

Robert Markland Smith

Deadly Mischief

2016.

The trumpet / quartet

ÜBERMENSCH

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PRIMATE IN A POLICE STATE

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SMILE, SMITTY LOVES YOU

ÜBERMENSCH

Last Saturday, I was telling Bonnie, my wife, about Lord Byron, while we drove back to Montreal. I had read the biography by André Maurois while I was studying literature at Loyola College many years ago. There is a scene in which Byron is recently married; it is nighttime, and his newlywed wife is in bed, trying to sleep, while there is a fire burning in the fireplace and the maniac poet is stoned on opium, holding a skull in one hand and a pistol in the other, ranting diabolically as he keeps threatening his wife. You can imagine the shadows dancing on the walls and the ceiling, to the rhythm of the flames gyrating on the embers. And Bonnie asked me why I was fascinated with Lord Byron, when he was such a blatant scoundrel. I replied, "Because he was a brilliant writer..." For instance, in his one-act play Manfred, the hero is in a dark castle on top of a cliff, during a thunderstorm in the Alps, and he is tormented because he has a dark secret. Byron's secret was his incest. He got engaged to marry a woman who was, according to him, "mathematical," so on his wedding night, instead of sleeping with his wife and consumating his marriage, he slept with his half-sister. For this crime against nature, he was exiled from England and spent the rest of his life on the continent.

Bonnie wondered why such depraved individuals reach such prominence. We were debating this, while driving along the highway. I mentioned the myth of Faustus and the medieval interpretation of fame and fortune – people used to believe that if you sold your soul to the devil, he would give you fame and fortune. Anyway, the Faustus of Marlowe and Goethe believed this and was of course betrayed, because why would the devil keep a promise?

I was saying there are other reasons why some evil people become bigger than life. Sometimes they happen to be very creative individuals and land in favourable circumstances. I have always felt that it is like shouting in the Grand Canyon: if you are exactly in the right place, the echo of your voice will resonate louder and louder. Cathedrals and concert halls are designed to have similar acoustics, aren't they? Bonnie agreed. She said some writers or politicians or painters simply have a lot of talent.

However, I replied, some very talented people wrote brilliantly but had never been recognized. Other times, there are mediocre writers like John Masefield who become poet laureates. Then, Bonnie and I discussed artists, especially actors, who are thrown into the limelight because of their promoters. What about Elvis or Marilyn Monroe, who made it very

big, were driven by their agents, and came to a tragic end? "The bigger they are," I said, "the harder they fall."

Bonnie didn't agree with this. She doesn't believe there is any poetic justice involved in tragedies like those. And she certainly doesn't believe the devil or a god grants fame or fortune to individuals they favour. She thought it is entirely up to the artist or politician or public figure. She believed some people are clever manipulators and use people in their surroundings to express their message. She also thought some artists or writers can capture the spirit of their times better than others, like Obama. I replied that others still are discovered only centuries later, like William Blake. And the debate went on, as the windshield wipers slashed back and forth during the storm along the highway.

On the other hand, I told Bonnie, there are also clever manipulators like Hitler, who seize opportunities to suit their own ambition. I remember reading in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, how Hitler seemed driven to do impulsive things which served his own evil ends. And yet, he had an agenda, which he described in *Meinkampf*. And he also came to a disgraceful end. I tried to explain to Bonnie that he had been an antichrist, but she didn't buy this biblical interpretation.

Bonnie had just taken a course in Greek mythology at Concordia, and told me that in antiquity, the common interpretation was hybris and nemesis. Some individual, such as Hitler, would exalt himself, raise himself up to the status of the gods; consequently the gods would crush that person and put him back in his place. The first process was arrogance, or hybris. The tragic end of these kings would be nemesis.

I replied that there was the same concept in the Bible. King Nebuchednazzar thought he was a god; therefore, Jehovah drove him mad, so that he left civilization, grew long hair and ate grass, like cattle. That was his nemesis.

Once again, Bonnie is not a believer. Neither in the Greek gods, nor in the god of the Bible. Nor does she believe in fate. She thinks everything in the universe runs on chance or randomness. Her interpretation is that ambitious people make it to the top, that hard work will make you rich, that talent is always rewarded. She doesn't like it when I quote Ecclesiastes – *the race is not to the swift, nor battle to the strong, nor riches to men of understanding, nor bread to the wise, nor favour to men of skill...* That contradicts her whole ethic. And yet, I remind her, most

people get rewards for their efforts, but then again, some people like Leonard Cohen acquire so much fame and acclaim that mere talent doesn't explain it. In Montreal newspapers, Leonard can do no wrong. He is a *vedette*, a super star. The newspaper articles never discuss his ideas. They discuss the scarf and the coat he was wearing at Irving Layton's funeral. If fame and recognition are a creation of the media, how does that explain the fame of people in antiquity, like Jesus Christ or Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great?

Bonnie replies that in a book she read, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, the author seemed to say that some people aim higher than mere survival. Their spirit soars and tries to fly higher and higher, while other creatures merely try to eke out a living. Didn't William Blake say, "No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings?"

And then I replied that some artists exploit others for their own ends. These are very successful people in their own fields. They get reviews in the press, favourable critiques on the web, some of them even have their names up in lights. But they are predators. They will arrive at the scene of an accident and take photographs or write a story, rather than call for help. They have an instinct for the right moment, they catch you when you are

down and out. They photograph, write about or paint suffering people. Their art depicts individuals who are handicapped, drunks, people with mental disabilities, people on medication. They love their subjects, all right. They love them so much that they make money off them. While the subjects of their movies and photos continue suffering on welfare, the artists get awards and praise and money.

I added that for the longest time, you wonder if these artists are angels or demons. When Ernest Hemingway described the character Robert Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises*, was he getting revenge? What were his motives as he was writing? The novel begins with a five page description of a person the author obviously hated. Yes, Hemingway appeared to be bigger than life, but was he a hero or a villain? When Shakespeare created the character Shylock, was the Bard simply being a predator or an exploiter?

Bonnie wouldn't answer that question. Not believing in angels or demons, she thinks people are just people. She has worked most of her life and never took time to trip out, to explore the depths of evil or meditate on the heights of goodness. And she is right. If you are going to fathom God or Satan, you need spare time. You need time to read books and travel; this means the average person doesn't know what these predator artists are up

to, what they are doing in their spare time – are they reading other writers and other scriptures? Are they conjuring up spirits and making deals with them? For that matter, how do cloistered monks and nuns spend their time?

She went on: is there something holy or compassionate about photographing handicapped people, like some do? Is there a guru that actually means something to these famous photographers? They always have a camera in your face. Do you know where they are going to show your picture? Are they benefactors or exploiters?

I told Bonnie someone told me a story by email. This person was supposed to meet some artist friends for some quiet time eating pizza on Saint Lawrence Street. Instead, they showed up and shoved a camera in her face and then broadcast the video on You Tube.

But this doesn't explain how famous people reach prominence, does it? What explains their success? Is it hard work? Is it luck? Is it their sense of timing? Is it talent? (Bonnie and I disagreed.)

I explained to her that incidentally, the late Graham McKeen once said to

me on the phone, "You know, Smitty, you and I have something in common. It's a good thing we are not famous. Because we couldn't handle it." I said I was no better than anyone else. Fame was simply never given to me.

I may have wished at one time I had more recognition, but today I realize I am just another ordinary person, a mediocre writer and I wouldn't want to be famous anyway.

As we were pulling up to our apartment building in Montreal in the rain, I added I was just curious why *the Babylonian lottery*, as Luis Borges called it, bestowed fame and fortune beyond measure to some people and ignominy to others, and to most people like myself, anonymity. And at the end of his short story, Borges admits the lottery run by the high priests of Babylon had the power of God, to make one man a leader, another man a prisoner, another man a labourer, one man a family man, and another man a drunk. The wheel of fortune spins around, like in *Carmina Burana*, and we all end up equal in death. We are all born naked. We will all appear in judgment. Then Thoth reads our record of good and bad deeds before the judge.

Bonnie pursed her lips and gave me her usual look of doubt.

May 18, 2009

TILL LUCK RUNS OUT

I had been on the road for six weeks, psychotic and running away from myself and my karma, wearing a dirty blue overcoat that I had found in a garbage can in Kamloops, British Columbia, dishevelled, unshaven, and looking pretty sick. I had been doing manual labour for ten years, although I had a bachelor of arts degree in French literature, although I could have done something more interesting; I had been working as a busboy, as a factory hand, as a truck driver's assistant, and my self-esteem was pretty dismal.

One afternoon, on the road, something amazing happened. I met an extraordinary gentleman. Well, was he a gentleman? I am not sure, but he pulled up to the curb as I was hitchhiking, and he was driving a spanking new fire engine-red Corvette. He told me, "Hop in. Where are you headed?"

The driver was about thirty years old, and was wearing a spotless white

suit, with a pink shirt and a blue sporty tie.

And we got to talking. I asked him, bluntly: “You must have a lot of money to drive a car like this?”

He answered, “I don’t have a cent on me.”

“Then how do you manage?”

He replied and told me, “This is what I do. I drive this car, pull into a new town, and rent a room at the best hotel. Then I go to the local pool hall, and I hustle people. I make \$ 500 and then I pay the hotel bill, and I move on.”

I was really impressed. At the time, I had been sleeping at men’s hostels, with derelict natives, or at the Salvation Army, with cowboys and rednecks. I figured I was down on my luck.

What was I running away from? From the possibility of succeeding? Here was a guy who obviously didn’t just live for his friends. He was a loner, and he fended for himself. Why wasn’t this hustler afraid of taking

chances?

Well, he drove me to my destination, and let me off. That was in 1977. I still remember the way he looked. You would have thought he was a millionaire, because he looked so successful.

January 11, 2004

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PORTRAIT DE MON PÈRE

Je possède quelques photos de mon père. Je les conserve dans un album avec les autres photos de famille. Il y en a une qui dit beaucoup au sujet du caractère de papa. Elle a été prise le jour de mes noces avec Nancy Hough, le 5 septembre 1987; au moment où la photo a été prise, mon père descendait les marches de la chapelle avec ma mère. Toute sa volonté, tout son effort paraît dans la photo. Il fronce des sourcils, qui sont épais, noirs mais grisonnants. Il est chauve. Il y a quelques cheveux noirs,

extrêmement courts, sur les côtés de la tête. Il se faisait couper les cheveux toutes les semaines. Il porte sa cravate éternelle, sempiternelle, qu'il n'ôtait jamais, même à la maison. Le nœud est parfait, le nœud d'un perfectionniste acharné. L'habit est sombre et sobre, comme mon père. Le bonhomme porte des lunettes noires et épaisses, qui encadrent des petits yeux perçants. L'expression de son visage indique que le monsieur fait un effort énorme pour être correct, tout en descendant l'escalier. La bouche crispée est celle d'un homme renfermé, refoulé, introverti. Aussi, il essaie d'avoir l'air jovial, même s'il ne s'est jamais amusé de sa vie. C'est un visage sérieux, trop sérieux, comme s'il s'apprêtait à me chicaner. Mais là, j'interprète ce que je vois dans la photo. En ce moment-là, le bonhomme avait soixante-dix-huit ans. Il était toujours sur son trente-six, de peur de révéler ses secrets personnels.

La première fois que j'ai vu mon père, je ne m'en souviens pas. Lui m'a raconté notre première rencontre. Il était derrière une vitre, et ma mère venait d'accoucher, au bout de cinquante-six heures de labeur. Je suis venu au monde en retard de trois semaines. Mon grand-père, le père de maman, était décédé le jour où je devais venir au monde. En plus, l'accouchement était très difficile. Ma sœur Claire était née par césarienne. Elle est mon aînée de trois ans. Après qu'elle est venue au monde, mon

père a subi des traitements électrochocs. Toutefois, c'est ma mère qui a accouché. Mon père, Markland Joseph Smith, m'a raconté son impression de ma naissance. Le médecin me tenait dans les bras, et j'avais l'air fâché. Selon mon père. Et je pleurais fort, ce qui n'est pas surprenant, parce que, en 1948, les médecins avaient la fâcheuse habitude de donner une tape sur les fesses au nouveau-né, afin qu'il crache tout ce qu'il a dans la bouche. De nos jours, il paraît que nous sommes plus civilisés, et une infirmière suce au bout d'un long tube en plastique ce que le bébé nouveau-né a dans la bouche. Autrement le bébé pourrait s'étouffer. De toute façon, mon père me regardait à travers la vitre, et il avait l'impression que je le jugeais, en lui disant : «C'est toi, le grand responsable!» En fait, mon père ne connaissait pas grand-chose à la génétique et il croyait que la femme jouait uniquement le rôle d'un réceptacle pour le bébé contenu dans le sperme. C'était une conception médiévale de la génétique. Alors, mon père se prenait pour le grand responsable. Quant à ma mère, elle devait être épuisée, au terme d'un accouchement qui avait duré aussi longtemps.

Cela, c'est du ouïe-dire. Évidemment, je ne me rappelle pas de ma naissance. Mais tout ça pour dire à quel point mon père se prenait au sérieux.

Son nom était Markland Joseph Smith. Joseph, c'était son grand-père à lui, Joseph Smith, qui était commis-voyageur. Apparemment, quand il rentrait à la maison au bout d'un voyage d'affaires de six mois, il donnait systématiquement la fessée à chacun des enfants, y compris le père de mon papa, que l'enfant ait été obéissant ou non pendant son absence.

Un jour, Joseph Smith est rentré de voyage et toute la famille s'était convertie au catholicisme. Alors Joseph Smith a plié bagages et est parti pour l'Australie. J'imagine qu'il a laissé mon arrière grand-mère avec de nombreux enfants. Cela s'était passé en Angleterre.

Un de ses fils s'appelait Sydney Joseph Smith. C'était mon grand-père, que je n'ai jamais rencontré en personne. Il est mort bien avant ma naissance. J'ai entendu des bribes au sujet de lui de la part de mon père, qui racontait une certaine version de sa vie à tout venant.

Sydney Smith et au moins un de ses frères, Eddy, ont émigré au Canada et se sont installés à Longueuil. Lui, Eddy, je l'ai connu et il est décédé quand j'avais seize ans. Il en avait quatre-vingt-cinq environ. Eddy était un comique, comme mon grand-père Sydney. Je me rappelle de voir mon grand-oncle venir en visite. Assis autour de la table, nous nous esclaffions à l'entendre jouer de la cornemuse en se plaçant un doigt à la gorge et en

se tenant le nez de l'autre main. Il imitait ainsi la cornemuse. Il racontait aussi des farces racistes, assez innocentes, mais qui en disait beaucoup sur l'éducation qu'a reçue mon père. Par exemple, il demandait : «What happens if you squeeze a lemon over a synagogue? All the juice run out.» Aujourd'hui, ce serait impensable de dire de telles choses, mais en 1900, je pense que beaucoup de nos ancêtres étaient antisémites.

En tout cas, un autre souvenir que j'ai d'Eddy Smith, c'est qu'il racontait que lorsqu'il allait chez un client pour conclure une vente, il attendait dans la salle d'attente et laissait son chapelet paraître dans sa poche de pantalon, pour s'assurer que l'affaire soit réussie. Ainsi, la secrétaire apercevait le chapelet qui dépassait l'ouverture de la poche et l'affaire était dans le sac.

Sydney Smith, lui, était comptable de métier mais n'a jamais pratiqué sa profession. Il était aussi artiste peintre et peignait des aquarelles assez bonnes. Je possède son diplôme du Montreal School of Arts and Manufacturing, qui est devenue l'École des beaux-arts de Montréal. Le diplôme est daté de 1899 et rédigé en anglais uniquement. Autre phénomène de l'époque. Si l'on se rend au Château Ramezay, dans le Vieux-Montréal, on apprend qu'en 1900, un tiers de Montréal était

francophone, un deuxième tiers, à Westmount, était britannique, et l'autre tiers, à Pointe Saint-Charles, était peuplé d'Irlandais.

Mon père m'a raconté un anecdote qui fait preuve du sens d'humour de mon grand-père Sydney, ainsi que de la mentalité de l'époque vis-à-vis de la langue. Mon grand-père travaillait chez Nordheimer Pianos, à vendre des pianos. Or, mon grand-père était marié à une francophone et suivait des cours de français sur disque. Si un client francophone téléphonait au magasin, mon grand-père prenait l'appel. Puis il se mettait à réciter ses leçons de français au client qui n'y comprenait rien. «Jean va à la bibliothèque. La plume de ma tante est sur la table de mon oncle...» Et on s'imagine que le client à l'autre bout de la ligne s'indignait en demandant : «Quoi? Pardon? Pardon? Je veux acheter un piano...» Alors le blagueur raccrochait l'appareil et disait aux autres employés, d'un ton assuré : «See? I took care of that!» (Cela se passait environ soixante-dix ans avant la Loi 101.)

Mon père m'a aussi raconté que Sydney et Eddy, les deux frères, avaient habité ensemble dans une maison de chambres. Selon eux, il y avait deux desserts, qu'on offrait tous les deux jours : «Sirop d'érable, compote aux pommes.» Le lendemain, c'était : «Compote aux pommes, sirop d'érable.»

En tout cas, mon père trouvait ces anecdotes très drôles...

Sydney Smith était marié à une dame Ledoux, qui était la fille de Charles Ledoux. Lui, Charles, était millionnaire. Ses usines avaient bâti toutes les calèches qu'on voit encore dans le Vieux-Montréal et sur la montagne. Il paraît qu'il avait vendu au CPR le terrain au centre-ville où l'on a érigé la Gare Windsor du Canadien Pacifique. Quand il est décédé, il a laissé l'héritage à ma grand-mère. Toutefois, il a dû faire faillite parce que Henry Ford, aux États-Unis, construisaient des véhicules automobiles qui ont remplacé la calèche comme moyen de transport des riches de l'époque. En tout cas, en 1914, la guerre est déclarée, et le gouvernement nationalise les usines de Charles Ledoux pour y construire des chars d'assaut.

Ensuite, mon père, qui est né à Weredale Park, une petite rue au bord de Westmount, le 17 juin 1909, voit mourir son père devant lui à l'âge de quatorze ans. Mon père, Markland, était nommé après Markland Molson, qui était un homme d'affaires de l'époque que mon grand-père admirait. Ce M. Molson avait fondé les brasseries Molson ainsi que la Banque Molson, qui se trouvait à Place d'Armes, dans le Vieux-Montréal. En tout cas, mon père faisait ses études à l'Académie Saint-Léon, qui est maintenant l'École internationale, en face de l'hôtel de ville de Westmount. Il rentre chez lui un jour après l'école, son père Sydney lui

demande comment ça s'était passé à l'école ce jour-là, et tombe raide mort. Sydney était assis dans son fauteuil, d'où il ne s'est jamais relevé. Il était âgé de 57 ans. Il laissait derrière lui mon père Markland, sa fille Marguerite, qui est décédée à l'âge de dix-sept ans, ainsi que sa fille Pauline.

Quand Charles Ledoux a fait faillite, la famille de mon père a déménagé de la rue Claremont à Westmount, qui était un quartier fointé, à la rue Saint-Hubert, un quartier francophone.

Mon père se retrouvait donc face à rien. À la maison, il y avait sa mère, sa grand-mère, la couturière, la bonne, ses deux sœurs – une maison peuplée de femmes. Ça le dérangeait. Voici qu'une dame de la paroisse offre de payer des études à mon père s'il devient moine franciscain. Lui, il saute sur la chance et s'inscrit au monastère. Il passera un certain temps au monastère de Rosemont puis à Trois-Rivières. En tout, il passe quatorze ans moine. D'après ce que m'ont dit ses collègues du monastère, ceux que j'ai rencontrés en tout cas, mon père, qui s'appelle maintenant le frère Charles, était heureux dans sa vie de moine. Un de ces vieux franciscains m'a même dit un jour beaucoup plus tard qu'il croyait que mon père deviendrait évêque. Lui, mon père, faisait pénitence. Il portait par exemple la silice. Ah, vous ne connaissez pas? Il s'agit d'une ceinture qu'on se

serre autour de la taille, de plus en plus serrée, sauf que la ceinture porte des clous par en-dedans. Alors plus on serre la ceinture, plus ces clous s'enfoncent dans la chair du ventre. Pendant qu'on se martyrise comme cela, on réfléchit aux souffrances de Jésus sur la croix. Charmant, n'est-ce pas?

Mon père me raconte toutes sortes d'anecdotes au sujet du cloître. Parce qu'il s'agit bien d'un cloître. Un jour, il réside au monastère de Rosemont et sa sœur se marie en face, dans une église de l'autre côté de la rue. C'est Pauline, qui épouse Eddy Aubut. Mais l'abbé, c'est-à-dire le directeur du monastère, refuse à mon père la permission de traverser la rue et d'assister aux noces de sa sœur. Pourquoi? Pour faire pénitence. À l'époque, les gens croyaient qu'il faut souffrir pour Dieu, pour faire plaisir à Dieu. C'est une phase du mysticisme, de la nuit de l'âme et de la nuit de l'esprit. C'est ça – souffrir pour Dieu.

Mon père me raconte un autre incident. Pendant les repas dans un monastère, pas question de bavarder ensemble. Un lecteur lit la Bible à voix haute pendant que les autres mangent. On l'écoute lire. Or c'est le tour de mon père, le frère Charles, d'apporter la Bible et de faire la lecture pendant que ses collègues mangent. Voici que mon père oublie la Bible dans sa cellule, dans sa chambre. Il s'étend à plat ventre devant l'abbé et

demande d'être pardonné. Et l'abbé lui répond : «C'est bien, mon petit frère. Mais que ça ne vous arrive plus.»

Entre-temps, mon père étudie. Il avait déjà terminé un cours commercial à l'école secondaire, où il avait appris entre autres à dactylographier. Au monastère, il a appris des sujets comme la cosmogonie, qui est une matière médiévale selon laquelle la Terre est le centre de l'univers et les étoiles tournent autour. Même vieillard, mon père ne croira jamais à l'évolution. À tous les étés, quand il rentre chez lui en vacances, il commence par lire les quatre Évangiles (il y en avait originellement une douzaine). Il écrit sa thèse de maîtrise en théologie sur l'épître de Saint Jacques. Et il apprend les idées de l'époque, y compris le messianisme québécois. Ma mère me montre un jour une dissertation que mon père avait rédigée quand il était en rhétorique, et on y parle de la mission du peuple canadien français de faire régner le Christ au Canada et dans le monde (sic). On m'a déjà dit que mon père était un disciple, un fils spirituel du chanoine Lionel Groulx. Effectivement, j'ai fouillé dans la bibliothèque de mon père après sa mort, en 1989, et il y avait des volumes tels que L'appel de la race, et Notre maître le passé, de Lionel Groulx. Mais il y avait aussi un livre intitulé «L'infiltration gauchiste du Canada français», par un historien et traducteur ami de mon père nommé Robert Rumilly. Ce monsieur avait

travaillé pour mon père au fédéral au Bureau de la traduction. Je n'ai jamais ouvert le livre, mais il me semble que le titre dit tout. Et mon père apprend au monastère à lutter contre les communistes. Et contre tout le monde. Il me racontera un jour que sa philosophie consiste à «résister à l'environnement». Il apprendra à avoir la tête dure.

En tout cas, mon père passe quatorze ans au monastère, jusqu'à l'âge de 28 ans. Il semble qu'à l'âge de quinze ans, il subit un coup de soleil et passe une semaine dans le coma. Il prétendra plus tard que cette expérience lui a causé du dommage au cerveau. Puis voici, tour de chapeau. Un an avant d'être ordonné prêtre, il lui reste seulement un cours de théologie à suivre, sur l'hyperdulie, ou le culte de la Sainte Vierge, et il quitte le cloître. On ne sait pas trop pourquoi. Il racontera toute sa vie à notre famille qu'il a eu des problèmes digestifs causés par l'extrême rigueur du régime. Par exemple, pendant la Dépression de 1929, les Franciscains, qui sont un ordre qui quête ses biens, n'ont rien à manger sauf de la citrouille pendant trois mois. Ils mangent de la tarte à la citrouille, de la salade à la citrouille, de la citrouille à tous les repas – et mon père n'aime pas la citrouille!

Ensuite, mon père nous raconte qu'il aurait fait une dépression nerveuse.

Puis, il me raconte quand j'ai dix-sept ans qu'il aurait eu des amitiés

particulières pendant son séjour au monastère. Et deux semaines avant de mourir, en décembre 1989, il raconte tout à ma mère. Il sait qu'il va mourir. Il cesse de porter la cravate tous les jours. Il cesse de se faire couper les cheveux une fois par semaine. Il flâne dans la maison, en robe de chambre, sans se raser. Et il se vide le cœur. Il raconte à ma mère qu'il y avait tant d'homosexualité au monastère que cela troublait le frère Charles. En fin de compte, moi je constate que le fait de quitter le monastère à ce moment-là fait son affaire. Il a obtenu une licence en philosophie et en théologie. Mais de là à se faire ordonner prêtre, il y a tout un pas. Il hésite à s'engager pour de bon. En tout cas, il vit des rationalisations comme ça pendant toute sa vie. Et il ne s'ouvre pas à personne, de peur de vendre la mèche.

Alors, Markland Smith quitte les ordres et annonce à son beau-père (car sa mère s'est remariée avec un certain M. Laberge) qu'il a l'intention de travailler. Il commence par vendre des produits de beauté Paula à des salons de coiffeur. Puis il est vendeur de porte en porte. Et il travaille pour les fermes Décarie, à planter des arbres. Car à NDG, il y a des vergers, des centaines et des milliers de pommiers. Les terres où l'on a bâti Montréal, et surtout NDG, sont les terres les plus fertiles du Québec. Mon père me racontera plus tard qu'en faisant du travail manuel, il se rétablit et son

estomac malade prend du mieux.

Puis il y a sa carrière de dramaturge à Radio-Canada. C'est à l'époque de Guy Mauffette, de sa sœur Estelle, qui deviendra l'amie de fille de mon père et évidemment, de Félix Leclerc. Aux dires de mon père, Estelle Mauffette, la «reine de Radio-Canada», joue le rôle à la radio de l'épouse de Séraphim Poudrier, au début des années quarante, et elle incarne si bien le rôle de la pauvre femme de l'avare, que des gens du public lui envoie des dons par la poste. On lui envoie des vêtements et des vivres. Mon père prétend que les gens de l'époque étaient si naïfs qu'ils pensaient que Mlle Mauffette crevait vraiment de faim.

Ensuite il y a Félix. Mon père raconte que pendant deux ans, Félix a deux cents pièces de théâtre qui sont rédigées et prêtes à passer à la radio. On le laisse attendre. Il est assis sur des bancs dans les corridors de Radio-Canada à attendre d'être reconnu. Rien. Enfin, au bout de deux ans d'attente de ce genre, un réalisateur lui achète six scénarios, pour se débarrasser de lui. Alors Félix est écoeuré de ce régime et part pour la France, où c'est la gloire. Il est enfin reconnu et quand il revient au Canada, au bout de quelques années, on l'accepte. Ce sera l'histoire de biens des artistes et écrivains canadiens. Nous vivons dans une colonie et

les décideurs croient que pour que ça soit bon, il faut que ce soit français de France ou britannique. Ce qui est canadien est considéré inférieur.

C'est pourquoi Irving Layton s'écrira un jour : «Canada, why do you murder your children?» Du côté anglais, même scénario. Emily Carr, la grande artiste de Colombie-Britannique, raconte comment le Groupe des Sept sera rejeté et ne s'attirera jamais l'attention des critiques parce qu'ils sont Canadiens. À l'époque, au Canada anglais, si l'on veut être reconnu, il faut que le produit soit britannique.

Mon père, lui, va à la bibliothèque tous les jours et compose des pièces de théâtre historiques, qui portent sur l'histoire du Canada. Ma mère écoutera ces pièces à la radio, à Ottawa, bien avant de rencontrer mon père. Mais mon père est dégoûté de l'ambiance à Radio-Canada. Si l'on veut que sa pièce passe aux ondes, il faut toujours acheter une boîte de cigares pour le réalisateur. Un jour, mon père avait rédigé une émission dans laquelle il comparait la peinture, la musique classique et la poésie. On n'achète pas sa pièce, mais l'épouse du réalisateur vole ses idées et l'émission passe à la radio sous le nom de l'épouse. Mon père quitte Radio-Canada en claquant la porte.

Il me racontera plus tard qu'à l'époque, il voulait un poste avec sécurité

d'emploi et un régime de retraite. On lui suggère de devenir traducteur au fédéral, à Ottawa. La première fois qu'il tente l'examen d'admission, il manque son coup. Mais l'année suivante, il réussit. Il décroche un poste de traducteur au Bureau de la traduction. À l'examen, qu'on écrit sans dictionnaire, il faut réussir vers le français ainsi que vers l'anglais. C'est le régime «hurry up and wait». On le fait attendre pendant six mois, puis tout à coup, on lui ordonne de paraître dans un certain bureau à Ottawa dans deux semaines. Alors mon père, qui habite au début des années 40 dans la maison de chambres d'une certaine Madame Noblet à Chateauguay, plie bagages et se rend à Ottawa, où il entreprend une carrière de traducteur qui durera quarante ans, dont trente ans comme chef de bureau à temps plein et dix ans à la pige.

*

Entre-temps, quand mon père quitte le monastère, il a des problèmes de santé. Il va voir un médecin qui lui recommande d'adhérer à un «groupe d'intellectuels très intéressants» dirigés par Adrien Arcand. Vous ne connaissez pas ce type? Tiens, je vous le présente, tel que raconté par mon père. Markland assiste à plusieurs des réunions secrètes de ce fameux groupe. Ça sent le cigare. L'air est plein de fumée. Il y a des centaines de gens qui écoutent cet Adrien Arcand déclamer contre les Juifs. M. Arcand raconte le passage de la Bible au sujet de David et Goliath. Il décrit

Goliath comme un bel homme, un géant magnifique, qui se fait tuer par le petit Juif sournois, David, qui ne lutte pas à armes égales, mais lui jette une pierre dans le front. Et mon père trouve ça bizarre. Ce n'est pas l'interprétation catholique de la Bible. Alors mon père, un homme prudent qui se fie toujours à l'autorité de l'Église, va voir un Jésuite qui lui conseille fortement d'éviter cet Adrien Arcand. Avez-vous deviné? Monsieur Arcand est le directeur du Parti nazi du Canada.

Mon père avait toutefois des amis bizarres. Il participe à la Chambre de commerce de Hull, où il rencontre Michel Chartrand, qu'il traite de «bouffon»! Ensuite, à un moment donné, il y a la grève générale à Winnipeg. Mon père est lié d'amitié à un colonel de la Gendarmerie royale du Canada qui infiltre le Parti communiste à Winnipeg comme agent double. Cet ami de mon père devient le secrétaire général du Parti communiste, puis fait un coup de théâtre. Au moment où tous les dirigeants du Parti se font arrêter, ce secrétaire général comparait en cour vêtu de son uniforme de GRC et dénonce tous ses supposés camarades. Mon père trouvera ce type de trahison le comble de l'intégrité et de l'honneur. Il me racontera que cet agent double doit ensuite s'évader et se cacher dans les Territoires du Nord-ouest. Mais c'était le genre de gens que mon père fréquentait. Puis il y a Georges Forest, qui sera connu

comme un grand patriote canadien français. Il contestera une contravention qu'il a reçue à Winnipeg sous prétexte qu'elle est seulement rédigée en anglais. Son cas se rend jusqu'à la Cour suprême et en fin de compte, toutes les lois du Manitoba doivent être traduites en français. Une grande victoire. Mais Georges me dira bien des années plus tard dans le salon de ma mère qu'en 1948, il fonctionnait lui aussi à titre d'agent double. Il avait infiltré le mouvement pacifiste parce qu'il cherchait des communistes parmi ces gens. Et son employeur était encore une fois la GRC. Et ce sera un autre collègue de mon père.

Mon père avait l'habitude de déblatérer contre certains groupes – les communistes, les syndicats, la révolution tranquille, les indépendantistes, les Juifs, les hippies, les anglais, les noirs, les Protestants, bref tout ce qui n'était pas Markland Smith. C'est peut-être pourquoi Félix Leclerc refusait de lui parler, après l'époque de Radio-Canada.

Ma mère m'a déjà montré des poèmes de guerre de mon père. Il écrivait des sonnets enthousiastes où il proposait de tuer les Japonais et les Allemands. Il a été recruté trois fois par la conscription. Chaque fois il a été refusé. La Deuxième Guerre mondiale rageait. Alors mon père a fait son effort de guerre en traduisant dans les bureaux du ministère de la

Guerre, qui est devenu la Défense nationale.

Une ancienne collègue traductrice de mon père m'a dit que mon père n'était pas un traducteur extraordinaire, mais qu'au bout de six mois au Bureau de la traduction, il a été nommé chef de section. Il paraît qu'il avait des talents de gérant, de directeur, de patron. Il a été chef au ministère de la Santé, à la Défense, à la Traduction générale, puis à Emploi et immigration, etc. A la fin de sa carrière, il a obtenu un poste de chef de Division, pour fonder le bureau de Montréal du Bureau de la traduction, en 1964. Il était responsable de 300 employés. Cette division a commencé avec deux traducteurs et six secrétaires, puis mon père a monté tout un bureau.

Entre-temps, il était capable de dire des énormités comme le fait que Franco était à son avis un grand monsieur, car il avait sauvé l'Espagne du communisme. Ce serait comme dire que Hitler était un grand monsieur parce qu'il avait sauvé l'Allemagne du communisme. Mais mon père n'a jamais compris cela.

Le 1^{er} janvier 2009

A FACE FOR EVERY OCCASION

“Forget about the brotherly and otherly love;

What you need is motherly love.”

(Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention)

Does your mother love you? Think about it.

I know that my mom had some expectations regarding my future. She wanted me to study commerce, so I could make some money, but I wanted to be a writer. So she accommodated herself to that ambition of mine. Whenever I quit a job and dedicated myself to my writing, she would be angry; but whenever I published a book, I became her little calling card for her high-society friends.

But does my mother love me? I would have to think about it.

In 1983, I had self-published an anthology of poems and drawings called *I've Been So Happy Since I Got my Lobotomy*. As a result, I was interviewed in Ottawa, on Carleton University community radio. As was my wont, I ranted about drugs, and revolution, and the streets, and death, and jail, and madness.

Meanwhile, my mother and father were listening to my interview live on the radio. They didn't have the facilities to tape directly off the radio, so my mother placed a tape recorder about a foot away from the radio, and taped my show.

What she didn't realize was that her comments in the background were also recorded on the tape.

I was living off Saint Lawrence Street that year, and my mother thought I would be happy if she gave me the tape of my show. I listened to it, and over and beyond my own voice, I could hear my mom in the background, yelling to my father, in French of course, "The little bastard!! The little fucker!! Markland, we'll never get him to shut up, will we? The little prick, listen to him..."

Now my mother has Alzheimer's, and I see her a couple of times a year, because she lives far away. She is always sweet – to my face. I guess it is sad, very sad.

I remember something Frank Zappa said, once: "If kids really knew what their parents are up to, they would rise up and kill them in their sleep." I

also remember what Jesus of Nazareth said about parents: “Except a man hate his mother and father, and his brothers and his sisters, and yea, his own life, he cannot be a disciple of mine.”

February 7, 2004

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THE BLUESTOCKING AND THE BUM

*“You used to be so amused
at Napoleon in rags
and the language that he used.”*

(Bob Dylan)

She was the cat’s miaow. She was the wife of the successful man, and her dream was to eat at the table of honour of a banquet, with a Senator, a bishop and a prominent lawyer. The husband had a heart of gold, and didn’t fit into her social schemes. He would rather talk to another man confidentially, about philosophical matters and social issues; however, that

afternoon, she had the ladies over for a cup of tea and a game of bridge.

Her apartment was very feminine, and was decorated impeccably. She had the post card of the *Pieta* framed in an expensive frame: she had bought the picture at a tourist shop in Rome, and it was therefore in prominent display in her living room. In the dining room, there were silver spoons hanging on a rack on the wall; it was clearly indicated that they were from exotic European cities – to show she had been there.

Whenever I told them ahead of time that I was going to drop in, she had my photograph splashed all over the living room. But if ever I dropped in unexpectedly, my picture was nowhere in sight, although I was not her son. And not only she would display my photograph, but as I was coming in the door, she would be playing the classical record I bought her for her birthday.

Anyway, I was not much one for social games and polite manners. I happened to drop in unexpectedly that day, without phoning first, and I barged in on her social gathering with the literary society. She was a member of the *Société d'études et de conférences*, a literary coterie, and all her high-society friends were there, in the living room. She was visibly

embarrassed to have me present, so she ushered me off to the bedroom, and ordered my father to entertain me.

One of the ladies, who was wearing a long string of pearls, commented, “Oh, Mrs. Smith! Is that your son?” And my mom blushed a bit and responded immediately: “Yes, he is freelancing in Montreal. He is an accomplished translator, walking in his father’s footsteps.” What was really going on was that I was on unemployment insurance, and living on the dole. I hadn’t worked in several months. But “freelancing” sounded good.

Then my mother switched the conversation to another subject to divert the attention from her delinquent son. Just as I walked into the bedroom, I heard her relating this story to her friends: “Oh, did I tell you what happened to Arlette and me yesterday? We had lunch at the Château Laurier, and then we thought we would sit in the park behind the hotel, in Major Hill Park. And we were sitting on a park bench, admiring the architecture, when a funny little man came up to us. He was obviously a wino, a street bum, and not a young man either. He was about seventy years old, and dressed in rags. And he hadn’t shaved that morning. Well, it was the funniest thing. He came up to us and tried to beg some money

from us. And he pulled up his trouser leg, and showed us his hairy legs. And he was moaning in admiration obviously, going, “Oh, ladies! Ladies!” Then he performed a little curtsy for us, bowing gracefully. So we laughed and laughed. We were tickled pink. What did you think of that?”

The ladies giggle. One of them was visibly uptight about that, and exclaimed, “Why, is that all those artists can do, drink all day long?”

The conversation wandered off, as they complained about abstract art, and modern architecture. Each lady was more indignant than the next, as they denounced the poets, the novelists, the musicians. It seems that they liked musicians like Debussy and painters like Van Gogh, because they were long dead – they couldn’t molest your children. The dead artists from long ago – in Europe – were safe, and they all approved of dead artists.

Meanwhile, my father was sitting on the bed, wearing his best suit, and glancing at some books that were on the shelf. I wondered how long this charade would last. A half an hour later, the ladies started to leave, because it was getting late in the afternoon.

I had no doubts about my mother. My father never said anything to me, but I could count on him to bail me out when I was in trouble. And my

mother worshipped the ground he walked on – after all the old man supported her in a lifestyle she could get accustomed to.

December 25, 2003

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SANTA'S WORKSHOP

I am not sure how or why I ended up with this bizarre group of people. I had spent four months in a psychiatric hospital nicknamed “The College,” and when I was discharged, I was still pretty confused. The social workers had made private arrangements with the group of people, which was run by a man called Salvador. I was let out of the hospital with a bag full of clothes and put into his custody. Two or three of his friends met me at the door of Durost Pavilion on a cold winter night, asked me how I was and then I was shuffled off to their van, which took me to their house in the East End of the city.

I knew one of the members of the group, called Yves. (His name was

pronounced like “Eve.”) I think he had something to do with my being put in Salvador’s custody. I had met Yves in California, on a street corner in Berkeley, California, and we had lived together for several months, before he came back to Canada. I have no idea how he ended up in this group either. Yves had long hair down to his chest, and a little growth of beard. He was always smiling and chuckling. He was French Canadian, as were all the members of the group. They looked like bohemian street people, judging by their clothes, but I found out they didn’t take drugs or drink. No one smoked cigarettes. Nevertheless, they looked scruffy.

That night, we drove through the snowladen streets and highways to the residence where I was assigned to live. It might have been seven or eight o’clock, because it was dark out. There had been a snow storm the day before, and city employees were busy clearing the snow off the streets. There were giant snow ploughs, snowblowers and trucks carrying off snow. This made an awful noise, which I found scary, because I was still on medication. As we drove by, I could see the blades of the snowblowers and I was a bit nervous and had the shakes. I didn’t know what I was getting into this time.

Once we arrived at the house, a big, three-story building on a residential

street in Hochelaga, it was time for supper. We were about to eat at a long table set for fifteen people or so in a huge room, with a ceiling about twenty feet high. No one paid attention to me, and everyone seemed to have a function, a job. One woman with dirty blonde hair was setting the table. She told me later her name was Paule, which is French for Paula. Another teenage boy was sweeping the floor. It was like a big beehive or an ant colony. No one was giving orders; everyone knew what to do. As a matter of fact, no one was talking at all. I noticed this was strange. I wondered about this.

Then the cook, a man about forty-five years old with a bald spot and longish stringy black hair, came out of the kitchen carrying a caldron of soup. Suddenly, everyone sat down and waited to get served their portion of soup. It was lentil soup and smelled spicy. Once everyone had been served, people finally broke the silence and started asking to pass the salt or the bread. Everyone seemed quite self-conscious, and I just went along with the flow, not knowing anyone there but Yves. But he had disappeared. I didn't see him again for several days.

I looked around me at the people sitting at the table. Many of them were obviously mentally ill. Their faces were deformed from years of taking

medication. Others looked fairly normal, but strange somehow. Who were these people? What was I doing there? I had just spent several months in the funny farm, and I was still not too solid. I didn't dare speak at the dinner table.

After dinner, as everyone was cleaning off the table, I finally encountered Salvador. He came home late, kicking snow off his boots and throwing off his coat as he came through the door. Then the first thing he did was to walk up to a young native boy in the group, who was short and about twelve years old, and slap him across the head, before even saying hello to anybody. I cringed when I saw this happen, and I was about to go up to this man Salvador, when another member grabbed me by the elbow to restrain me. Besides, I don't know what I could have done to prevent the violence: Salvador, the leader of the group, was a full foot taller than me or anyone else there. He had rage in his eyes, sparks were flying, and he just hissed like a mountain lion, then went to sit down at the dinner table, waiting to get served. He had a shaved head and was built solid, with tattoos on his arms and neck. The lady with the dirty blonde hair, Paule, served him his meal, without saying a word. She wore an ankle-length dress and looked puritanical. No one smiled. Everyone seemed intimidated by this Salvador fellow. I wanted to confront him, but I was told to go to

the second floor, where the bedrooms were. Meanwhile, there were several men and women in their late twenties or early thirties doing various chores in the big room, where the dinner table was laid out. What I found strange is that there was very little conversation going on in this place. It was almost as though there was a secret shared by the members of this household.

On the second floor, a man called Jacques, who spoke only French, assigned me to a bed in a long, narrow dormitory. He obviously had fetal alcohol syndrome, if you looked at the shape of his head. There must have been twenty beds in the men's bedroom and another ten in the women's. There was a night light along the baseboards of the floor, but no other lights in the room. I found this setup spooky. I wanted to read in bed, but obviously, this would be impossible. There were no pictures hanging on the sallow wall, which made the room look bare and sparse. Near the door, there was a poster signed by Salvador containing rules and regulations for the bedroom. It was a large greyish piece of paper containing typed instructions.

Jacques asked me if I wanted to take a shower before going to bed. I replied, in French, that I had taken a shower just before leaving the hospital. Then he scurried off like a hunchbacked monk down the hall to

other business.

I had a minute to myself to reflect on what had transpired in the past few months. The first question I asked myself was, Who was this Salvador creep and why did he hit the young native boy? And, why on earth would the social workers arrange to have me stay in this strange place? But there were many more questions that came to mind, as I sat on the side of my bed in the dark. I had stayed in similar surroundings in California, before I came back to Montreal. These places had evolved out of communal living, but they were very, very structured and regimented. The men in one bedroom, the women in another. Everyone taking turns to use the showers. Jobs assigned to each member of the household. It was almost like living at the Sally Ann. And there was no fun allowed, no spontaneous conversation, no smiling or laughing. What were these groups centered on, what kept the people staying there? Did they share any common activities? I had an apprehension that these activities were not all that wholesome...

A bell went off in the morning, a loud siren. I jumped out of bed, startled and scared. Like firemen leaping off to work, all the men around me quickly got dressed and ran out of the room. So I did the same. As I gathered my thoughts, I realized I had fallen asleep unawares the night

before. I remembered to take my largactyl pills, which were in a plastic bag. They tasted awful and burned my throat.

We all joined together downstairs in the big room, for a drill. Salvador was the only one who was still in his bathrobe. Everyone else stood in line, like soldiers, waiting for the leader's speech. I was shaking a bit. I had a tremor in my fingertips and kept shuffling on my feet. I was standing between Jacques and another man I had not met yet. Salvador took a deep breath after a few minutes, and screamed out, in French, "All right everybody! The Spirit told me about every one of you. Even before you showed up here. But he told me there is one of you here who is a traitor, who doesn't belong. Mark my words, I will find you out! I am sure you are in this room, and give me a couple of days, and you will be sorry you were ever born! Now go eat breakfast, all of you! Come on, move!"

Everyone broke rank and there was the same ritual as the night before, everyone with a job fussing about, working at preparing the meal. People peeped at each other and looked at the next guy sideways, but no one uttered a word. There was a cloud over the group this morning. I ate my bowl of porridge and had my coffee. Then I brought my dishes into the kitchen area as three men or so were washing the dishes. Everyone

concentrated on their jobs, if they knew what was good for them.

Salvador had disappeared. I asked Paula, a few minutes later, who was this guy Salvador. She said that no, we don't discuss that around here. Then I asked another man, whose name I didn't catch, who was the leader of the group, who was this man Salvador. He looked terrified and just motioned me to be quiet. No one would talk to me.

By then, the largactyl started taking effect and I felt sleepy. I sat down on a sofa near the dining-room table and dozed off. I was in and out of a dream for what seemed like hours. It occurred to me that Salvador ran a pretty tight ship. There was even a photograph of him on the wall, beside the front door, just a bust with him looking dead serious. And once again, there were no other pictures on the yellow walls. And as people went about their chores around the house, no one sang, no one whistled, and no one talked. All you could hear was the cold wind whistling through the screens in the windows. The place felt haunted.

December 12, 2009

THE MIRAGE, A RANT

You are traveling through the United States by intercity bus, from State to State. You have been off your medication long enough to begin hallucinating. What this medication does is give you a sense of reality about what you see. Now you have lapsed into a virtual fortress of blablah sustained by the constant chatter of the other passengers on the bus, who have been watching television and listening to preachers and going to school and gossiping with the neighbours and talking over supper concerning what is news and what is true and what matters. You used to be followed by a psychiatrist, who is basically a parole officer. You have your own baggage of virtual reality neurons ticking off in your little brain, altering your perception of what is out there, so that the State of Utah becomes West Germany, and the farms along the highway become concentration camps, and you have been in psych wards and jails that are strewn across the American landscape, like a bad dream, an American nightmare that has layer upon layer like a movie within a movie, until you don't exist anymore.

Now you are on the run. Running away from Martians and satellites that follow you around. However, there is a reality involved in your

perceptions. You sense America protects itself against foreigners and aliens by projecting a smoke screen. You notice this if you stop watching television and movies for a few years. You come to realize everyone else is brainwashed into staring in dark air-conditioned rooms at large screens, that distract the public from the evil that is within. The red herring created by the smoke screen -- the mirage --is that the enemy is out there, stalking America, waiting to take over and murder Huckleberry Finn in cold blood, once and for all. This enemy out there is called Castro and Milosevic and Ho Chi Minh and Osama Ben Laden, who have agents right within this bus.

By keeping Americans and Canadians paranoid, the system keeps citizens distracted from the oil spills in the Red Sea and Alaska, the nuclear and chemical tests on their own territory that ruin the soil and make women give birth to monsters, the mafia-created porno movies that begin with the national anthem, and the class system that makes it possible only for isolated individuals made of the right stuff to break into success. Only one in many millions of people becomes an idol, a beast six six six, standing larger than life like a movie hero, like the statues of Mao you hear about, a hundred feet tall. Meanwhile, people are distracted by Michael Jackson's death, by Michelle Obama's dress and earrings, by Obama's dog, by

Hillary Clinton's wrinkles and Al Qaeda, which is a fabrication of CNN to create a link between random bombings.

Hey, I am Al Qaeda. I live in a tent in Pakistan, but I am really dangerous. But what did Camus say? The revolution as myth is the definitive revolution. And what did Karl Marx write? There is a specter haunting Europe, and that specter is communism. But why are communism and revolution and Al Qaeda such a threat? Maybe they are a threat to Donald Trump and the people who make billions of dollars manipulating the masses, running government, lending money they call the national debt to government in order to better control its politics. And again, someone said a hundred and fifty years ago that whoever controls the nation's purse controls its politics. So they lend billions of dollars to governments under the American Money Fund and the Southeast Asia Money Fund. And then suddenly the government is no longer the government of the people, by the people, for the people. The financial world tells the government they will give them an AAA credit rating if they cut back on social programs and abolish the welfare state. And suddenly there are news reports about the scams people on welfare have to pull off to survive. And there are documentaries about homeless people and how bad they are. And morning television shows for children warn the audience not to end up on welfare. All because some billionaire, who lives

in the Bahamas to avoid paying taxes, has decided not to support the people anymore.

Meanwhile, Karl Marx and Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson and Saddam Hussein must be turning over in their graves, as I travel on the bus, psychotic, hallucinating about Iraqi oil fields, down the highway, through season after season, through nuclear landscapes, through the moon in Utah, in Kansas, in Nebraska, in Colorado, waiting for the American apocalypse to stop devouring its children like Saturn. It is all stolen land anyway, full of graves of Mexicans and North American natives, full of Rebel flags and crucifixes, full of skulls of the dead from the Spanish American war and the Civil war and the war of the worlds, for that matter. It is stolen land sustained by mythology created by television news reports and the internet and rock and roll music that you can't escape. Chuck Berry and U2 and the ghost of Elvis are in this bus, riding with you into the twenty-first century, past the grave of deposed leaders like Noriega and Milosevic. Look, there is Fidel Castro, he is dying and riding next to you on the bus, with his graying beard, and he is mumbling something about sustaining the revolution, about imperialism, about the revolution of the ages, which goes on and on.

Sept. 11, 2009

THIS EQUATION DOES NOT RESOLVE

This equation does not resolve

X remains unknown,

After all the calculations, masses,

Closed meetings, ping pong & therapy,

After thirty or forty years of searching

And nightmares & geographical cures,

After all this mummery & flummery,

I still don't know

If the higher power exists,

If it is found in the Host,

If it has genitals or a vagina,

If he is God

Or she is the Goddess,

Although I am told

I am not supposed to go there,

By expert technicians like cloistered nuns

And buddhist monks,
I am told that if I am to be a practising Catholic
I have to turn a blind eye to a lot of things,
Like witch burnings and progroms,
And the good ole holocaust
For good measure,
Not to mention crusades
And Billy Graham crusades,
And being born again
And living anyway to a ripe old age,
I still don't know,
Because at three o'clock in the morning,
At the witching hour,
Anything is possible,
And this equation does not resolve,
X remains unknown
Unless you have a textbook approach
To the whole matter of algebra
And thinking in general,
And no, you can't learn the truth in schools,
In synagogues

In churches
Or temples
Of one kind or another kind,
For there is mystery,
And my little rational mind
Is metaphysically befuddled
Once again
Because most equations
I am told,
Do not resolve,
Unless as I said,
You poke your eyes out
To be a true believer.

Then I am told
To try my own conception of God,
And this universe
Has a galaxy made up of
Methyl alcohol,
And I'm probably going there
As I lay dying.

No, my guess is that we are just
Gorillas in a police state.

July 7, 2009

MERE PRIMATES IN A POLICE STATE

‘One generation passeth away, and
another generation cometh:
but the earth abideth for ever.’

And so the world passes, with its burden of illusions and deceptions and
trickery, its mirages and violent adventures, and I let go of this snare,
pulling myself free from the entanglements and emotional chains;

Turn the page, move on, old friends, for this time is short, and the pain is
quick; the nights of mourning and agonizing are long.

There is no hope in reaching the goals of youth – fame and fortune do not
quench the thirst; poverty and sickness are bitter vinegar, and time moves
on, forgetting our heroes and villains, and no one remembers us.

And so, another breath, another night, with tubes coming out of my arms, with an oxygen mask over my face, much hue and cry about the emergency ward – and not a friend to come hold my hand in these last minutes.

Children grow up, and the madness and beauty of youth fade like the sunrise shimmering on the waves, reaching towards another shore.

Finally, the sun and the moon are regular, but chance dictates, chaos runs every day, from dawn to dusk, and there is no messiah to come and make everything better.

Old age approaches. Standing by the tomb of my family, I notice my name is probably the next one to be engraved there, and I feel the serpentine force coming up through my feet, holding me still as the grip of wintry death.

Is there anything beyond? Is there a hope? I see long tunnels, turning right and left, running with people in wheelchairs, hallucinating war, tunnels going off like birth canals, and finally, I am in a geriatric ward, talking

nonsense.

What dread pit awaits us? What dreamland riding on a rainbow? I reach up, and no one grabs my hand, except the cold air, except for my friends, but they are no longer.

And so the world goes, with its illusions, passing beyond our reach, over the mountaintop, like a cloud formation that people recognize as faces and monsters, gorillas and giraffes, but the wind conquers and dissipates all.

November 8, 2009

OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

PRIMATE IN A POLICE STATE

POLICE STATE PRIMATE

PRIMATE POLICE STATE

STATE POLICE PRIMATE

STATE POLICE STATE

POLICE STATE POLICE

INSIDE OUT

SIDE INSIDE OUT

November 20/09

TORTURE

I am pretty concerned that people even consider possibly justifying torture. I have a copy of *1984* here, in case these people want to reread it. Remember? We are supposed to be the good guys? It's the bad guys that torture people? We are not supposed to be like the Nazis in Germany or the Communists in Russia or China... We are doing this democracy experiment in the name of what? Not that democracy is perfect in any way. No sir. I have personally been beaten up by the cops, sometimes for the sole reason that I wandered homeless into their town. But that is not torture. If you justify torture you are opening up a whole ugly pandora's box. Do you know what the French police used to do to suspected terrorists during the Vichy occupation of France? They used to poke out their eyes, put live cockroaches into the sockets and sew their

eyelids shut. Except today we call these bolshevik terrorists the French resistance, and they are supposed to be heroes. Hindsight is always 20/20. I don't care who can benefit from torture. Besides, the information a person will give you under torture is not reliable, because they will say anything to make the pain stop. Nobody benefits from torture. Who would get tortured if we legalized this? Anyone suspicious. Just like we used to hear during the cold war. Such and such a diplomat was kicked out of Russia because he was spying. That's always a good one too - spying. Join Amnesty International for ten years and then come and discuss torture. They will let you know that torture is used in police stations and army barracks and jails and penitentiaries all over the world. But the governments who get denounced for using torture are accused internationally of violating human rights. Remember the Human Rights Act. Shouldn't that have priority over the Anti-terrorist Act? And you tell me you are liberals!! You tell me you are enlightened? Why not justify the holocaust or the Spanish inquisition while you're at it?

RENÉ'S DREAM

I had a dream that I was walking down Saint-Urbain Street with René Lévesque, and he looked about twenty-five years old and smiling. He must have been a journalist in my dream, and had a twinkle in his eye. He had a vision of a people emancipated once and for all; a dream of a better country, like Abraham. I was happy to walk down the street with him, in the spring sunshine.

Right now, it is January, cold and damp; the streets are full of slush and brown, wet snow that gets your feet soaked. The economy is sluggish, recovering from a stock market crash like a hundred pianos smashing on the ground. People lost their shirts on the stock market, and now there is less work. If you live south of the border, there is no work. The sun is a sick, yellow thing hiding behind gray clouds, and the scenery in Montreal is like a Brueghel painting, with peasants doing absurd things.

In 1995, Pierre Vallières wrote an essay in which he denounced the fascist successors of René – they didn't share his social democratic vision, and were greedy for power. Be that as it may, the chips fell where they did, and now this cold country is run by the police and security is a pretext for oppression. Everywhere I go, I see more and more police cars, with their sirens blaring, rushing through red lights – and there is no one protesting.

No one protesting against the war, no one protesting against the murder of black teenagers at the hands of the police, no one protesting about the condition of natives. And, as under Mussolini, the trains run on time.

Somehow, the days are getting longer, and the spring is coming, and ‘if winter be here, can spring be far behind?’ René, when can I hold my head up high? René, when will the immigrants no longer be manipulated, by either side? When will my children realize they are not Americans?

Although there is no sign of change, although my bank account is empty, for now, I know the revolution of the ages will come around, people will wake up and stop living for fashion, and the people will assume responsibility for its own destiny. As Pierre Vallières said, ‘better eat bread standing up than eat steak on your knees.’

Jan. 12, 2010

LES BOEUFs

Hier, je passais sur la rue Ontario, près de Saint-Denis, et j’ai remarqué un jeune homme noir qui se faisait arrêter par deux agents de la police de Montréal. Cela m’a mis la puce à l’oreille : Anthony Griffin, Marcellus

François, Richard Barnabé, Freddy Villanueva, et j'en oublie. Assassinsés par la police de Montréal.

Chaque fois qu'un incident de ce genre est arrivé à Montréal, l'enquête a été menée par d'autres organismes du gouvernement. On impose aux meurtriers la peine de passer soixante heures à faire du travail communautaire. En outre, la Fraternité des policiers réclame qu'on réduise davantage la peine.

Le malheur veut que personne qui se prononce sur la question n'a jamais été détenu, arrêté, battu par la police ou harcelé par des agents. On a un autre point de vue une fois qu'on a eu affaire à la police. Il est évident qu'une fois arrivé au poste, il n'y a plus de Code de déontologie, plus de principes, plus de justice.

Si on est Noir, on a peu de chance de s'en sortir indemne, car les policiers sont racistes. Même les agents de couleur se font harceler par leurs collègues blancs.

Il faut mettre fin à cette situation intolérable. Pourquoi ne pas mettre en œuvre une commission de l'ampleur de la Commission Bouchard-Taylor pour se pencher sur le comportement criminel de la SPVM?

Quant au jeune homme que j'ai vu dans les mains de la police hier sur la rue Ontario, je lui souhaite de la chance. Il en aura besoin.

EARTH TIME

O Mother Earth, traveling through space, rushing into nothingness and leaving behind nothing;

A planet coming out of darkness and night, but alive to light for half the day;

You are alive for a split second, right now, which is already past as the cursor moves across the page.

We see life through a sliver of consciousness we call the present, Notwithstanding that we have records of the past, going back beyond understanding and memory:

Like the sphinx, the monoliths of Easter Island and Stonehenge, Memories of dreams we can't interpret, which haunt us as an incomprehensible explanation of our past origins.

O Earth, I have known your children – some of them I have called friends,

Moulded out of your crucible, fashioned in the womb of women, living
sperm and egg,

Sparks of stardust, like anything else.

And I, a poet, wish to leave behind a record of my life straddling two
millenia;

Although there are fewer and fewer guarantees we will survive for any last
mile;

I greet the future, sometimes with apprehension, other times with hope,

As though the spectre of continuity and consistency made Chaos
accountable and predictable.

I say hello to those who read my rhyme, my lines from a cold climate, on
the Northern hemisphere

Of our mother, Mother Earth.

What awaits us in the Night, prophesied over and over as threatening?

I see the golden dawn arising soon, full of hope, fulfilling expectations,

I see the omega point approaching, as we rush through space,

Towards fulfillment.

What awaits us is annihilation of ego, yours and mine, as we become

leaves on the Tree of life.

November 25, 09

KARL MARX RIDES THIS BUS

A minute ago, I was riding on the bus facing two black women in their forties. One looked bright and chipper, wearing bling bling and talking blissfully on her cell phone. She wore goldrimmed sunglasses, an all black outfit with golden sandals, hoop earrings, a gold bracelet and necklace, and she looked so cool, as though she didn't have a problem in the world.

The other lady was sleeping in the back of the bus. She didn't wear any makeup or jewelry, wore a frayed jean jacket and a ruddy red shirt. She wasn't carrying a fancy purse like the other bourgeois lady. She looked as though she spent the night working in a factory doing hard labour. She didn't shine, she didn't glow with satisfaction. She just looked real tired, real real tired.

THE SOUL'S ASCENT TO GOD

Did you ever wonder what is the current relevance of the great world religions, in an age of smart bombs, spams, missions to Mars, and neuroleptic medication? Well, one day in 1978, I bought a book called *The Soul's Ascent to God*, by the famous doctor of the Church, Saint Bonaventure. I picked it up at a used bookstore called The Word, on Milton Street, in Montreal.

I began to read it, and it was largely about angels. Did you know there are about thirteen different kinds of angels? Why, there are cherubim, and seraphim, and guardian angels, and archangels, thrones, principalities, powers, and so on. And I got fascinated with the descriptions of heavenly geometries, the logic of this medieval mind, and I was literally tripping on the little book, when I remembered I had to meet someone at 1:45 p.m. at the McGill metro station.

Now, I lived on the corner of Durocher Avenue and Milton Street. It was normally a three minute walk to the McGill subway station. All I had to do was to walk one block South on Durocher, and half a block further South on Union Street, and I was right there. Well, that day, I was so tripped out

on angels and the otherworldly dimensions of heaven, that it took me 45 minutes to even find the McGill metro. Here I was, walking around in circles all over downtown, without a clue where I was going, thinking about dominions and principalities, and grace and redemption, about the structure of the human soul, and I was completely lost. It never occurred to me to look at a street sign, because there are no street signs in heaven, and here I was, my mind racing all over the cosmos, while my friend was waiting for me by the turnstiles at the metro station. I walked and walked right, left and center, exalted, my soul soaring into God's almighty hands, as traffic rushed around me down here on earth. Hey, I crossed on red lights, and almost got run over, but I was on an ascent to heaven. And my guardian angel was having convulsion fits as I risked my life in downtown traffic.

Finally, after 45 minutes, I stumbled upon the metro station.

And it seems to me that if Saint Bonaventure had been given shock treatment, he might have written books about golf instead.

January 27, 2004

THE MAGIC BOY

"Except ye humble yourselves and repent,

*and ye become as little children,
ye shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven."*

I see a little boy, about nine or ten, inspired by the Spirit, in love with God, walking down the street in circles, spinning around, telling God in his heart, without words, that he loves Him so much that he will act like a fool to prove he loves the Creator. He doesn't care what people think, because he knows something they don't know, because he knows they will persecute him for this, because they can't see his relationship with Jesus – they don't know his Jesus; they are too busy with their lives, too busy being mean to children, rather than opening their hearts to the wonder of the universe...

Only fools and children know about this child's magic. Here and there, occasionally, some stranger is plopped down on the child's path, to teach him lies and truths they have accumulated and treasured throughout their lives.

This child's God is not a mighty fortress; he is not uptight. It is flowers in a garden; it is puppy dogs, wagging their tails happily, sniffing around for food, waiting to be petted by the boy. And the boy doesn't say very much :

he just opens his heart and worships what is greater than his undaunted imagination, what is love beyond measure, what is the magic of the stars in the heavens.

April 11, 2009

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DIONYSUS & HORUS & ME

"he was very deep, espieally when he was siting down"

(Stephen Leacock)

I camoe out of Egypt

Where the Nile flows forever

Where Pharaohs have eternal noses.

I am the Son, who dies and goes to Hades

Who gives his body to the ladies.

I am the Son of Isis.

I am the carpenter's son.

Rejoice, you have life through me

Meanwhile, the witches & the heretics burn:

And under this sign you shall conquer.

Didn't I tell you the universe is expanding?

You shall conquer new lands,

You shall speak in tongues.

Horus & Bush and Dionysus

Haven't you heard of we three?

Meanwhile the light is shining.

Understanding and compassion.

People, I mean the light is shining.

Little children play in the park.

Noah floats on his ark.

Little children play & sing.

And little dogs bark,

But Pharaohs live forever.

March 9 2008

SMILE, SMITTY LOVES YOU

So, no matter who you are, how insignificant you feel, no matter how lonely and godforsaken you have become; you may be behind bars, you may have tubes attached to your arms and nostrils; no matter how unhappy you think you are, rejoice and be exceeding glad, for Smitty loves you.

Yes, Smitty has walked down the same paths as you, has carried the same burdens, and Smitty knows about your soul, and Smitty loves

you. (Recite this prayer to yourself three times a month and you will get rich. Smitty doesn't think you should drink or masturbate or smoke dope, but if you do, occasionally, don't feel bad because Smitty forgives you. So go out now and spread the word to your neighbour that yes, Smitty loves the whole world. Smitty has come into the world not that they should suffer, but that mankind could rejoice in Smitty's

love.) Do you feel loved by Smitty? Sit down crosslegged and hold your thumb closed on your palm and feel the cosmic vibrations generated by Smitty's love and whisper to yourself, "Smitty loves me, I am okay

everything is okay, because Smitty loves me." (With fervour.) You
have heard of the starving children? Well, Smitty loves them all, with his
relentless, thirsty, all-knowing love. So give all your money to Smitty and
Smitty will save the starving children.

(Amen. Recite three times.)