-partiers, and middle-aged businessmen from across the US and Canada with a combination of cheap, strong beer and friendly naked women. And while Québec's strip-bars and massage parlours now offer lucrative employment to a diverse collection of ethnicities, a sizable contingent of French-Canadians still work the pole. Many of them are likely descendants of the original *filles du roi*, disadvantaged girls as young as 12 who were rounded up during the 17th century and shipped off by the boatload to the soldiers and settlers of New France in an attempt to pump up the struggling colony's population.

I settle into my seat and turn to Ian as Chantale, a buxom blonde, slips out of her thong and bends over so that the blushing flower of her womanhood is perched...

*(That's enough – The Editors)*

"Don't you just love culture?" he shouts over the din of the house DJ's remix of Lady Gaga's *Pokerface*.

*(Seriously – The Editors)*

I signal the waitress to bring us another round of Jell-O shots. "VIVE LA CULTURE!" ◇

# Books

*by Heathcote Williams*

The first flash mob in Europe  
met in Rome on 24 June 2003.  
Three hundred people entered Messaggerie Musicali,  
a large book and music store,  
to ask its staff either for non-existent books  
or for the most obscure books  
by untraceable authors.

One flash-mobber asked for a copy of the New Testament  
translated from Coptic into Latin by David Wilkins  
and published in 1716 by Oxford University Press.

The book took till 1907 to sell its 500-copy print run.  
It was the slowest selling book in human history.

'Have you got it?' the book-lover excitedly giggled,  
Eager to serve the cause of surrealism and fun.  
the assistant scrutinized Messaggeri's database then said,  
(in Italian) 'It's not coming up. I'm sorry. It's gone.  
But maybe you just missed a copy . . . ? I'll double check.  
No, it's gone. But you must come again.  
We're always restocking. We'll have it in very soon.'

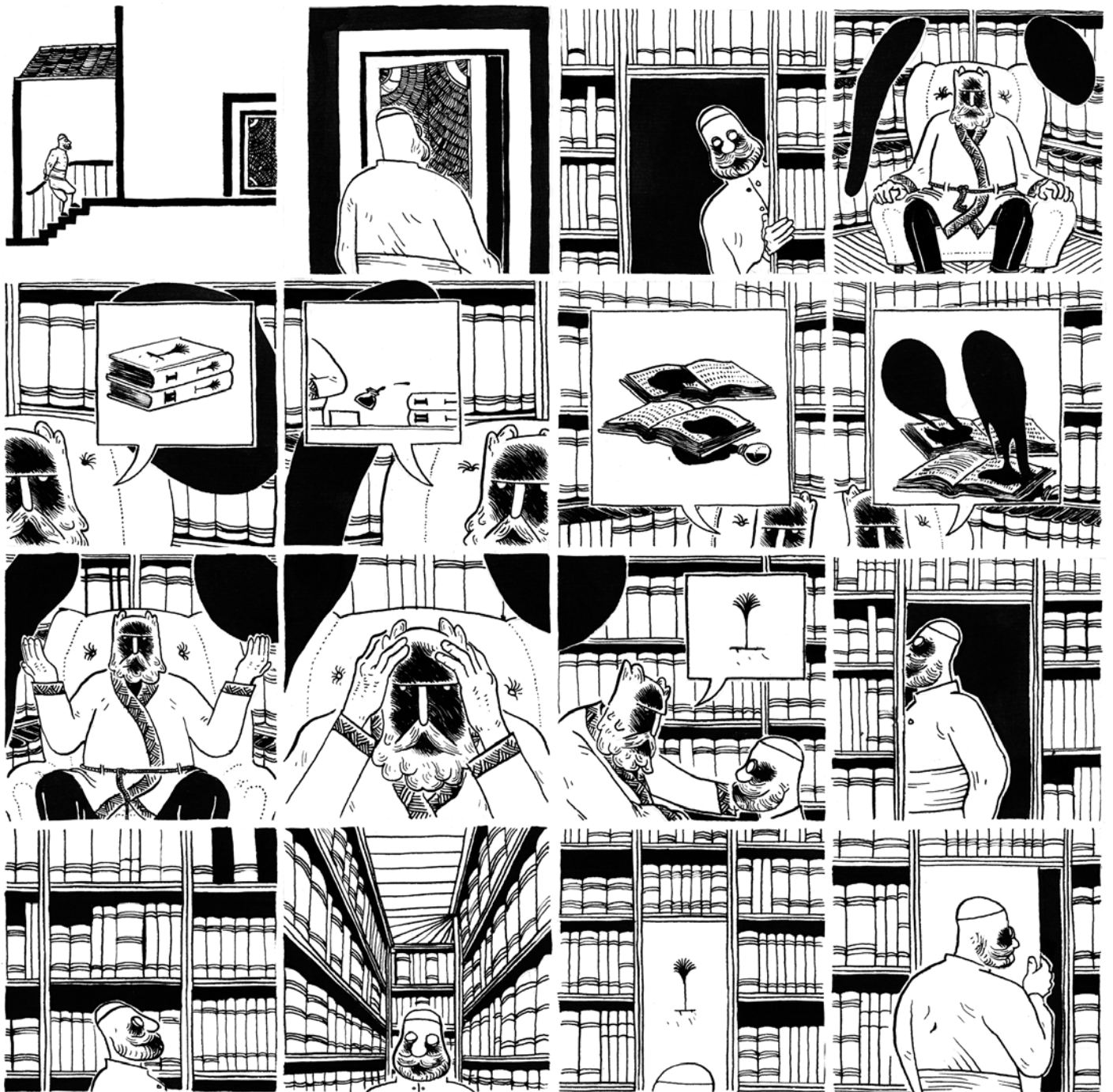
She smiled, an old smile to warm your hands on.

Maybe it's the smell of books,  
that crisp mustiness that mixes past and present  
combined with the fummy glue in their bindings  
that makes even the most impossible dream  
seem completely achievable. A commonplace . . .

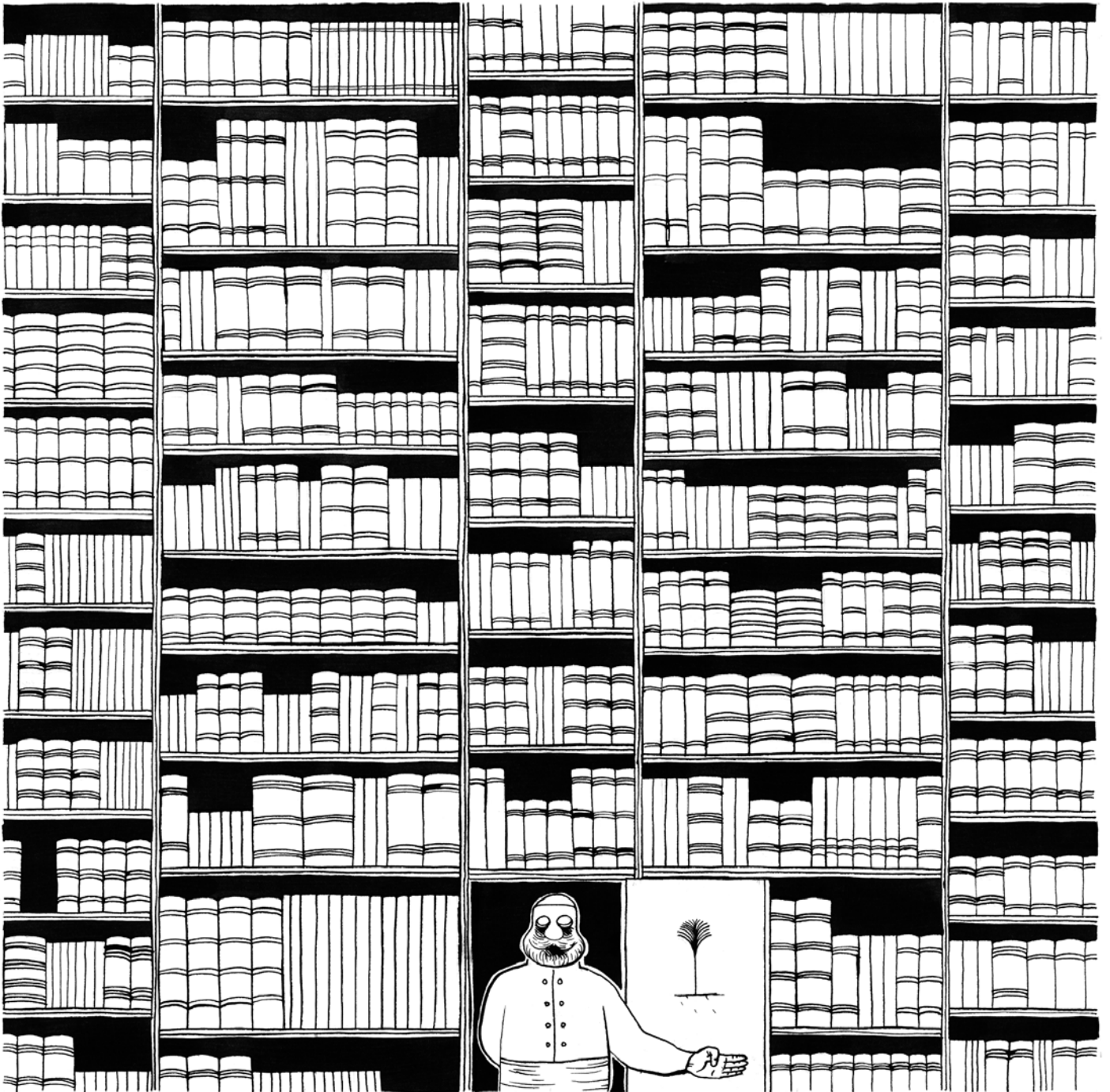
Just one amongst many in the rows of dream-weavers  
each with an immortal shelf-life and no sell-by date,  
whose books open like butterflies for the pages to flutter  
until something rises out, fanned by two floating minds,  
for the reader's soul to lose weight as it hitches a ride  
on a tandem freewheeling through time and space.

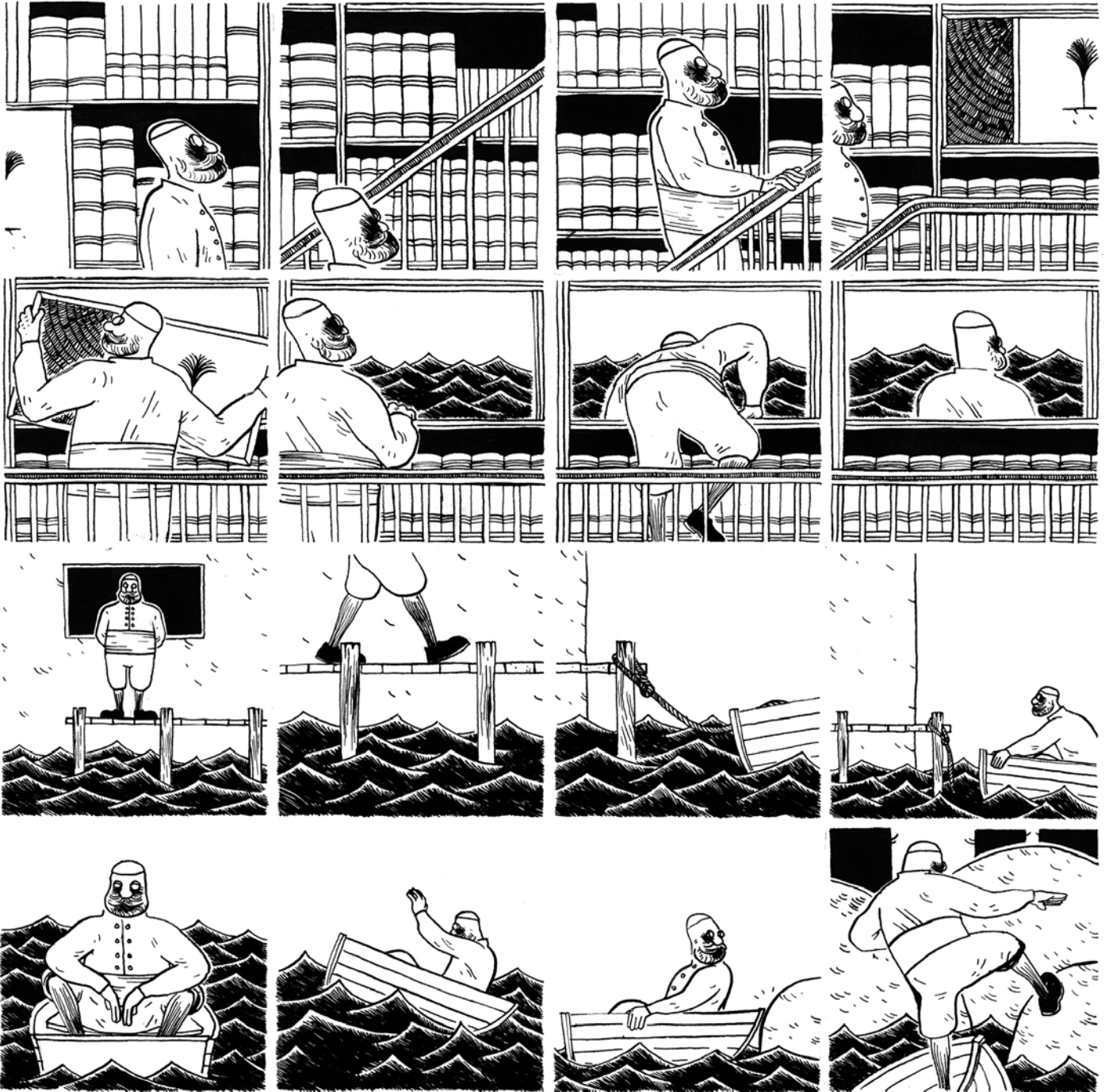
'Will that be all, sir? Thank you, sir . . . Next?'



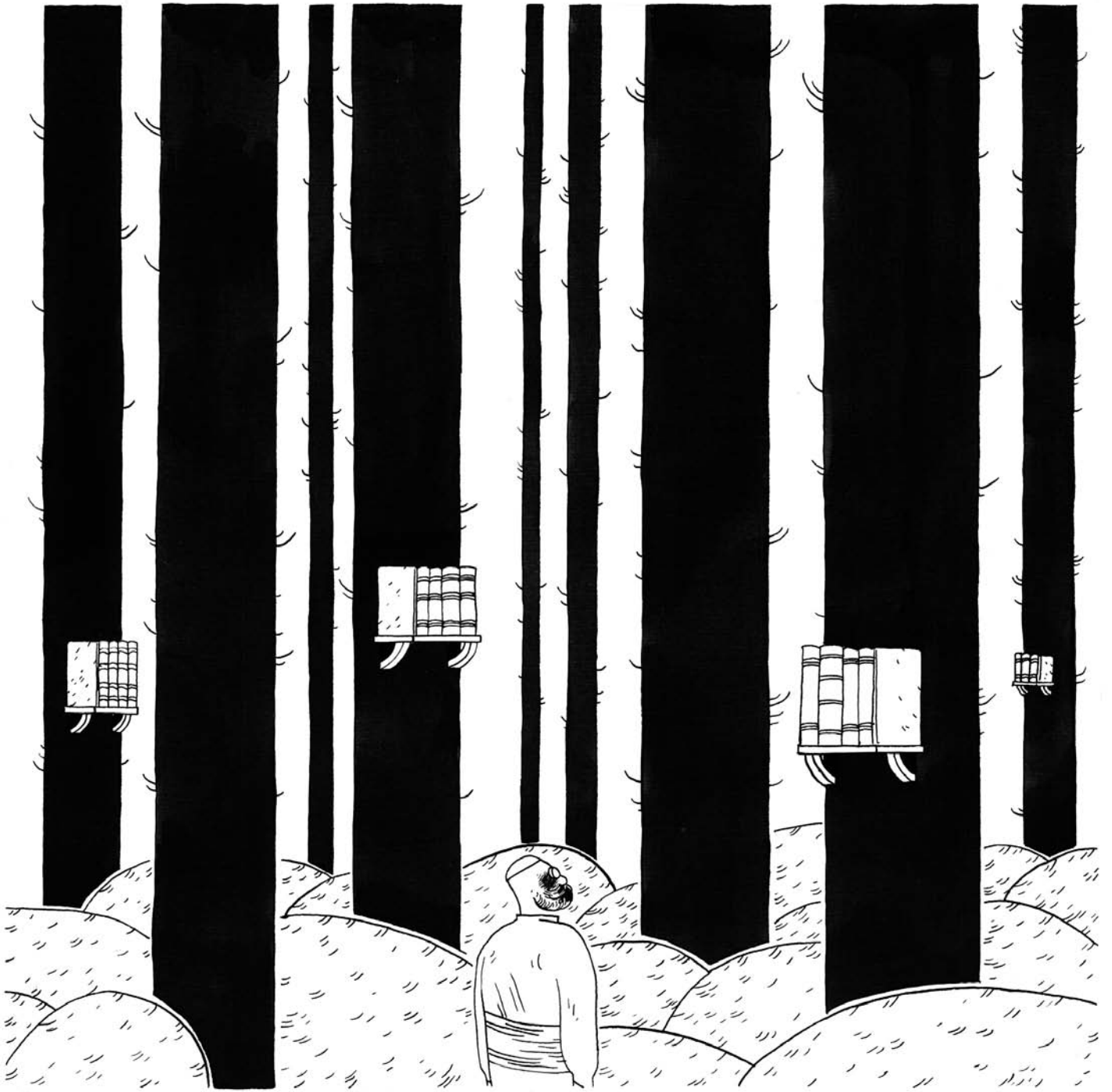


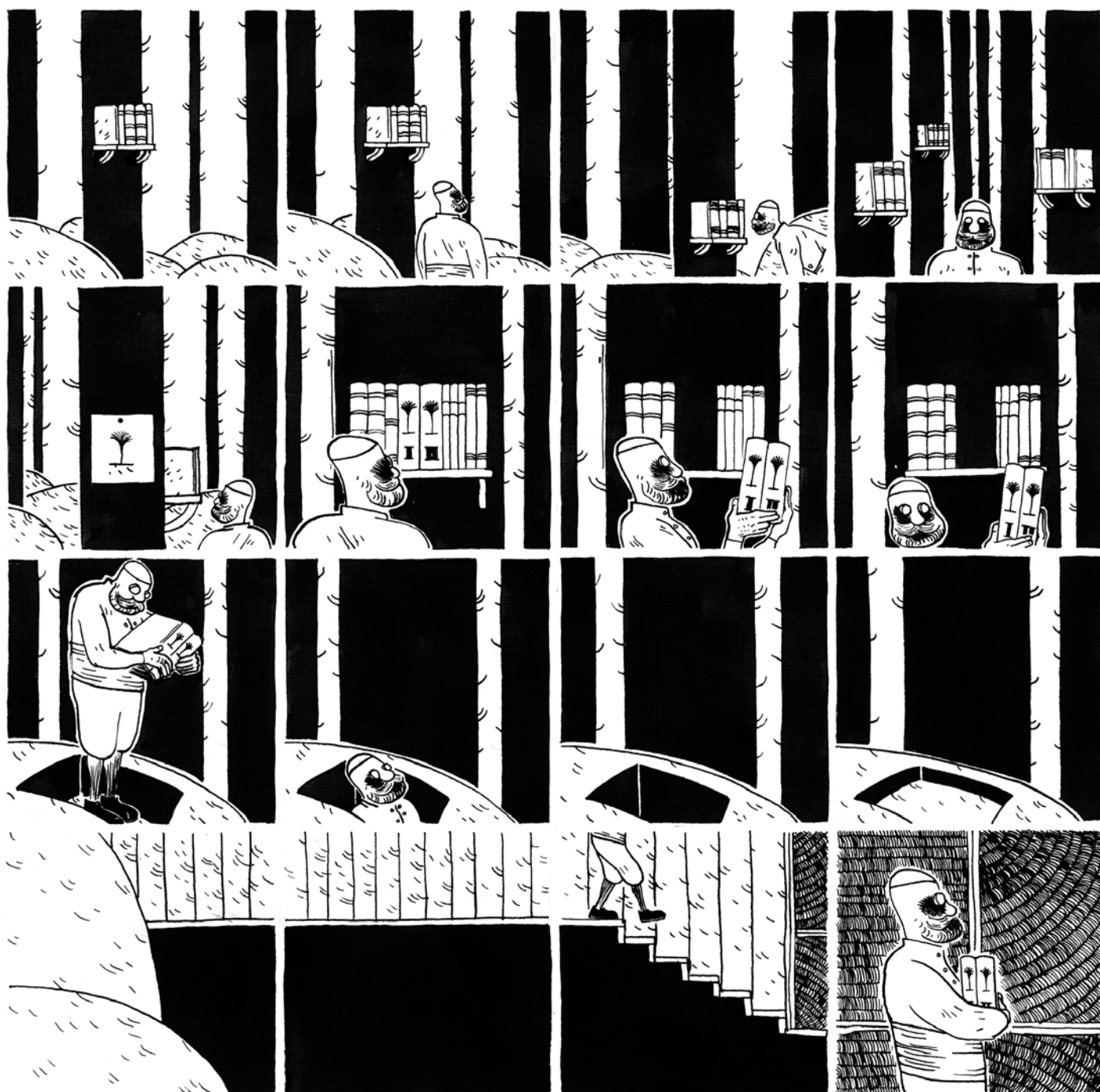








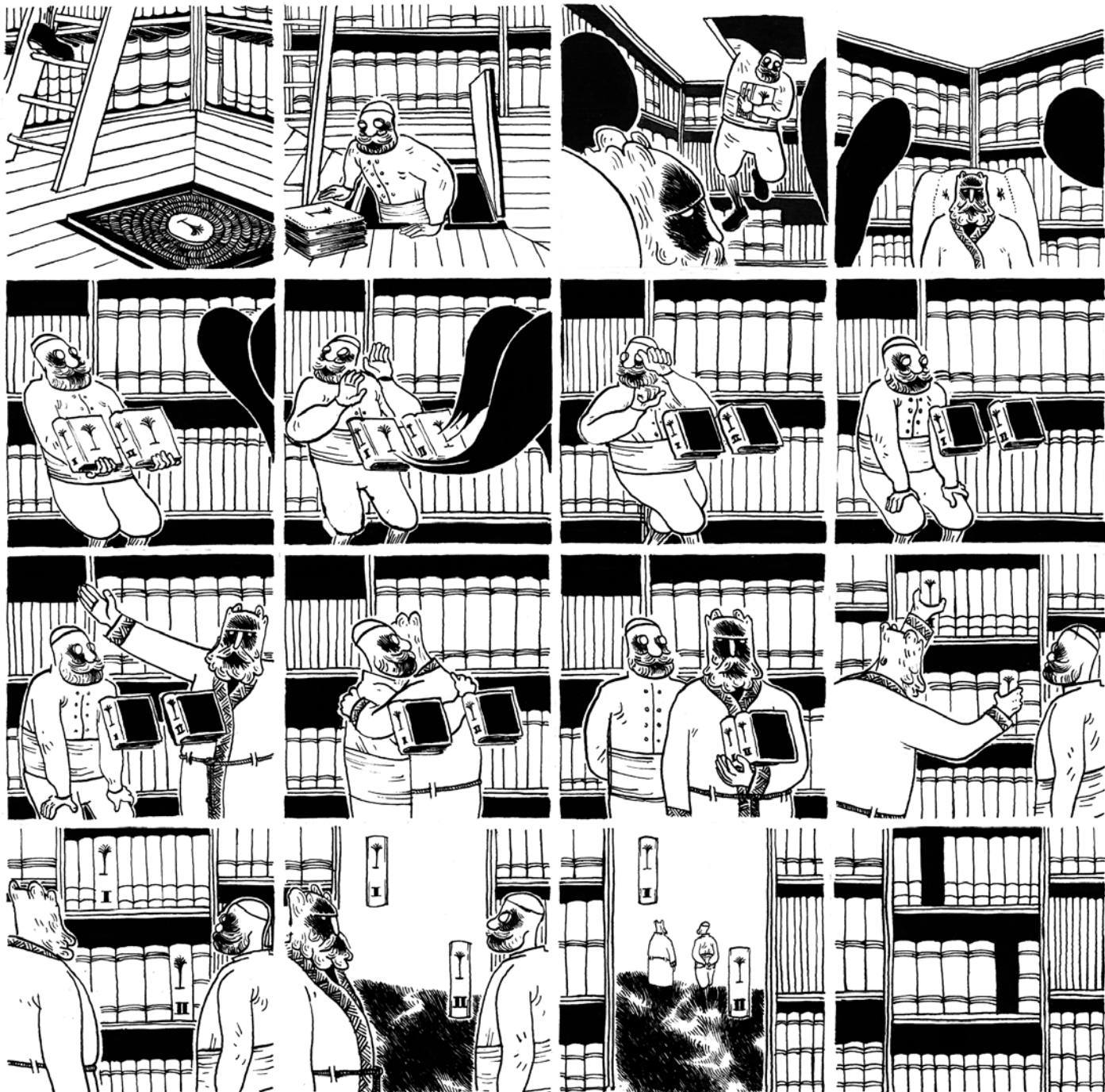


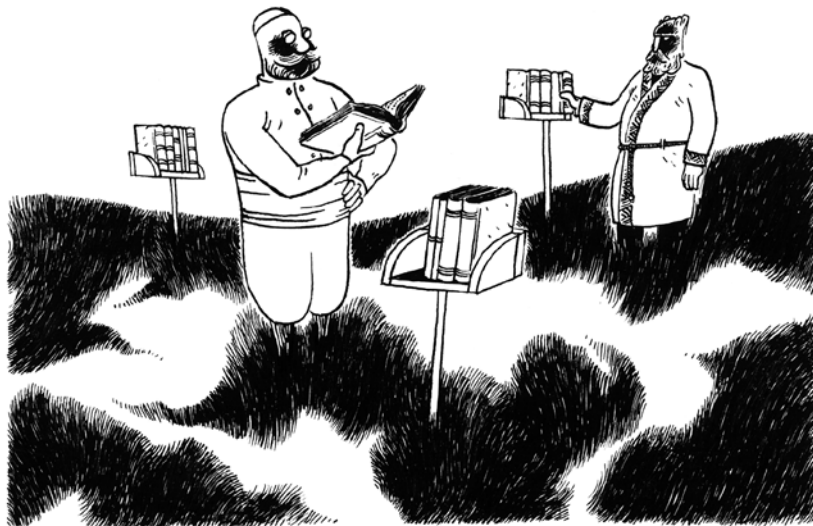
















# Here is why critics matter. We need them in Québec

by Robert Lévesque

translated by David Homel

THE BEST (and only) friend of press magnate Charles Foster Kane, in the film *Citizen Kane*, is the theatre critic of one of his newspapers, the *New York Inquirer*. Kane likes to call him ‘Jedediah’, though Leland is his name, and they’ve been inseparable since their college days. Leland is played by Joseph Cotton, the newspaper tycoon by the director, Orson Welles. Welles and Cotton play an absolutely wonderful scene, bitter and smooth at the same time, about the exigencies, the fragile character and the dignity of the critic’s trade. Returning from the premiere of the opera *Salammbo*, in which Susan Alexander, Kane’s new mistress, made her debut in the theatre that the businessman built for her in Chicago, Leland fixes himself a drink and sets about writing his critique to declare just how worthless the soprano is. The whiskey does its job, and he falls asleep before finishing the article. Kane arrives at the paper and slips into the newsroom with the editor-in-chief who, from behind Leland’s shoulder, begins reading a few lines for Kane: ‘Miss Alexander, pleasant to look at but devoid of talent,’ ‘impossible to imagine a more dreadful mediocrity,’ etc., etc. Kane pulls the sheet from the typewriter, reads the text carefully and, with a sad smile at the corner of his mouth, puts it back and finishes the critique himself without changing the meaning or the tone. Then he wakes up Jedediah and informs him, ‘You’re fired!’ Then makes out a cheque in his name for the sum of \$25,000.

Once Kane and Leland were the best of friends. But by the evening of the premiere, their friendship had long since soured and Leland, to get away from Kane, had requested a transfer from New York to Chicago (if he’d only known!), so deep had their disagreement become. Leland admired the declaration of editorial principle (‘Speak the truth, inform honestly’) that Kane had printed on the *Inquirer*’s front page after he took the paper over, and managed to keep the handwritten version of it. Yet

over time he watched his friend turn into a voracious and self-serving maker of public opinion; he had seen him unscrupulously extend his net, becoming a basically egotistical and politically ambitious manipulator.

Old, hospitalized now, Leland, who is being interviewed by a journalist trying to solve the mystery of the last word uttered by Charles Foster Kane (‘Rosebud’), recalls the episode of the murderous critique finished by his boss, this apparently magnanimous gesture of an old friend. Leland says, ‘Kane wanted to prove that he was still honest. But,’ he adds with a sad smile at the corner of his mouth, ‘he proved the contrary.’ In contrast to the portrait of this baron of the press with an insatiable will for power, Welles set out the image of an honest, idealistic critic: Leland, who returned the torn-up cheque by mail and the manuscript of the declaration written in Kane’s own hand.

## BOTTLES CAST INTO THE SEA

Let’s stick with the movies: King Vidor’s *The Fountainhead* (1949). In that film we also find a newspaperman, the director of an important weekly, and critics who work not in the theatre or opera but in architecture. One is the reigning king, conservative and arrogant, and the other a woman who, out of respect for art, quits her job, refusing to write in the triumphant shadow of her populist colleague who, what’s worse, is pulling the strings of a competition to maintain the mediocrity of a slap-dash designer facing off against the visionary genius of a non-conformist artist (Howard Roark, the film’s hero played by Gary Cooper). The industry won’t give the artist a chance, rejecting his audacity that runs counter to reigning neo-academism (without Vidor naming him, we can easily see in Roark the figure of Frank Lloyd Wright).

To all those who wonder about the critic’s usefulness and power, whatever the field might be, if we invert Gary Cooper’s role (rejected visionary architect

becoming an intelligent but ostracized critic), the film supplies potential eloquent answers. Thibaut de Ruyter, an architect himself and an art critic whose writings appear in *Art Press*, mentioned the relevance of Vidor’s film in an issue of the French magazine *Mouvement* about criticism (‘The Critic Is Dead! Long Live the Critic!’; October–December 2009). If he recognizes that the character of the arrogant, self-serving critic is a caricature and that the type no longer exists (or almost), he does write, ‘A critic won’t make or break an artist’s career; he can just play the game of a perverse and incestuous system in which he’s but a pawn. Mediocrity will continue to reign, since it makes us believe in the individual genius of certain artists. To the critic falls the role of Rebel, the one who speaks ill of what is accepted by everyone, to display, like Roark, the hero of the film, individualism and subjectivity in his or her aesthetic choices. Even if it means going against the majority, even if it means detesting Louise Bourgeois, if it means defending the unknown and the indefensible . . . But obviously, in these conditions,’ Thibaut de Ruyter concludes, ‘the critic quickly finds himself in an outsider position that is difficult to maintain, and he must settle for casting little bottles into the sea, hoping one day that they might reach an attentive audience.’

The good critic must ceaselessly rethink literature, the way the visionary architect does with architecture, paying heed to its past and the prison of its surroundings, daring to question those more or less imposed aesthetic and political relations, those cursed fads fabricated by the industry. The good critic must constantly reconsider everything, at all times, step by step, the meaning of the mad march of the world in which art (or what stands for art) moves, and take the appetizing but ostracizing risk of insulting the reigning toadies of the media who want us to believe in the individual genius of certain

select bankable baronets of the society of spectacle, who fear all those, all others, who are greater than they are . . .

#### THE BUFFING MITT

And now, for poetry. Jean-Pierre Issenhuth, after having been a 'rebel' poetry critic for several years for the Montreal daily *Le Devoir*, a subjective individualist who was able to say out loud, for example, and in good humour (corporately applauded by a press corps of followers), all the negative things he thought about a fabricated event like the Trois-Rivières poetry festival (his article shook the foundations of the institution of poetry in Québec and earned him a large host of enemies), ended up putting distance between himself and poetry. He stopped his activities as a critic and returned to live in France (he spent thirty-three years in Québec; born in Alsace, he is now living in the Landes region of south-west France). But he hasn't stopped thinking about poetry. In *Le cinquième monde* published by Fides in 2009, he revisits Québec poetry and its absence, its lack, of any critical, sceptical viewpoints. He uses the image, borrowed from Pierre Reverdy, of the 'buffing mitt' to point out how much we need such points of view.

What did he write? 'The absence of this buffing mitt has been fatal to modern Québec poetry. It has bathed in a beatific, simplistic approach, a critical void close to indifference that very quickly sterilized it by dooming it to reproducing *ad infinitum* a false discourse. It is not easy to carry out sceptical criticism. It is always more convenient to supply soft approbation, to acquiesce without support, based on a few passages that save the rest. The result is a comfortable reputation of being convivial. But the responsibility is hidden here – with reason, no doubt, and more or less understandably too, when we consider the price to pay for true expression.' Think of the firing of 'Jedediah' and Thibaut de Ruyter's bottles cast into the sea.

Issenhuth considered that the critic is not present enough in Québec, and his judgement can be applied to the other arts. 'As I deplore this lack, I think I understand it: in an emerging literature, people believe it is essential to encourage, support, value it in spite of everything, even if it means being blinded by a good cause. I've always

thought that this approach is a mistake because it rejects risk; what is missing in this landscape is a Karl Kraus. I continue to believe that criticism – a false science – can be justified only if it risks being wrong. Separating coin of the realm from counterfeit is a perilous but necessary undertaking. Though recognized in painting, the fake in literature is strangely unknown. Gleeefully we refuse to distinguish between chalk and cheese, a copy for what is authentic, delirium and genius, diarrhea and abundance, wealth or generosity, theory and practice – that is where the critic becomes useful. But since criticism can't claim the status of an exact science unless it is totally deluded, it must tend toward the status of art; otherwise it won't exist.'

#### THE TORCH

Karl Kraus, 1874–1936. Yes, we've missed and we're still missing a Karl Kraus in the overall cultural, literary and political landscape of Québec. I modestly held such a role as a theatre critic, a job that, the way Issenhuth did with poetry, I stopped doing out of a sense of isolation and weariness. I never did have, like that Austrian who haunted the cafés of Vienna, the flamboyant and unstoppable taste for combat with all adversaries. At the age of twenty-five, Kraus, the son of a paper-maker, already had his own journal, *Die Fackel* (*The Torch*), that he would use to carry out a life-long battle as a pitiless and polemic critic of the political, literary, cultural and social life of his country (he was the young ancestor of Thomas Bernhard). Attacked on all fronts, sometimes even physically in the street, abandoned by his colleagues, in the end the only journalist writing in his journal, a burning leaf of paper repeatedly struck down by censorship but an ember that refused to die, like a torch the leaf clung to the top of its tree, rejecting all contributions, no matter their source. Rebel, artist, never one to remove his buffing mitt, dead at age sixty-two in 1936, fighting national socialism, killed, ironically, by a cyclist in a Vienna street. Long live Karl Kraus!

#### KNOWING HOW TO READ

Philippe Muray (1945–2006) describes, in his *Désaccord parfait* (Gallimard, 2000), the idea of an 'aristocracy' of critics: not of a group or cast, but of 'isolated individuals whose critical experience presents as

few affinities as possible with today's disastrous little editorial-journalistic-intellectual congregation, and that has no connection with the stories our society is telling, with what it maintains it loves, the frozen values it markets, the terrorizing uniformization it is imposing under cover of its pathos of solidarity and humanitarianism.' Muray, basically a follower of Céline, wrote that in 1997, and it's got worse since . . .

He's not afraid of words: 'A critique is a judgement. It is the appreciation and determination of the properties of something. It is the possibility of drawing up criteria that enable us to make a judgement. A good awareness of today's reality, of the state it is in, seems to me necessary to appreciate novels insofar as they deal with that reality, a mixture of neo-evangelistic thinner, the playful disappearing of differences, informational oppression, etc. True critics must be called upon, of course, out of internal necessity, so to speak, not only to unveil their thoughts about the book (or play) they are criticizing, but also, through the critical article, to say what they think of the world, of the things that make up life, of the universe around them, or what remains of it.' In other words, to frequent (that's the most accurate verb, I believe) a critic who has good judgement, a good pen and a broad education, and not those flash-in-the-pan media darlings who are so conveniently gregarious and vulgarly expeditious, implies reading what he or she has understood of the present and those who inhabit it.

#### DISCOVERER OF DISCOVERIES

Milan Kundera, in his preface to François Ricard's essay *La littérature contre elle-même* (Boréal, 1985), defines the critical exercise as 'a meditation that tries to capture and name the discovery contained in a work.' The discovery contained in a work – in other words, the critic must perceive, understand, realize and explain what constitutes the originality (of the viewpoint, the word, the tone, the style) and the relevance (symbolic, aesthetic, political) of a new work, creation or artistic construction. Critics become the architects of a reading, *their* reading, an analysis and perspective they build, adjust and propose with their free intelligence, independent of the deadening influences of the period, the successive waves

of magical thinking, in other words, of everything we call current events, gesticulations that harm meditation.

In this meditation, the building built, the article written, the critic as young architect, as intellectual, can then make up for a lack of interpretation or comprehension among readers (this is his usefulness), having tried to capture and explain, to the best of his knowledge, what the work does or does not bring that is new; what it repeats and replaces, renews and launches. In the ideal critic Kundera sees a discoverer of discoveries who names the till-then-unknown aspect of the existence and thought that the artist was able to discover. The tragic version would be Michel, the mad painter of the film *Port of Shadows*, who ‘paints the things behind things.’

Just to make things more complicated, the critic’s work is carried out without any method (critical thought being essentially

non-methodical, Kundera writes). This is the false science as described by Issenbuth, who declares it is full of risks and aspires towards art. The critic, like the artist, can be mistaken. Listen to Kundera on the subject: ‘Not only can the critic be wrong (and often is), but we can’t even check the veracity of his judgement. Everything he says remains his personal bet, his risk. Yet, as erroneous as his thought can be, if it is based on authentic competence it will still be useful; it will provoke and create further reflection and help constitute a background of meditation indispensable for art.’ What Voltaire called ‘the circulation of ideas’.

NOWADAYS

You’d have to be both Voltaire and Karl Kraus to be so bold as to undertake true criticism, and pick up the torch of ‘Jedediah’ Leland’s dangerous and noble quest. You’d have to be a rebel

and an aristocrat, a resister, judge and polemicist, a specialist in the sciences, deep in meditation, free of speech, audacious, terribly sceptical with a buffing mitt on your hand at all times . . . and not drink too much whisky. Which is why, nowadays, the workload being so demanding, the critic’s trade includes fewer and fewer artists (I see none in Montreal, none who feels in the honest exercise of his or her trade either creative joy or destructive rage, as Goethe saw it; in other words, an involvement, a jump, an awakening, a rock-hard resistance), yet the trade is every day more essential, for its survival in our society of spectacle is decisive for the future of literature and art. If the trend holds, we will be – we are already – severely lacking when it comes to those literate and audacious scouts whose authority is recognized, those self-confessed intrepid killers whose professionalism we so admire. ◇

HOW TO UNDERSTAND QUÉBEC #7

## On The Montreal Forum

by Rebecca Harries

THE MONTRÉAL FORUM is simply the temple of hockey. Before I was aware of any other meanings of forum, I knew that there was an ice rink on which gods skated. Where the stands were filled with better dressed persons, ‘Montrealers’, than I had ever seen: all sharp suits, furs and immaculately feathered hair. From a childhood in southeastern New Brunswick, where Québec was a very, very long day’s drive in a secondhand VW away, the home of Montreal’s professional hockey team, Les Canadiens – also known as the Habs or in French ‘les glorieux’ – seemed so remote and inaccessible that it may as well have been called Avalon or the Isle of the Blessed.

When our 2.5 television channels – we are discussing the 1970s – came in clearly, weather permitting, I watched a world of grey-scale hockey games. Yes, hockey existed and exists in other places, but these seemed prosaic at the time. After all, the forum was the rightful home of Guy Lafleur on the right wing – the Flower or the blond demon (*le démon*

*blonde*); towering, curly-haired Larry Robinson on defense – the Bird or Big Bird, after *Sesame Street*; goaltender Ken Dryden, the most intellectual of the team, leaning on his stick; and impassive, unreadable coach Scotty Bowman, the mastermind behind the team’s record-setting success.

I was watching one of the greatest teams in sports history, the 1970s Canadiens, who won the league’s highest prize, the Stanley Cup, five times in that decade. I knew this, even though neither of my parents was born in Canada, but I knew it in the way that you understand something as inevitable and unchanging. By the end of spring the Cup would be paraded through the streets of Montréal. The ever-growing number of banners waved from the rafters of the Forum, which, built in 1924, also seemed eternal. The announcers spoke of ‘ghosts’, partly joking but partly as a matter of fact, suggesting that the struggle for sporting glory also took place on the spirit plane.

Early in 1996, the last hockey game

was played in the Forum, and Les Canadiens moved into their new home, which has gone through a number of names. The team last won the Stanley Cup in 1993 and, somewhat nervously, fans say that the ghosts did not make the trip. Although I ended up studying and working in Québec, I never had the opportunity to attend a game in the old Forum. The new is not without its aura – yes, there are t-shirt and even hotdog guns, but the passion and knowledge for the sport is there. The players seem to feel the weight of legend. I still follow the team ardently, but they are mostly mortal now and the personnel changes rapidly.

The Forum itself has been converted into a cinema complex, capacious and comfortable. In the lobby, ‘centre ice’ has been recreated in memory of the old building and some of the stands have been preserved. The seats are smaller than they would be today, and as I have passed by on my way to the movies, I feel a sense of immediacy to the dream world of my youth. After all, a holy site is a holy site – the ruined temple, a standing stone in a field of grazing sheep . . . But here, in Québec, I am not alone in my slight pause, my lingering by the stands, too shy to sit in the brightly coloured seats, mute witnesses of a shared faith. ◇



# Instinct

by *Émilie Andrewes*

translated by *David Homel*

I AM A MAN who relies on his instincts. I chose my wife on instinct, and the province where I live on instinct. I barricaded myself in our house with her five years ago, and that was on instinct too. I feel that something terrible is about to take place. If you think that's the result of paranoia, then you're wrong. If I said 'I know' to you instead of 'I feel', you'd probably take me more seriously. But I don't know anything. I feel. That's all.

I quit during the last year of high school. What I know how to do: write and speak. I stopped exercising the second activity, called 'chatting' where I live, twenty years, six months and nine days ago. All I do is write. My instinct advised me to. Some might speak of psychogenic flight, but they've got it all wrong. I didn't change my identity. I've kept the same name I had at birth, but my instinct has advised me not to reveal it to you.

Since I woke up, the sound of your helicopters above my dwelling has exasperated me. I suppose this had to happen sooner or later. All the attention focused on us has forced me to write this missive, which I will slip into your hands through one of the slits in my rampart. Why don't you batter my door down now? True, it would be impolite. So I will explain my story to you and, with a little luck, my wife and I will have, once more, peace and quiet.

I left the family dwelling in Abitibi-Témiscamingue because I was careful. My father did not want to pay for my post-secondary studies and I saw in that an evil

omen. He wanted me to work in the pulp and paper factory, as he did, and spend the rest of my life there. He came home late in the evening after having been with the local hockey team in Rouyn, since he was their coach. After losing a game, he threw tables and chairs. I was often sitting on one of those chairs. At the age of sixteen, I lost half the contents of my memory: the period of my life from eight to sixteen. As time went by, some



of my friends and witnesses told me about three events, real or not, that might have explained the coma into which I fell and the partial amnesia that resulted: I lost consciousness in a car accident; I lapsed into an alcohol-induced coma; and/or I was seriously beaten about the head. I will never know the truth. I don't remember anything. I don't know which incident is the cause of this awakening,

this illumination, only to follow one's instinct, but I packed my bags several days later, after I exited the hospital, never to return to my native region.

When I awoke in the hospital, a young nurse congratulated me on having returned to the land of the living. He was as beautiful as an angel. I suppose they don't put just any nurse to keep watch over a comatosed person. I was then released. A friend came to pick me up in his car. He said nothing about my appearance. I rushed madly back to my house. I was mad with joy, for my father was absent. I discovered that something had happened to my face when I looked in the mirror in my parents' bathroom.

I packed my bags and took the first train for the Canadian West. I worked high on a mountain, as a dishwasher in a hotel restaurant. That's where I met my wife: a cook and deaf-mute. Originally she had spoken English, but she had stopped speaking altogether. I did the same, with boundless pleasure. We communicated through sign language. One day, she decided to leave the kitchen for an unknown destination. My instinct told me to refuse the advances of other women and stay with her alone. I didn't know her at the time, but my instinct ordered me to accompany her.

That unknown destination was this farm in Alberta. When she saw me leave my job and the girlfriend I had at the time to live with her, she considered me with distrust, but then accepted that I follow her. I didn't know why I was doing this. She didn't ask questions, and accepted that I might not know. I never know what drives me to act. I simply follow my instinct, and it leaves me no choice. In fact, it is my only choice; it imposes itself.

I never thought I would live on a farm,



even less one on the Canadian prairies. By now our address is well known in the media: 25 Commission Street. This is where my wife spent her vacations when she was young. An abandoned old farm in miserable condition. We invested much time and love to turn it into an inhabitable place. If you want me to describe our schedule to you briefly, I will tell you that my wife is a marvellous cook, we grow fruit and vegetables, and I take care of the chickens. That's what I could have put in the box entitled 'Occupation' on the many census forms you have placed before our door. We spend time relaxing in the yard with our dog. I read; she cooks. We are very happy. We don't own any weapons, either of light calibre or of mass destruction. We have instinctively decided to retreat from the modern world and, instinctively also, to barricade ourselves in this house. For no other known reason than instinct. The future, that is growing ever closer, to judge by the way you are acting, will tell us why we needed to do this.

Because of our way of life, there is no one to stare, frightened, at the half of my face that is purple and swollen, like a giant three-dimensional birthmark. When people look at my left profile, they see a handsome, elegant boy, a descendant of the Aztecs; and when they look at the purple, black and violet swelling that is my right profile, they freeze. As for my wife, she tenderly kisses this horror.

I awoke this morning with a thought, one that confirmed all my thoughts of the previous day: something worldwide, planetary and hideous was about to take place. I had this terrible premonition five years ago. I haven't been able to confirm the truth of it, since we have no television or computer, and we don't read the papers, but I immediately started to build a barricade around the farm, this rampart that you are now trying to destroy. At the beginning, people thought we were creating some sort of art installation, and we had a lot of curious visitors. It must be art, but not the kind that people think. Pure instinct. Pure, black instinct. Instinct is a lot more complex than contemporary art, and a lot more ancient in its nature.

I think that if you are circling the dwelling – we can feel you through the walls of our house – this is the reason why we are disturbing the landscape with

our towers, and our plaster and concrete monuments that protect our farm. It's our land, after all. It's edifying to see that, even if my wife did inherit this plot, her possession does not give her the right to occupy the air space, the volume that comes with the earthly geography; not all constructions are permitted. Not all art is accepted. Air space always belongs to other people, especially in cities. In other words, we own only the surface of things, like the grass and the flower gardens. Let me point out this ghastly truth: the air will always belong to the State.

I have noted that you are outraged by our resistance. But that is not a valid reason to see in us some kind of threat. A threat to the peace of the public mind, as you wrote in the letter you mailed to us several times. You pointed out that several inhabitants in the area barricaded themselves in when they saw our rampart, believing that the threat was real.

That situation concerns me. Have you provided any psychological help to the people who apparently need it? In what shape are they? What are their barricades made of? Do they need our advice? I would be more than happy to communicate with them by mail, to discover their motivation and their fears. And to tell them of ours. We survive on well-rationed food reserves: canned goods. We are not in need. There are no corpses in our basement, no abused children, no mistreated animals.

Very simply, we are waiting. And of course we are ready. Is it you we were waiting for? Were we waiting for your assault? Is it the source of my premonition? I have no idea. You could simply answer one question: what are you counting on doing? You like to maintain secrecy. What are you going to do? Your paranoia could well provoke, on our side, the paranoid terror that is yours. But that is not what is happening. At this very moment, my wife is reading a book by Colette; she is in a state of jubilation, while I am writing you this letter, in a state of infinite tranquility, in my armchair, with a cup of tea. There is no reason to get excited until something happens. I understand that you are very tenacious. My wife just told me that one of your bulldozers has begun destroying the rampart facing the living room. She

jumped up in a sweat; you frightened her. I was wondering where you'd begin. The wall facing the living room is particularly thick, and demanded months of work. I am watching the machine of destruction. I am going to calculate the time it takes you to destroy what I spent five years building. Time it. That won't explain why we built this barricade. But on the other hand, it explains everything. The need creates the organ. You have just indirectly given us the reason for it. Proof by the absurd.

I see you out of the window. You, the man to whom I am writing, I suppose, you are probably that man with the wide black helmet, crouching behind a section of concrete, though I only see your weapon, with your forehead and your eyes. In your eyes I see that strange moment when you want to retreat, but it is too late. You frowned when you saw me; you have obviously just noticed my birthmark. I understand the effect it has on you. A man is holding his club in the air; he has just spotted me too. He is watching us the way people stare through a half-open window at the neighbours having Christmas dinner.

Oh, my God! Your men have killed our dogs.

It took you an hour and a half. I take up the pencil again and note down that fact for you. Our premonition was right: you are very violent men. We were right to dread your arrival. You are scaling these mounds of rubble to reach us. There are one-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine, yes, nine of you circling our house. Your guns are jauntily pointed at our windows. I feel you are going to break in or fire. I feel that you are not sure what to do. I don't need a lot of instinct to understand that – it's fully visible – you were stricken by doubt when you saw my deformed face. My wife is sheltering behind me. I am going to offer you this letter from behind the pane of glass and patiently wait for you to decide. Instinctively, I'd say you are going to shoot. If this letter is published one day in a newspaper, it means you did it, you will certainly agree with me, and that someone in your ranks is sorry and resents you for it.

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September 2010, page 4.

# Street Noise

Michel Vézina

translated by David Homel

SOME TIME ago, I was riding on a train in France. I was vaguely listening to the conversations in the compartment. I was pretending to sleep. I'd drunk too much the night before, or not slept enough, or both. The people around me were talking about art and literature, they were a little fancy, a little dry, a little artsy-fartsy, but they weren't necessarily stupid. One of the women declared, 'These days, what's missing in art is the noise of the street.'

Francis Bacon said that that's what he was trying to paint. Street noise: its energy, its strength.

Ever since hearing what that woman said, I've been trying to write that noise.

I was into punk. I was into it in a very visible way, at a certain time. It might be less visible nowadays. Fifty years old, bald, thirty kilos overweight, victim of a heart attack last year: I'm a man with a past who never thought he'd have this much future.

A lot of my *no future* friends were right about that: overdose, suicide, hepatitis, AIDS. Not many of them are left. The survivors necessarily had to settle down; some have changed, others are dying. *DOA*. (Lech Kowalski, 1980.) Dead on arrival. Never has the title of a film so well described an era: we really had decided to die.

I was born in 1960.

In the 1970s, my country was trying to define itself, make an identity for itself, as if it didn't already have one. Everyone was beautiful, everyone was sweet.

Except me.

I hated groups like Beau Dommage and Harmonium so much that, today, I can say that their only value was to have turned me into a punk. If that was the

choice, then I certainly didn't want to identify with *that*.

Except for a few iconoclasts, most local Québec artists made me want to puke: too clean, too careful and much too sweet.

In those years, in London, New York and Paris, the earthquake was on.

As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a writer, which sounded strange to my friends. All of them wanted to write songs in English and scream them at the top of their lungs, to become rock stars.

Listening to the New York Dolls, the Ramones and the Pistols, I built my identity by reading Philip K. Dick, Harlan Ellison, Jack London, Dashiell



Hammett, Charles Bukowski, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Hunter S. Thompson . . . Not many French or Québec writers on my radar screen – a bit of Vian here, a bit of Debord there, thanks to Patrick Straram. A little Queneau, but not enough to get me off. And there was Louis-Ferdinand Céline, but it wasn't considered in good taste to claim him . . . Sade, of course, and Bataille . . .

I stayed away from my neighbours.

Until the day I came upon *La Nuitte de Malcolm Hudd* by Victor-Lévy Beaulieu. A good old Québécois with a long beard showed me that we could write real stuff too, and I understood that people from my part of the world could do that.

I really was going to be a writer.

But I wasn't going to let my soul fade away. I'd stay punk.

Write, write, sweat it out in slams and pogos, drink and never sleep for fear of missing something. Travel, see shows on two or three continents, always taking copious notes. Wine, whiskey, hash pipes – and a little ink to go with that.

I didn't write to be read, I wrote to write, to create a style. I practised my scales, I learned to play with words and stories. And I read. I discovered a whole range of writers who turned me on as much as the most violent American punk bands. Americans, most of them (Darius James, James Baldwin, Gregory Corso, Terry Southern, Burroughs and Bukowski again and again) and a few French: Virginie Despentes from her first book on, Maurice G. Dantec a little later. Louis Hamelin and his rage won my greatest admiration (and that of my girlfriend, which put me in a rage!)

Rock and punk. The 1980s and 1990s, between New York and Europe, between CBGBs and Le Gibus, between Les Foufounes Électriques and the Confort Moderne, between the Usine in Montreal and the one in Geneva, between The Fahrenheit and La Cigale.

I hung out till late at night, choosing the bars according to the content of their jukebox. They had to have the Ramones and the Clash, otherwise I wouldn't set foot in them. I'll name four places I went: Le Café Noir in Paris, the Mars Bar and Mona's in New York, the Nice N Sleazy in Glasgow . . . I spent nights

and evenings, hours and days writing and drinking, reading and trying to figure out why I wanted to dip my pen in punk instead of honey.

There was nothing between the two – nothing.

#### THE WHITE BUTTERFLY

Times Square in the 1980s. She had a big round butt, high heels and white wings that made her look, from the back, like a vulva, her head as the clitoris.

Was I obsessed? Before me stood an angel of sex, a fatal vision of the final swallowing up. I wanted to lose myself and dive into this sex that was too white to be true.

A cerebral pleasure, very intellectual and sensitive, that only literature could procure.

I loved New York. Who was I? A North American, for sure. I didn't love Paris, no, not yet. My obsessions, my wants, my desires, my fears would materialize there. I shivered at the thought of the adventures that awaited me on the Lower East Side: 'A' for 'aware'; 'B' for 'beware'; 'C' for 'crime'; 'D' for . . . 'death'.

I was looking for death there. I wanted to die.

I understand that now.

Get shot, overdose, cop a case of AIDS that didn't yet exist, although there were plenty of chances for a dose of clap in the bathrooms of bars and concert halls.

The Mars Bar, July 2007: the same crazy people, the same exaggeration, the same jukebox. Time stood still . . . A woman in a very short dress that wasn't very clean. Well muscled she was, a party girl that the punk years seemed to have spared. Two guys who looked to be on very good terms with her were buying her drinks. It was the middle of the afternoon: two or three hangers-on weren't saying much.

Her dress was too short and too dirty and she was talking boxing. She said she knew how to deliver a punch. Her display of shadow boxing in front of the window proved that much. One of the guys promised her a drink if she punched the other guy. She said no. She liked the other guy and didn't want to hit him. Okay, two drinks.

No.

Three.

No again.

Twenty dollars.

Forget it!

Fifty dollars!

Just when does the price of friendship get too high? Her friend, the guy she liked too much to hit, told her, 'Come on, punch me in the face and give me half the money!'

That's punk.

There was Hell's Kitchen and the Neither/Nor.

At the first place, we just drank and cruised for chicks. We knew that what we drank there wasn't going to make us sick, and what we might find to fuck there wouldn't either. At the Neither/Nor, we went to see the fauna and never knew if we'd get out alive. That's where I met Darius James for the first time, the author of *Negrophonia* that, years later, I translated into French (*L'Incertain*, 1995). Coke on the bar top and blow jobs in the toilets. If you have to pee, go outside!

Poets and transvestites, transsexuals and coke-heads. Girls with legs that reached up to heaven in their high heels, who then revealed themselves as possessing the same virile member we did. Hermaphrodites on the road to a sex change who had stopped along the way . . . Monstrous cocks mounted on kick-boxer's muscles with lightning speed.

Fatal angels. When you're twenty, New York as often as possible. Writing took on real life there, more so than in Paris. Writing was the only way to drink. Writing and reading out loud in exchange for a few miserable bottles of Rolling Rock and a little watery whiskey. Writing love poems for the girlfriend of the day who belonged to some illiterate bartender, like in *Le côté obscur du coeur*, for present or future consideration.

Poetry made you drink and fuck, that was true.

That angel I glimpsed, with the white wings and the round butt, those big lips attached to her head in the shape of a clitoris, how often I followed her, almost every night!

I admit it: I'm still pursuing her. Always will. Today, at fifty, I'm still a punk. An old punk who doesn't want to die anymore.

Ever.

◇



# On Small Town Escape

Maxime Catellier

translated by David Homel

*'The season has been a very bad one for new books, & I am afraid the time has passed away in which poetry will answer . . . the Shepherd's Calendar has had comparatively no sale . . . All the old poetry buyers seem to be dead, and the new race have no taste for it . . . I think in future I shall confine my speculations to works of utility.'*

—Letter to pastoral poet John Clare from his publisher John Taylor

I was born in the wrong century.

'Stand less between the sun and me,' said Diogenes the cynic to Alexander the Great. 'It was men I called for, not scoundrels.'

I was born far from the city, in a part of the country whipped by the salty wind that rises from the river and blows upon the hayricks of the villages. As for this place in a savage country better pictured at a distance, it was a provincial town, as chauvinistic as can be imagined. As if elsewhere we could never find a shoe to suit our foot. A well-known fact: the sea air makes some vomit and lets others breathe easy.

At the age of nine, I discovered poetry with James Douglas Morrison. What was this melodic sadness in the turning wheel of words? Who was this shameless bearded man who better than anyone else sang the melancholy of the evening, when black takes over? Sitting on the

edge of the world, ready to cast himself into the void to see if he could fly, he composed a psalm about the recent drowning death of a friend.

In the spring of 1991, another cry split the night of my childhood. The angel played guitar with serpents, and his voice was like a piece of evidence in the burden of proof. For my generation, for whom I do not try to speak, but instead give everything I love, there was this Aberdeen boy who related, once and for all, our epidemic fear of the future: 'With



the lights out, it's less dangerous.'

I must have been fifteen when I walked into the Index bookstore in Rimouski. Marc Fraser, the friendly owner, offered me a coffee and a cigarette. I bought *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in exchange for two bucks – the best purchase I made in my life.

In December 1998, the Index organized an event: '48 Hours: Highway 132 Leads to Kerouac'. When you're 600 kilometres from Montreal, it does you good to know that Highway 132 leads to Kerouac.

I came to Montreal in September 2002, and needed only two years to cross the bridge, returning from Rimouski one time, to feel at home. I spent most of my time in the neighbourhood between De Lorimier, Sherbrooke, Saint-Hubert and de Maisonneuve Boulevard. In this piece of urban patchwork, set off by the mountain and a canal, I took up residence, the way you move into a new house.

It would be a bald-faced lie to say my time at the Université de Montréal added nothing to my life except a growing distrust of official culture. I met great people there – but small

numbers of them.

Most were complex-ridden fascists who dreamed of a Republic dominated by intellectuals, and who would finally wreak vengeance on the superficial world that did not recognize them. Poor philosophers! The real world that sported at their feet would have to look elsewhere.

Ironically, what helped me extirpate myself from university was a job working for the most vile press conglomerate in the history of print media in Canada. It would be an insult to newspapers everywhere to call it a 'newspaper'. But I managed to slip the book section in when no one was looking.

I wasn't brave enough to leave the ship before it sank. I should have left before they demanded their keys back. But in the end I didn't need to give them back, because they didn't fit any more. Demagnetized by boredom, my pass key wouldn't open any more doors.

I was born in the wrong century. ♦

# Incendies directed by Denis Villeneuve

Rawi Hage

IN SOPHOCLES' tragedy, the incestuous Oedipus only gains wisdom after experiencing darkness by piercing his own eyes. For the Greek playwright, wisdom, redemption and tragedy can never be fully grasped without a moment like this of utter darkness.

In Denis Villeneuve's critically acclaimed film *Incendies*, adapted from a play of the same name by Wajdi Mouawad, the director takes the liberty of presenting his audience with a story filled with references to Sophocles' Greek tragedy but devoid of the necessary invested darkness.

In an interview, Villeneuve declared that before making the film he had no idea about the Arab world; one might suspect that even after it was completed he still did not.

To use a religious image: for an Arabic audience, *Incendies* speaks in many tongues. Literally.

The various Arabic dialects in the film threw me into utter confusion as to the location of the story. Villeneuve may have learned a few things in his recent travels in the Middle East, but one thing he clearly missed is that the Arab world is not a homogenous place, linguistically or culturally. In Villeneuve's film, the same character might jump from using a Lebanese dialect to a Jordanian or Moroccan one in the very same sentence.

Of course, this instantaneous hybridism of language could well be justified as a universal development as old as history itself. One might even argue that language and its evolution depend on the creation of such hybrid forms. This conflation of languages, this universalism – accidental or forced – could perhaps be explained by the playwright and the filmmaker as artistic liberty and, furthermore, tied to freedom of expression, or perhaps a post-nationalist act aiming to liberate the people from attachment to regional

specificities and petty patriotisms. But then, I wonder, would Villeneuve accept such drastic indulgences – transcending histories and time, and the textured slow growth, birth and death of a dialect or a language – if applied to his own mother tongue?

It is somewhat surprising that the liberty to ignore the unique characteristics of regional languages is taken by a man who lives in a province that celebrates the importance of its own distinct language and dialect. Would *Léolo* or *Les Invasions barbares* have been as powerful if they had been written in a mish-mash of Patois, Creole and Parisian French, with a jolt of Tunisian dialect thrown into the same sentence? These films would then certainly have been condemned by L'Académie française, or at least Bill 101, or simply dismissed as experimental comedies. It is unlikely that they would have been celebrated, as Villeneuve's *Incendies* has been, for evoking true, epic, grand tragedy. Who do we write, paint or create for? is the question. Is it still permissible in this time and age to portray the story of the other without fully allowing the other a clear language of his or her own? Must we show them their own story in a newly constructed, transformed language that they, themselves, cannot even comprehend?

The story at the core of *Incendies* is based on the life of Soha Bechara, a very well known figure in Lebanon. Bechara, a resistance fighter, stabbed the commander of the South Lebanon Army, after befriending and giving aerobics lessons to the commander's wife. *La femme qui chante*, as she is called in *Incendies*, barely sings in the film, nor goes on to have a singing career after her liberation from the notorious Khiam Detention Centre in south Lebanon. In the film, she manages to conceal her past (something the audience must find hard to believe for a

figure as famous as Soha Bechara) and is a mystery to her own twin children. These children, after following the instructions of their mother's will – which is more of a riddle, to give it a Hellenic symbol – embark upon an adventure through the many hills and many battles of what one might assume is the Lebanese Civil War, to finally discover that they are the product of a violent relationship between their mother and her torturer, who turns out to be her lost, firstborn son, Nihad of May.

Watching the film, one wonders why the twins, conceived through their brother's rape of their mother, have no resemblance at all to either their Arab mother or father. On screen, the twins appear to be two *pure laine* Québécois – as indeed they are. To again give the filmmaker the benefit of the doubt, there is always the possibility that Villeneuve was furthering his attempts at hybridization, progressing onwards to a complete, miraculous transformation. This time, however, the fusion is not related to language but is rather an instant, mythical metamorphosis of the genes themselves, brought about by mere exposure to another culture.

The flaws of *Incendies* derive not from its lack of authenticity, or the fact that the filmmaker doesn't belong to the culture he seeks to portray, or that the principle actors look like two Montrealers who appear to have no hereditary traits of their character's pasts. Many actors have played and writers have written about the elsewhere without having experienced it – one need only think of Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, or even Homer himself, who, many scholars believe, was blind and so never witnessed the destruction of Troy. The trouble with *Incendies* lies in its detachment from local histories, local tragedies, and its contrived efforts to compensate for these non-experiences with grand, dramatic, theatrical moments; the relentless onslaught of one violent scene after another. *Incendies* is reminiscent of those romantic painters who draw distant, exotic landscapes devoid of darkness and, one might suspect, affinity and concern. ◇

# The Author of *Le Temps d'Aimer*

by Claude Mathieu

translated by David Homel

I AM NOT in the habit of frequenting the book sections of newspapers, and literature is not my profession. I am happy spending the little leisure time my medical practice leaves me by enjoying writers and their books. Though, thanks to the friendship that bound me to Jean Gautier, and the discoveries I was recently able to make about his brief career, I thought I should write these few lines and insist that the *Journal des lettres* publish them *in extenso* to attempt to repair the damage they caused the author of *Le temps d'aimer*. It is true: I am convinced I can wash clean the memory of Jean Gautier from filth used to sully his name in the time leading up to his death. May the naïveté and modesty of my prose be pardoned; my goal is to re-establish the truth, offered up here without any of the artifices of literature.

Three months ago today, the author of *Le temps d'aimer* left this earth. Perhaps this sad anniversary has been forgotten, as are the facts that caused Gautier's death. Journals and their readers have short memories, and news ages quickly. What does it matter if falsehood cuts short a career, destroys a life, causes death; what does the truth and error of one day matter, since the next day it will fall into nothingness? What counts is to satisfy the public's insatiable appetite for sensational news, and the latest scandals; when the pickings are slim, unscrupulous invention becomes necessary. The reader may forget yesterday's gossip, but the victim, never. Jean Gautier was the victim of the yellow press, and he could not forget what it had done to him.

I knew Gautier for twenty-five years, from his first year of university, where we met, until his death three months ago. We were both twenty years old back then; now we are – I am, at least – forty-four. I believe I know him completely, in as much as anyone can penetrate the secrets of another's soul. I was the witness to the building of his work, with the honesty, no matter what people have said, and the tenacity of a

good labourer in the field of letters. He never considered himself a genius, and no one ever labelled him so. He did have talent, and a certain ability for invention disciplined by a praiseworthy literary patience. I often heard him refer to himself as a man of letters, even as he realized that the expression carries a slight pejorative connotation in these times. But the awareness of his limits did not keep him from publishing, over twenty years, not only this suite of poems responsible for the scandal, but a collection of stories and seven novels, works that inspired a readership that was modest but faithful. Gautier never told me to what he attributed the constancy of this attachment. In my opinion, his books were not, I admit, the secret and difficult type that would conquer a small, stubborn audience. Instead they were clear and readable, a little out of date, and they pleased, I believe, a category of readers made up mostly of women. Some of them, *of a certain age*, found in his novels the elegance of a past whose disappearance they deplored. Others, younger, read him to forget the boredom of their office or shop. Gautier never had any illusions about how durable his work would be, and one day he told me, without bitterness and with humble serenity, 'It's enough for me to know that, today, with each of my books, I've made five thousand people happy for a few hours of their day.'

Surrounded by the literary press's half silence, yet sure of his readership, Jean Gautier lived and wrote until the day, four months ago, that the journals began speaking of him and him only, but to ruin him with, as an excuse, their concern for truth and good faith I did my best not to suspect. Some expressions of good faith wound for ever, and some interpretations kill.

Some readers may remember the affair; it can be described in a few words. Gautier had just published a slender volume containing a poem made of four hundred and two alexandrines

entitled, simply enough, *Le temps d'aimer*. All were surprised that the author, at age forty-four, would publish verse for the first time. And even if poetry has the reputation of selling less than novels, without advertisement or other campaigns, *Le temps d'aimer* moved out of bookshops at the same steady rhythm as Gautier's other works.

But suddenly the journals – and the *Journal des lettres* was the first to sound the alarm – broke the scandal about *Le temps d'aimer*. I admit that the affair was of some importance, and despite my friendship, I was shaken at first. I won't deign to repeat the libellous articles and the vile tone of some of them, and will simply restate the accusation: *Le temps d'aimer* reproduced word for word a poem published with the same title in Marseille in 1844 by a writer named Adolphe Rochet. The journalist who alerted the world found Rochet's work at the municipal library. He supplied the call number and a detailed description, and quoted passages that were at the same time passages from Gautier's work. 'I won't bother quoting more,' added the journalist, 'since everything, down to the last comma, is identical.'

Gautier did not normally respond to the rare critics who reviewed his work, even when they mistreated him. But this time his honour was at stake, and he considered he had to do it, and in the *Journal des lettres*. He could assert all he wanted that he did not know of the existence of Adolphe Rochet, he could denounce the hateful machinations of the whole affair; far from clearing his name, he appeared ridiculous. The municipal library did have Rochet's work in its collection – that much was checked – so a set-up was impossible. The word went out that Gautier had committed his plagiarism by counting on his impunity, since the copied author was completely unknown. A critic retorted, using the cutting tone of a literati who knows everyone who ever picked up a pen, 'But Gautier, there will always be someone who knows even the unknown writer.' Let me point out that that journalist had not been the one who discovered Rochet's work.

Gautier protested, and all saw in it a growing sense of panic, the clever thief who is frustrated at being exposed. And



it was true: Jean was laid low. Others would have been for lesser accusations. His publisher found himself in an embarrassing situation. The courts were going to look into the affair.

As a friend, and as Gautier's doctor, the building's concierge came to me to announce the writer's suicide. I sped to the scene. It was a fine spring day, and it was difficult to imagine that the taste for death could have triumphed over that for life. He had been dead for several hours, and had chosen asphyxiation by gas. He was wrapped in a dressing gown, lying on his bed and, what I found surprising, surrounded by newspapers and journals.

AS I SAID, the revelations in the press shook my faith too. But my friendship, as well as the scrupulous honesty that had always been Jean's, prevented me from believing in this plagiarism. Besides, had I not often seen with my own eyes Gautier writing as he worked on *Le temps d'aimer*? He had written the poem in my house in the Laurentians where he spent several weeks with my wife and me; he had written it in front of us. Sometimes, it is true, Jean's facility amazed me, a facility that also helped him write his novels, he told me. He said to me then, I remember, that he carried his works within him where they would compose themselves, and all he had to do then was carry out the long process of writing them down and tightening their structure.

I could not believe my friend could have learned Rochet's poem by heart and would have played the game of writing it as I looked on, as if he were preparing me to be a witness to his literary creation in case, later on, he had to face an accusation of plagiarism. Friendship alone did not impose that certainty, but the facts: after the scandal, Gautier made not the slightest allusion to the possibility of me being his witness, and his silence was not that of a man waiting for a friend to step forward, but that of someone who had forgotten everything.

In the month that passed between the revelations in the journals and the suicide, I sought another solution besides plagiary. I did not find it until a little more than a week after Gautier's death.

BEFORE JEAN'S papers were returned to his family, I was allowed to study

the manuscript of *Le temps d'aimer* and compare it to Rochet's book that I borrowed from the library. I was surprised to discover that all the crossings out and all the corrections tended, slowly but surely, to bring his text closer and closer to Rochet's. Often starting from quite a distance, little by little the thought and expression approached that of Rochet. The words and punctuation were mixed, scratched out and then replaced to become Rochet's work. In other words, it was only by great effort that Gautier's text came to resemble that of the writer from Marseille. This strange phenomenon proved in my opinion that this was not a case of plagiarism. But what was it?

As well, I could not adequately explain the great number of newspapers and journals on his deathbed. Why had Gautier consulted so many of them the day before or the day of his death? No one had spoken of the plagiary for the last two weeks. Gautier must have been waiting for something else, and could not tolerate the waiting any more. It seemed obvious to me that the supposed plagiarism was not the only reason for his suicide.

For an entire week, I carried out research in libraries in Montreal, Québec City and Ottawa. No college or university library, and no public library (and not Gautier's personal library either, of course), owned any work by Rochet; the Montreal municipal library was the only one. That library's records showed that Rochet had written seven novels, a collection of short stories and a suite of poems that all had the same titles as Gautier's books. I asked for Rochet's works and Jean's: the same text was to be found on the corresponding pages of the two authors.

I was trembling with astonishment at what the journals would have called 'the enormity of the plagiarism.' But why did they not announce the similarity between all of Gautier's books and Rochet's? Examining the beginning of *Le temps d'aimer*, I answered my own question. There was no list of other works by the same author at the beginning of the book; the journalist who first mentioned the plagiarism must have found Rochet's book by the title entry, not the author entry.

I looked at Rochet's books from every angle. The endpapers of each one

included a note explaining that these works had been donated to the library by the heirs of Dr Raymond Santerre, and each one bore an amiable dedication by the author to the doctor. I went over the borrowing history – it didn't take long – that is attached to the last page of the book. I discovered that Rochet's works, since their donation to the library in 1864, had been borrowed only once, except for *Le temps d'aimer* that had been taken out three times: first by borrower 11,292 on April 4th, that is, two days before the first story of the plagiary; borrower 11,292 must have been the journalist. Then on May 6th, I had borrowed the book to compare it to Gautier's manuscript, as I have said. As for the third reader, he had borrowed all of Rochet's works, including *Le temps d'aimer*, on May 2nd, 1944, the day before Gautier's suicide; he was borrower 10,824.

The librarian to whom I asked about the identity of borrower 10,824 did not see me turn pale as she went through the pages of her registry. I knew what she would tell me, and I wished for her never to reach the name of that borrower. She stopped at one particular page and hesitated, then ran her finger down the columns of numbers with their names and addresses.

'Here it is,' she said. 'Mr Jean Gautier.'

Still hoping for the impossible, I went as far as to ask the address. It was Jean's.

The day before his suicide, for the first time, he had consulted all of Rochet's works, realized their identity was the same as his and did not survive that discovery.

As for the extraordinary meeting between these two bodies of works, it was explained to me – if 'explanation' is the right word for it – when I began to search for information about Rochet the man in the dictionary room of the library.

My discovery disturbed me, and disturbs me still, in a way I cannot begin to express. So then . . . was it possible? What had happened before Jean Gautier? And what would happen after him? Was time simply a disease of our brain too weak and too limited to grasp the world without cutting it into successive slices? Or was life simply an endless anaphora?

Father Boismenu, in Volume V, page 809 of his celebrated *Trésor des biographies françaises* (1890), writes:

ROCHET, Joseph-Marie-Adolphe, born in Marseille in 1800, author of estimable stories and novels (*L'Antiquaire*, 1824, *L'Amour en automne*, 1828, *Hécate et son cortège*, 1832, *Fidélité*, 1834, *Les Jardins de Murcie*, 1836, *Delphine de Rochelonde*, 1839, *L'Amazone de la via Veneto*, 1841, *Adieu à Tullia*, 1843); took his own life in his native city on May 4, 1844, after an obscure charge of plagiarism in *Le temps d'aimer*, a suite of

poems he had recently published.

Doctor Roger-Louis Larocque

[Publisher's Note: On September 20, 1964, the *Courrier des bibliothèques*, page 8, published the following notice:

Moved by a generosity that honours their name, the heirs of the late Doctor Roger-Louis Larocque have

bequeathed the library and manuscripts of the deceased to our municipal main branch. We know that Dr Larocque, who was close to all the writers of our city, owned an extremely fine collection of autographs and signed first editions. Readers and researchers will be delighted that this treasure has not been dispersed, and will be available to them as soon as inventory and filing have been completed.] ◇

#### HOW TO WRITE A LETTER

## Oscar Wilde to Alsager Richard Vian

*A suggestion of an article – and perhaps more*

*Recently discovered letters from Oscar Wilde to the young editor of Court & Society Review, Alsager Richard Vian, include this wonderful pitch letter:*

My Dear Vian

Shall I do an article called the 'Child Philosopher'? It will be on Mark Twain's amazing and amusing record of the answers of American children at a Board

School.

Some of them such as Republicans – 'a sinner mentioned in the Bible', or Democrat – 'a vessel filled with beer', are excellent.

Come and dine at Pagani's in Portland Street on Friday – 7.30. No dress – just ourselves and a flask of Italian wine – afterwards we will smoke cigarettes and Talk over the Journalistic article – could we go to your rooms, I am so far off,

and clubs are difficult to Talk in. This however is for you entirely to settle. Also send me your address again like a good fellow – I have lost it.

I think your number is excellent, but as usual had to go to S. James' Street to get a copy. Even Grosvenor Place does not get the C&S. Till Thursday night! This is all wrong, isn't it.

Truly yours,  
Oscar Wilde

◇

#### HELP PAGES

## The Agony Uncle

*Alain de Botton will ease your pain*

*My parents are high-achievers and have always pushed me to be the best. At the same time, they were very contemptuous of people they called 'losers'; people who were lazy, or just didn't do well in their work. I have hence grown up with a terrible 'fear of failure.' Though I am doing well at work at the moment, I permanently worry about disappointing people – and myself. And this has become very boring and tiring. Any thoughts? —Albert, St Albans*

I WAS THINKING about Albert's problem with the help of Aristotle's ideas about tragedy; particularly, the idea that we become more sympathetic to people

the more we can feel like them. In the Greek philosopher's eyes, it is tragic plays that can help us to identify with 'failed' people, and so learn to feel sorry for their reversals of fortune. After watching tragic plays, proposed Aristotle, we will stop being so hard and sarcastic about those we presently call 'losers'. Consequently our own fear of being a 'loser' will diminish.

The play that most perfectly suited Aristotle's conception of the tragic art form was Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, first performed in Athens at the Festival of Dionysus in the spring of 430BC. The story of how Oedipus ends up marrying

his mother and killing his father is a familiar one. Of course, we might rejoinder that marrying our mothers and killing our fathers is hardly an error of judgement many of us are likely to make. But the extraordinary dimensions of Oedipus's blindness do not detract from the more universal features of the play. Oedipus's story affects us in so far as it reflects shocking aspects of our own characters and condition: the way apparently small errors can have the gravest of consequences, our blindness to the effects of our actions, our erroneous tendency to presume that we are in conscious command of our destinies; the speed with which everything we hold dear may be lost, and the unknown obscure forces, what Sophocles termed 'fate', against which our weak powers of reason and foresight are pitted. Oedipus had not been devoid of error. He had

hubristically believed himself to have escaped the oracles' prophecies and had lazily sided with his subjects' high estimation of him. His pride and hot-temper had led him to pick a fight with King Laius and an emotional cowardice had prevented him from connecting this murder to the prophecies about him. His self-righteousness had made him cover over the crime for many years and then blame Creon for hinting at his guilt.

If a tragic work allows us to experience a degree of concern so much greater than that we ordinarily feel for others' failure, it is principally because it leads us to plumb the origins of failure. To know more is, in this context, necessarily to understand and to forgive more. A tragic work leads us artfully through the miniscule, often innocent, steps connecting a hero or heroine's prosperity to their downfall and the perverse relationships between intentions and results. In the process, it makes it unlikely that we can retain for long the sneering, indifferent or vengeful tone we might have had recourse to had we merely read the bare bones of a story of failure in a newspaper.

In the summer of 1848, a terse item appeared in many newspapers across Normandy. A twenty-seven-year-old woman named Delphine Delamare, née Couturier, living in the small town of Ry not far from Rouen, had become dissatisfied with the routines of married life, had run up huge debts on superfluous clothes and household goods and, under emotional and financial pressure, had taken her own life by swallowing arsenic. Madame Delamare left behind a young daughter and a distraught husband, Eugène Delamare, who had studied medicine in Rouen before taking up his post as a health officer in Ry, where he was loved by his clients and respected by the community.

One of those reading the newspaper was a twenty-seven-year-old aspiring novelist, Gustave Flaubert. The story of Madame Delamare stayed with him, it became something of an obsession, it followed him on a journey around Egypt and Palestine until, in September 1851, he settled down to work on *Madame Bovary*, published in Paris six years later.

One of the many things that happened when Madame Delamare, the adulteress

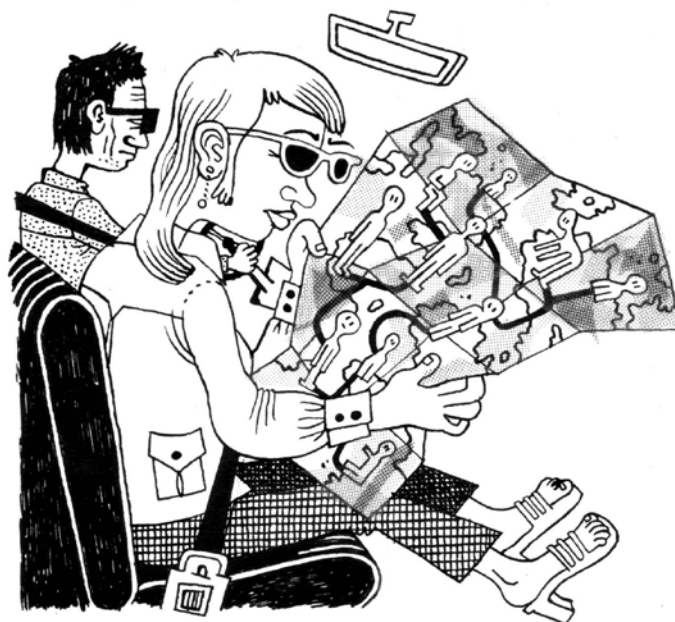
from Ry, turned into Madame Bovary, the adulteress from Yonville, was that her life ceased to bear the dimensions of a black-and-white morality tale. As a newspaper story, the case of Delphine Delamare had been seized upon by provincial conservative commentators as an example of the decline of respect for marriage among the young, of the increasing commercialisation of society and of the loss of religious values. But to Flaubert, art was the very anti-thesis of such crass moralism. It was a realm in which human motives and behaviour could for once be explored in a depth that made a mockery of any attempt to construct saints or sinner. Readers of Flaubert's novel could observe Emma's naïve ideas of love, but also where these had arisen from: they followed her into her childhood, they read over her shoulders at her convent, they sat with her and her father during long summer afternoons in Tostes, in a kitchen where the sound of pigs and chickens drifted in from the yard. They watched her and Charles falling into an ill-suited marriage, could see how Charles had been seduced by his loneliness and by a young woman's physical charms, and how Emma had been impelled by her desire to escape a cloistered life and by her lack of experience of men outside of third-rate romantic literature. Readers could sympathize with Charles's complaints against Emma and Emma's complaints against Charles. Flaubert seemed almost deliberately to enjoy unsettling the desire

to find easy answers. No sooner had he presented Emma in a positive light than he would undercut her with an ironic remark. But then, as readers were losing patience with her, as they felt her to be nothing more than a selfish pleasure-seeker, he would draw them back to her, would tell them something about her sensitivity that would bring tears to the eyes. By the time Emma had lost all status in her community, had pushed arsenic into her mouth and been laid down in her bedroom to await her death, readers would not be in a mood to judge.

We end Flaubert's novel with fear and sadness at how we have been made to live before we begin to know how, at how limited our understanding of ourselves and others is, at how great and catastrophic are the consequences of our actions and at how pitiless and vengeful the upstanding members of the community can be in response to our errors.

As readers or members of an audience of a tragic work, we are the furthest it is possible to be from the spirit of newspaper headlines like 'SHOPAHOLIC ADULTERESS SWALLOWS ARSENIC', tragedy having inspired us to abandon ordinary life's simplified perspective on failure and defeat; and rendered us generous towards the foolishness and errors endemic to our nature.

In a world in which people had truly imbibed the lessons implicit within tragic art, the consequences of our failures would necessarily cease to weigh upon us so heavily. ♦





# David Shields

## *Our star columnist takes on the issues of the day*

### DYING IS EASY

Our recently graduated graduate student died in a freak accident. At the funeral, many classmates and teachers told standard stories: funny, sad, vivid, delicately off-colour. I praised him fulsomely, thereby casting a warm glow back upon my own head. Another teacher, trying to say something interesting, criticized his fledgling work. I upbraided her for her obtuseness, but I felt bad about badgering her and made it worse by harumphing, 'Words are famously difficult to get right; that's why being a writer is so interesting.' Worse still by adding, 'Who among us doesn't get the words constantly wrong?' She plans to write Patrick's widow an explanatory and exculpatory note, but it'll come out wrong, too, I promise. Because language is all we have to connect us, and it doesn't, not quite. It never fails to fail us, never doesn't defeat us, is bottomlessly –. But here I am, trying to paper over the gaps with erratic glue.

### THE SADNESS OF THE YANKEE FAN

The sadness of the Yankee fan lies in his knowledge that his gorgeous dream is made of money. This is America, though: capital of capitalism. I was once wildly in lust with a girl fond of saying it's not the bulge in front, it's the bulge in back. So, too, I've lived my life for art, which I know is not immemorial. Illusion, baby, illusion – whatever the cost.

### A DAY LIKE ANY OTHER DAY, ONLY SHORTER

Birth is not inevitable. Life certainly isn't. The sole inevitability of existence, the only consequence of being alive, is death. J.M. Coetzee: 'That, finally, is all it means to be alive: to be able to die.' Death R Us. Whereas once one could frame mortality within an ideology of the afterlife, now we can no longer speak with assurance about the immortality of

art, the consolation of philosophy or the reach of heaven. Where does this leave us then? How do we face death?

Death is not a passageway to heaven but a brute biological fact.

We're done. It's over. All the gods have gone to sleep or are simply moribund. We're a bag of bones. All the myths are empty. The only bravery consists of diving into the wreck, dancing/grieving in the abyss.

As baby-boomers enter their/our senescence, we're all looking for companionship in the dark. Michael Billington, reviewing Simon Gray's *Close of Play* in the *Guardian*, wrote, 'To embody death convincingly on the stage is one of the hardest things for a dramatist to do: Mr Gray has here managed it in a way that, paradoxically, makes life itself that much more bearable.'

To quote Greg Bottoms, 'When things go wrong, when Nietzsche's breath of empty space moves over your skin, reminds you that you are but a blip in the existence of the world, destined from birth to vanish with all the things and people you love, to mulch the land with no more magic than the rotting carcass of a bird, it's nice to imagine –' Imagine what, exactly?

If Death = X, solve (or don't solve) for X.

Some people might find it utter anathema to even consider articulating an answer to such a question, but if, as Rembrandt said, 'Painting is philosophy,' then certainly writing is philosophy as well. Isn't everyone's project, on some level, to offer tentative theses regarding what – if anything – we're doing here?

Against death, in other words, what solace, what consolation, what bulwark, what transcendence – if any? Tolstoy: 'The meaning of life is life' – for which much thanks. Ice-T's answer: 'A human being is just another animal in the big jungle. Life is really short and you're going to die. We're here to

stick our heads above the water for just a minute, look around, and go back under.' Samuel Beckett's much-rubbed articulation: 'I can't go on. I'll go on.' Okay, you're going to go on, I hope and assume. Congratulations. Why, though? What carries you through the day, not to mention the night? Beckett's own answer: he liked to read Dante, watch soccer and fart.

As a nine-year-old, I would awake, shivering, and spend the entire night sitting cross-legged on the landing of the stairs to my basement bedroom, unable to fathom that one day I'd cease to be. I remember being mesmerized by a neighbour's tattoo of a death's head, underneath which were the words, 'As I am, you shall someday be.' Cormac McCarthy recently said in an interview, 'Death is the major issue in the world. For you, for me, for all of us. It just is. To not be able to talk about it is very odd.' We're trying to do a very un-American thing here: talk about it. Why? Because, as Thomas Pynchon says, 'When we speak of "seriousness", ultimately we are talking about an attitude toward death, how we act in its presence, for example, or how [we] handle it when it isn't so immediate.'

David Foster Wallace, who posed the difficult questions usefully for all of us, said, 'You don't have to think very hard to realize that our dread of both relationships and loneliness, both of which are sub-dreads of our dread of being trapped inside a self (a psychic self, not just a physical self), has to do with angst about death, the recognition that I'm going to die, and die very much alone, and the rest of the world is going to go merrily on without me. I'm not sure I could give you a steeple-fingered theoretical justification, but I strongly suspect a big part of a writer's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny.'

All of my work is an attempt to do exactly what Wallace called for: aggravate exactly this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, since any possible human redemption requires us first to etc. ♦

## Michel Tremblay

translated by David Homel

‘I DON’T DRINK and I don’t do drugs because I’m a control freak, not because I don’t have the taste for it,’ Michel Tremblay laughs. ‘I just don’t want my body making me do things that my mind would blame me for the next day.’

Tremblay once said he’d been ‘punished’ for his lack of bad habits with a case of throat cancer, an illness often seen in people who’ve abused certain substances. If anything, Tremblay is a gourmand, which makes his doctors happy, since they’re glad to see him put on the kilos he lost in his recent battle against cancer.

Considering he’s such an epicurean, no wonder the best table in Key West

belongs in his house, where he spends six months of the year writing. His visitors are pressed into service too. Their succulent dishes quickly become fuel to run the literary engine on this fabled Florida island, where Ernest Hemingway and Tennessee Williams worked their pens too.

A few months ago, he was seated in front of a DVD playing a version of *Albertine in Five Times* staged in Warsaw, followed by an adaptation of *Messe solonelle pour une pleine lune d’été* put on in Dublin. ‘My readers are faithful, and that’s a wonderful gift. Even when I tried new things, like *Un Trou dans le mur*, published right after I got cancer, they stuck with me. Even when I wrote about death,’ he says.

Besides death, the theme of memory is a strong part of his work. *L’Oratorio de Noël*, a play about Alzheimer’s, will be staged in Montreal in February 2012. He won’t say anything more about his newest creation, but his emotions are palpable.

‘I earn my living with memory. I also think that our recent past helps explain us to ourselves.’ At the age of sixty-eight, he understands himself a little more than before. The publication of his latest novel, *Le passage obligé*, offers a last piece of the puzzle: the family universe he’s been writing over the last forty years, the way a spider spins a web.

With *La Grande mêlée*, the author’s next literary adventure, he will finish his cosmogony full of women and men from Québec. It seems that Nana, Gabriel, Maria, Victoire and the others still have a few secrets to reveal.

—CLAUDIA LAROCHELLE

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## The *Five Dials* List of Top Ten Novelists Under Ten

LAST MONTH, when we came up with our plan to publish our second ever list of young fiction writers who we believe are, or will be, key to their generation, we took a look back at our first list, which we published a long time ago, like a super-long time ago. Many of the writers on that first list have gone on to become older and some are pretty old right now.

There are a lot of lists. *A lot*. The habit of literary list-making can seem arbitrary or totally weird, leaving the list-makers endlessly open to second-guessing. But it's also fun. Have you ever seen *Avatar* without 3D glasses? It's still pretty good.

Making lists of writers is really important. I hope we never stop making them.

We couldn't put everyone on the list. Two choices couldn't come on for an obvious reason – and that reason is age. Tom Templeton should have been on this list, but he recently celebrated his tenth birthday. (He had a pirate party). His novel *Goodnight Yourself* is a controversial and moving reinterpretation of *Goodnight Moon*, as told from the point of view of the moon. "I was always struck by the narrowness of the original tale," Templeton said to me. "The moon is not, in fact, going to sleep. Yes, the people are going to sleep, but that's a typically anthropocentric point of view." He actually said "amnioticallish," but he meant "anthropocentric."

Another person who is not on the list is Nick McKittridge, who turned eleven a few weeks after the publication of his novel, *Six*. "Being six is nothing like being five," McKittridge said, and in his harrowing debut, he showed us exactly why.

I hope you enjoy our list.

—JAMIE BUCKS,  
*Five Dials* intern (age 13)



*Where Are We Two Going?*  
by Tobin Wu (age 9)



*I'm Not A Boy, I'm Not A Girl, I'm Not A Lady, I'm A Fixer-ing-man Man.*  
by Elisa Vanvitelli (age 5)



*No Kicking The Fort Down*  
by Alastair Turnbull (age 7)



*How the Moon Gets Up and Down Everyday*  
by Vlado Klesic (age 9)





*I Am A Ambitious Man Singer*  
by Marcus Korir (age 7)



*I'm Still Thinking About The Things*  
by Elizabeth Vonn (age 8 and a half)



*Cake and Strawberries and Candles and  
Preznets*  
by Sophie de Vries (age 4)



*I'm Not Seven, You Know (I'm Eight) and  
I'm Not Eight, You Know (I'm Dead)*  
by Terry Graveney (age 9)



*I Just Don't Like the Way the Earth Smells*  
by Tamara Escalona (age 8)



*How Do Dogs Learn to Cry?*  
by Anne Parsons (age 7)