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# ViceVersa

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## Canada and México

### *The Word Exchange Beyond Nafta*

*Carlos Monsiváis  
Rosa Beltrán  
Verónica Volkow  
Ernesto Lumbreras  
Daniel Sada  
Enrique Serna*

*Danielle Miller  
Douglas Coupland  
Monique Larue  
Michael Ondaatje  
Thomas King  
Anne-Marie Alonzo  
Janice Kulyk-Keefer*

*Interview:  
Leandro Urbina*

*Music:  
De cómo Esquivel perdió  
el García  
— Graciela Martínez-Zalce  
Esquivel, Yé-Yé  
and Me  
— Will Straw*

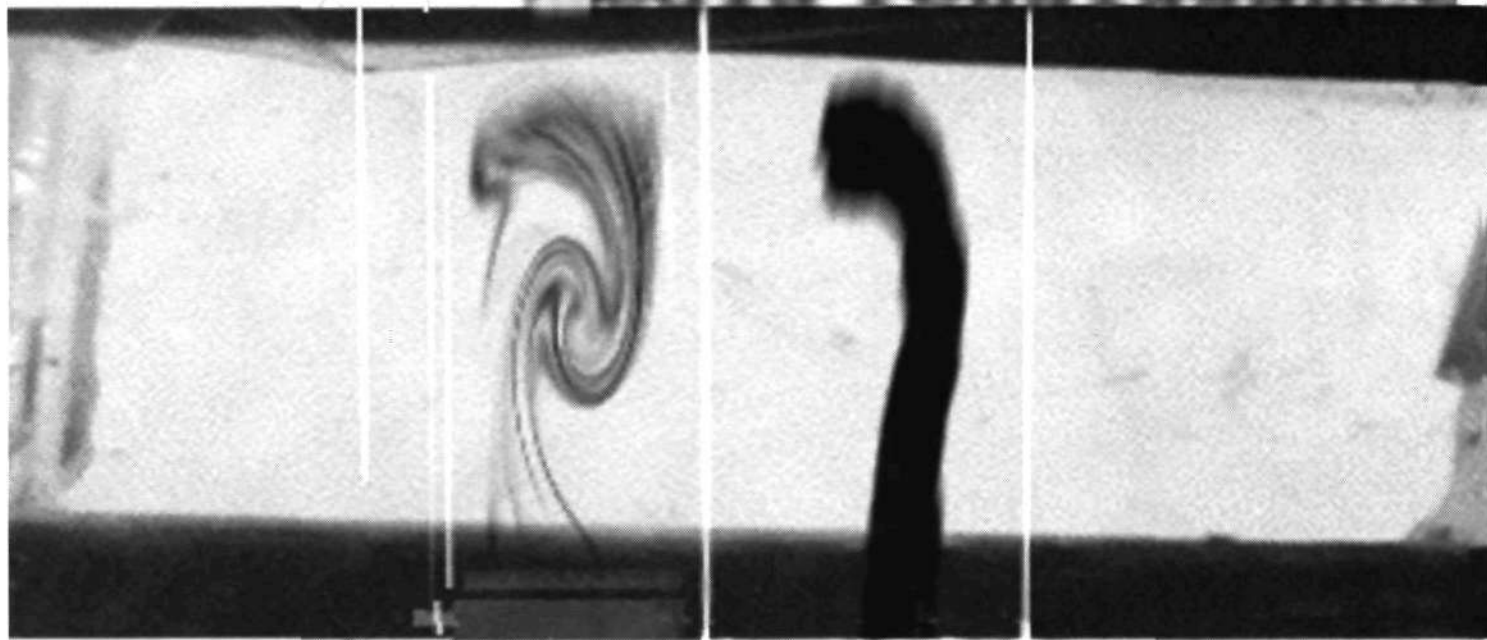


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# SUMMARY SUMARIO SOMMAIRE

## 53

AUTUMN • OTOÑO  
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### Editorial

Canada and México, The Word

Exchange Beyond Nafta 4 Danielle Miller

### Of Classics and Barbarians

Mexican Literature at  
the End of the Century 6 Carlos Monsivais

A Time to Die:  
Conjugal Love 10 Rosa Beltrán

Arcan VI: Los Amantes 12 Verónica Volkow

Larve de séraphin 13 Ernesto Lumberras

The Posma Jail 15 Daniel Sada

Le Trépassé 18 Enrique Serna

### Re-Imaging the Canadian Community

Taking a cue from our writers 22 Danielle Miller

It Can't Last 25 Douglas Coupland

Prison humaine 28 Monique Larue

The Cinnamon Peeler, Heron  
Rex, White Dwarves, In a Yellow

Yellow Room A House Divided 30 Michael Ondaatje

Changing Woman,  
Old Woman 33 Thomas King

Galia s'était cloîtrée 36 Anne-Marie Alonzo

April Showers 38 Janice Kulyk-Keefer

### Interview

Leandro Urbina 43 William Anselmi

### Music

De cómo Esquivel perdió el García 44 Graciela Martínez-Zalce

Esquivel, Yé-Yé and Me 45 Will Straw

### Book Reviews

Lush Freams, Blue Exile 46

Inside Statues of Saints

When the Fox is a Thousand

# Editorial

## CANADA AND MÉXICO THE WORD EXCHANGE BEYOND NAFTA

The historian Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities* defines the nation as "an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign". In so doing, he unveils the fundamentally fictional nature of this concept that continues to shape the way we perceive ourselves and that has led us into numerous conflicts among nations — usually with terrifying results. What distinguishes each community, according to Anderson, is the way in which it is imagined by its inhabitants, who although they may never meet, and despite the inequalities dividing them, believe they share a same community beyond which exist other communities. Anderson's definition seems straightforward enough until we ask ourselves who imagines the community. How? And for what purpose? In the case of most New World countries these are not simple questions to answer.

As a contribution to this debate, *Vice Versa*, along with its Mexican counterpart also called *Viceversa*, will explore and compare the ways in which two New World countries — Canada and Mexico — are imagined by their writers. Why these two countries in particular? Well, other than a trade deal, Canada and Mexico share problems linked to identity. For example, although inhabited by Native populations, both countries were allegedly first imagined (or "discovered") by foreign European nations, be they France, Spain or England. Perceived as a utopic extension of the Old World, a space less crowded and diseased. The New

World was imagined in order to provide spatial and temporal continuity for Europe. But herein lies the problem. The Old World attempted to control, classify and tame this new space by applying its established scientific and literary techniques — such as botany, ethnography, anthropology and travel literature — yet the New World resisted, preferring to define itself.

In Canada as in Mexico, this struggle for identity has been fought on two fronts, citing both space (America) and population as grounds for uniqueness.

Ethnically diverse, both countries have had to resist the cultural, political, economic and social influences of two larger powers, Europe and the United States. As a result, Canada and Mexico have resorted to similar

techniques for defining themselves; either through eugenic theories that at the turn of the century promoted a new and stronger breed of man emanating from the New World or through elaborate attempts to play the United States and Europe off against each other.

As the twentieth century draws to a close, despite the substantial bodies of national art and literature in Canada and in Mexico, the push to define the nation persists. In an attempt to promote cross-cultural understanding between two countries that until recently have shown little interest in each other,

*Vice Versa* has decided to publish a selection of poetry and fiction by five Mexican writers (Daniel Sada, Rosa Beltrán, Enrique Serna, Ernesto Lumbreras and Veronica Volkow) and six Canadian artists (Anne-Marie Alonzo, Douglas Coupland, Janice Kulyk-Keefer, Thomas King, Monique Larue and Michael Ondaatje).

What do these writings tell us about the respective communities? How are they imagined?

For what purpose?

We hope that this literary exchange will help to forge the cultural links between Canada and Mexico that will lead to greater social and cultural cooperation between the two countries. ■





# Editorial

En su libro *Las comunidades imaginadas* el historiador Benedict Anderson define a la nación como "una comunidad política imaginaria — e imaginada doblemente como limitación inherente y soberanía". De esta manera el autor revela la naturaleza esencialmente ficcional de este concepto que continúa dando forma a la manera de percibirnos y que nos ha conducido a numerosos conflictos entre naciones —y las consecuencias han sido casi siempre catastróficas. Lo que distingue a cada comunidad, según Anderson, es el modo en que ésta es imaginada por sus habitantes quienes, aunque nunca lleguen a conocerse y por encima de las desigualdades que les dividen, creen compartir una misma comunidad y que más allá de ésta existen otras comunidades. La definición de Anderson parece lo suficientemente precisa hasta que nos preguntamos: ¿quién imagina la comunidad?, ¿cómo?, ¿con qué propósito? En el caso de los países del Nuevo Mundo esta pregunta no son las más sencillas de responder.

Contribuyendo a este debate la revista *Viceversa*, junto con su tocaya mexicana también llamada *Viceversa*, explorará y comparará los modos en que dos países del Nuevo Mundo —Canadá y México— son

imaginados por sus escritores. ¿Por qué estos dos países en particular? Pues, además del tratado comercial, Canadá y México comparten problemas relativos a la identidad. Por ejemplo, aunque habitados por poblaciones indígenas, se supone que ambos países fueron imaginados (o "descubiertos") primero por naciones europeas como Francia, España o Inglaterra. Percibidos como una extensión utópica del Viejo Mundo, como un espacio menos atestado y con menos enfermedades, el Nuevo Mundo fue imaginado con el fin de proveer continuidad temporal y espacial a Europa. Y es aquí donde radica el problema. El Viejo Mundo intentó controlar, clasificar y domar este nuevo espacio con la aplicación de sus técnicas establecidas en el campo científico y literario —tales como la botánica, la etnografía, la antropología y la literatura de viajes— y sin embargo el Nuevo Mundo resistió, preferiendo definirse a sí mismo.

Tanto en Canadá como en México, este esfuerzo identitario ha sido batallado en dos terrenos: como un espacio (América) y como población en tanto que fundamentos de su singularidad. Étnicamente diversos, ambos países han tenido que resistir la influencia cultural, política, económica y social de dos grandes centros de poder: Europa y Estados Unidos. Como resultado Canadá y

México han recurrido a técnicas similares para autodefinirse, ya sea a través de teorías eugenésicas que a principios de siglo promovieron una fuerte y nueva raza de hombre surgida en el Nuevo Mundo, o a través de elaborados intentos de oponer los Estados Unidos contra Europa.

Ya casi al final de nuestro siglo y pese al imponente volumen de literatura y arte nacional en Canadá y en México, la búsqueda de una definición de nación persiste. En un intento de promover una mayor comprensión entre los espacios culturales de ambos países, que hasta hace poco demostraron escaso interés en el otro, *Vice Versa* ha decidido publicar una selección de poesía y ficción perteneciente a cinco escritores mexicanos (Daniel Sada, Rosa Beltrán, Enrique Serna, Ernesto Lumbrales y Verónica Volkow) y seis artistas canadienses (Anne Marie Alonzo, Douglas Coupland, Janice Kulyk-Keefer, Thomas King, Monique Larue y Michael Ondaatje). ¿Qué nos dicen estos escritos acerca de sus respectivas comunidades?, ¿cómo son éstas imaginadas?, ¿con qué propósito?

Esperamos que este intercambio literario ayudará a forjar lazos culturales entre Canadá y México que, a su turno, den como resultado una mayor cooperación social y cultural entre ambos países. ■

# Éditorial

Dans son livre intitulé *Les communautés imaginées* l'historien Benedict Anderson définit la nation comme «une communauté politique imaginée» — et imaginée comme étant intrinsèquement limitée et souveraine à la fois. Ce faisant, il dévoile la nature fondamentalement fictionnelle de ce concept qui continue à tracer la voie vers la façon dont nous nous percevons nous-mêmes et qui a été à l'origine de nombreux conflits entre les nations — souvent avec des conséquences terrifiantes. Selon Anderson, ce qui distingue chaque communauté est la façon dont elle est perçue par ses habitants qui, même s'ils ne se rencontrent jamais et en dépit des inégalités qui les divisent, croient partager une même communauté au-delà de laquelle il existe d'autres communautés. La définition d'Anderson paraît assez claire jusqu'à ce qu'on se demande qui imagine la communauté. De quelle façon et dans quel but. Pour la plupart des pays du Nouveau Monde, ce n'est pas une question facile.

Pour participer à ce débat, *Vice Versa* et son pendant mexicain appelé *Viceversa* explorent et comparent la façon dont deux pays du Nouveau Monde sont imaginés par leurs écrivains. Pourquoi ces deux pays en particulier? Parce qu'en plus du traité commercial qui les unit, le Canada et le

Mexique ont en commun des problèmes reliés à l'identité. Par exemple, bien qu'ils soient habités par les populations indigènes, les deux pays ont prétendument été imaginés (ou découverts) par des nations étrangères européennes, qu'il s'agisse de la France, de l'Espagne ou de l'Angleterre. Perçu comme un prolongement utopique du Vieux Monde, un espace moins peuplé et plus salubre, le Nouveau Monde a été imaginé de manière à offrir une continuité spatiale et temporelle pour l'Europe. C'est précisément là que réside le problème. Le Vieux Monde tenta de contrôler, d'harnacher et de classer ce nouvel espace en utilisant ses techniques scientifiques et littéraires éprouvées — comme la botanique, l'ethnographie, l'anthropologie et les récits de voyage. Pourtant le Nouveau Monde résista, préférant se définir lui-même.

Au Canada comme au Mexique, cette lutte pour l'identité a été menée sur deux fronts, citant l'espace (l'Amérique) et la population comme lieu de l'unicité. Éthniquement diversifiés, les deux pays ont dû résister à l'influence culturelle, politique, économique et sociale de deux puissances plus importantes: l'Europe et les États-Unis. En conséquence le Canada et le Mexique ont eu recours à des techniques similaires pour se définir, que ce soit par des théories

eugéniques qui au tournant du siècle prétendaient à l'émergence au Nouveau Monde d'un homme nouveau plus fort, ou encore par des tentatives élaborées de dresser les États-Unis et l'Europe l'un contre l'autre.

Comme le XX<sup>e</sup> siècle tire à sa fin, en dépit d'un volume substantiel d'art et de littérature au Canada et au Mexique, l'effort de définition de la nation persiste. Afin de promouvoir la compréhension transculturelle entre les deux pays, qui jusqu'à présent avaient témoigné peu d'intérêt l'un pour l'autre, *Vice Versa* a décidé de publier un choix de poèmes et de fiction de cinq écrivains mexicains

(Rosa Beltrán, Ernesto Lumbrales, Daniel Sada, Enrique Serna et Verónica Volkow) et de six artistes canadiens (Anne-Marie Alonzo, Douglas Coupland, Janice Kulyk-Keefer, Thomas King, Monique Larue et Michael Ondaatje). Que nous révèlent les écrits de ces auteurs sur leurs communautés respectives? Comment sont-elles imaginées? Dans quel dessein?

Nous espérons que ces échanges littéraires contribueront à créer entre le Canada et le Mexique des liens culturels qui permettront une plus grande coopération sociale et culturelle entre les deux pays. ■

# OF CLASSICS AND BARBARIANS

## *Mexican Literature at the End of This Century*

CARLOS MONSIVÁIS

**Poetry: The language  
of public and secret  
prophecies**

*translated by Andrew Seleanu  
Assistant Editor of the  
magazine Vice Versa*

In the course of this century, it has been the task of poetry to assume the luxuries and the possibilities offered by language, as well as the secret or unexpected forms of an emerging sensibility. In 1910, as the Mexican revolution erupts, one experiences unanimous wonder before the poets, "God's towers, celestial lightning rods", unacknowledged legislators of humanity. Then, during the revolution, the avant-garde emerges, and so does its desire to convert physical aggression or "stones thrown in the heart of the celebration" into poetic acts. A small literary milieu is influenced by the slogan: "Everyone is accepted, provided he (or she) is *somebody*" (Xavier Villaurutia), the exorcism of the minority against the anti-intellectual atmosphere. Then, during the decade of the twenties, there is a shift from rhymed to free verse; the vast and reverential public following of the modernist poets vanishes, faithful readers are being attracted a bit haphazardly, the coexistence between the very rhetorical and the very sentimental is so-to-say "legalized". Later, during the sixties, colloquial expression gradually displaces lyrical intensity (a change of tone which is a modification of perspective: poets *think* they are approaching their readers more democratically) And if great events — the institutionalized Mexican revolution, the Cuban revolution, '68, the denunciation of Marxism, the disenchantment with dogmas, the debunking of the "sexual mysteries", the demographic explosion, the crisis of utopian thinking — have no automatic consequences, (one way or the other), in poetry, the essential meaning of the transformations is preserved. Be that as it may, the new visions are addressed to *another reader*, socially freer and less used to deception: from the frank description of dreams of fornication, to the fluid expression of female desire, to the natural expression of homosexual desire. (without paying the high social costs, yet).

In recent years, Mexican poetry has attracted new readers — by way of obvious allies such as rock lyrics, or thanks to the very development of cultural life — new readers who, as ever, are demanding to see a clarification, a structuring or a reassertion of its spiritual vigour. And maybe, without a controlling center, all gets fused: "exquisite-ness", "barbarity", suburban dandyism, "stereo music" machismo, hermetism with or without a key to understanding it, the body as protagonist and the body as a significant absence, the rhetoric of plain speaking, the doctrinal arguments and flourishes, the return to the sonet, mysticism, cultism.

The specific tradition of Mexican poetry is noteworthy. For example, in the twentieth century we have the works of Salvador Díaz Míron, Alfredo R. Placentia, Francisco González León, Ramón López Velarde, Carlos Pellicer, José Gorostiza, Xavier Villaurutia, Gilberto Owen, Salvador Novo, Jorge Cuesta, Renato Leduc, Manuel Mapies Arce, Efraín Huerta, Octavio Paz, Ali Chumacero, Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, Rosario Castellanos, Jaime Sabines, Eduardo Lizalde, Gabriel Zaid, José Carlos Becerra, José Emilio Pacheco. If one type of poetry does not admit descendants (the aesthetic vision of traditionalism: Placentia, González León, López Velarde), almost all have created direct resonance. Thus there emerge poets not affiliated to any creed, yet who are maintaining the high level of the tradition — among them: David Huerta, Ricardo Yañez, Ricardo Castillo, Fabio Morábito, Jaime Reyes, Silvia Tomasa Rivera, Antonio Del Toro, Verónica Volkow, Jorge Esquinca, Luis Miguel Aguilar, Raúl Bañuelos, Aurelio Asiain.

Paz is without a doubt the most admired and the most controversial personality of these years. Poet, essayist, political analyst, author of literary treatises, Paz represents the splendor of classical workmanship, the openness to oriental culture, the register of the avant-garde and the critical look towards modernity, to controversy around history. Basically, the creative movement of Paz surveys and integrates his juvenile ideals, his idea of those vital changes poetry carries within it. He connects to the "tradition of the break" (risk, the rejection of what is established), and he translates his utopia into literature: "Poetry is knowledge, salvation, power, abandon. An activity capable of changing the world, poetical activity is revolutionary by nature; spiritual exercise, it is a method of inner liberation."

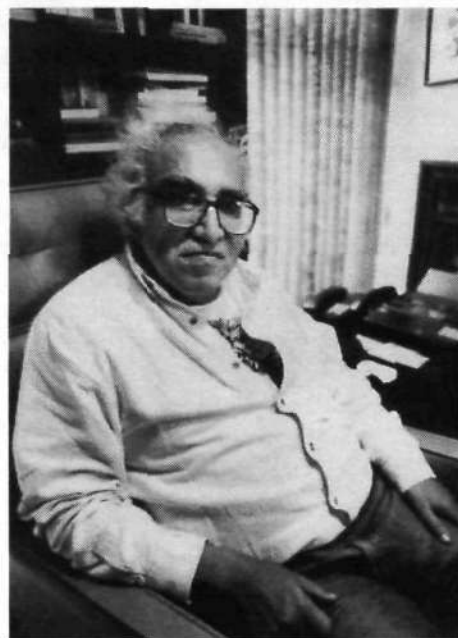


Photo : Manuel Zavala

*Born in 1938, Carlos Monsiváis is one of Mexico's most prominent essayist and writer. His career is marked not only by his array of publications but by the diversity of their themes.*

*He has been active in all the branches of the arts; including music, painting, film and literature.*

*He has also given numerous conferences and lectures at various schools in the United States.*

In the city of letters, Efraín Huerta and Jaime Sabines are considered as emblems of vitalism, and this may explain their hold on readers who normally don't read poetry. Notwithstanding their difference in tone (Huertas' intimacy is condemnatory, as opposed to Sabines' simplicity), both poets have in common the refinement, the extreme subtlety of the battlegrounds in the city of modernity, the mastery with which they express *limit* attitudes. Huerta represents lyrical obsession, militant compromise, the prophecy of apocalypse in the megalopolis, the city as propitiatory rite and memorable sarcasm. And Sabines is spontaneity ardently laboured, disdain towards "good taste", sentimental confession wrought into poetical provocation.



"To the screwed one the tears!" said I  
And I started weeping  
As they start giving birth

Sabines' poetry appears liberating within the purview of a literary environment governed in significant parts by reserve and stylistic exercises. Without fear, he points out emotions as they proceed from family roots; he transforms intimacy into feats of daily prowess, and full of spark, brings together tenderness, blasphemy, family love (which is legitimate ego comfort), the celebration of whores, resentful praise of solitude and the amorous feeling as an original well of imagery.

In images, and in the manifold meanings of the work of José Emilio Pacheco, the young ones encounter paradigms and "no exit" roads. And faced with the disappearance of the avant-garde and of poetic schools, original voices are slow in becoming established, because reputation is no longer dependent on provocations or on formal elaboration (while the former vanish, the latter is much more frequent today). And all and nothing are equivalents, as this poem by Ricardo Castillo (born in 1951) demonstrates:

### The Buttocks

*The back of the woman is also  
divided in two.  
But there is no doubt that the buttocks  
of a woman  
are incomparably better than those  
of a man  
they have more life, more gayness,  
they are pure imagination;  
they are more important than the  
sun and God together.  
they are an item of first necessity  
which inflation does not affect  
a birthday cake,  
a blessing of nature,  
the origin of poetry and of scandal.  
Like the pens of the dudes in the  
editorial office.*

## II

### The Novel as Social Avant-garde

'68 is preceded by the narrative impulse which is, among other things, a tribute to pluralism. Almost as a group, writers, no longer terrified by the accusation of "ingratitude", want to produce books which are "independent of the

national experience". Between 1947 and 1967, important or significant novels are published by José Revueltas, Augustín Yáñez, Juan Rulfo, Juan José Arreola, Rosario Castellanos, Ricardo Garibay, Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Ibagüengoitia, Elena Poniatowska, Sergio Galindo, Sergio Póitól, José Emilio Pacheco, Jorge López Páez, Juan García Ponce, Salvador Elizondo, Vicente Leñero, Juan Vicente Melo, Gustavo Sáinz, José Agustín. And books such as *Earthly Days*, *By the Water*, *Pedro Páramo*, *Confabulario*, *The Fair*, *Balún Canán*, *The House Which Burns by Night*, *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, *The Lightning of August*, *Till I May No Longer See You — Jesus Mine*, *January Justice*, *Fenced-in Time*, *You'll Die Afar*, *The Lonely Atlantic*, *The Night*, *Farabeuf*, *The Bricklayers*, *Nocturnal Obedience*, *Gazapo* and *In Profile* inform readers about trends, styles and preferences.

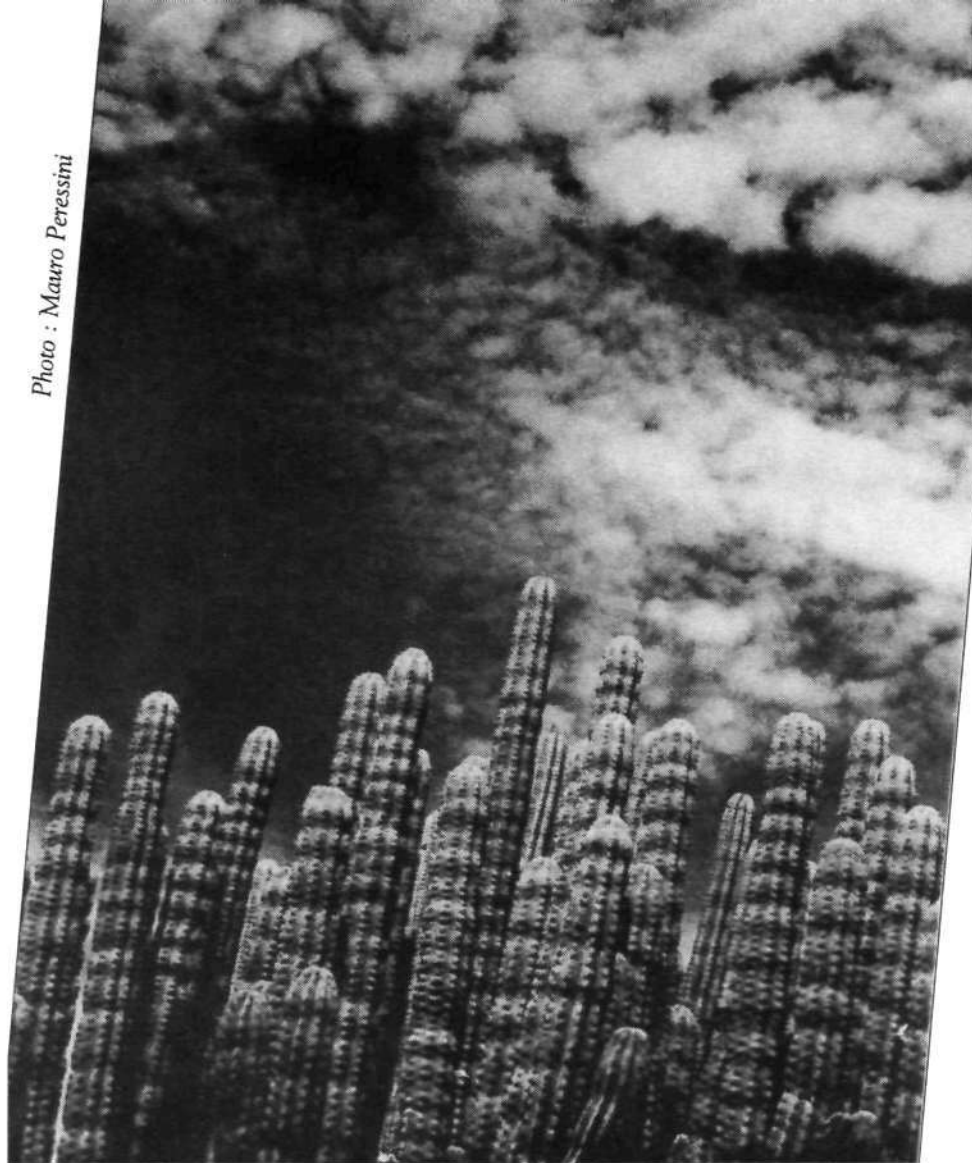
Urban growth actually rules out community life (construed as a creation of shared experience), and only a few domains offer, by way of culture, clues to modern life: cinema (massive attendance), music (the most immediate or the most extensive register of contemporary sensibility), fine art (the perception of the forms and colours which inform visual education), and literature: the classical territory. That is why the importance of Latin American writers happens to be greater than that of those observed in other regions. The outstanding books are considered either with resounding seriousness or with demagoguery, "portraits of the family and the Nation" and they also

fulfill functions reserved for sociology, social psychology, history. Every significant writer makes his (or her) contribution. Yáñez, Revueltas and Rulfo, for example, express the idea of the novel as an illustration of the tragic temperament, the prophetic sentence passed on those "natural landscapes" of misfortune, of suffering as the trademark of survival. They are, furthermore, transition writers, as, at the time of their literary training, there was still a belief in national literatures as spaces of singularity. (the influences of other literatures are described, *agriculturally*, as *fertilizers*) They are, for this reason, very conscious of the artful combination of their stylistic, and in some way, ideological, well-springs: European and North-American literature and the literature of the Mexican Revolution, Mariano Azuela and James Joyce, Martín Luis Guzmán and William Faulkner, José Guadalupe and Dostoevsky. Of this period, the best works are, (as I see them), *Ellena de LLamas* and *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo.

Carlos Fuentes wants to capture all about México: the mythological heritage, the repertory of cultural tensions. *The Most Transparent Region* (1958) and *The death of Artemio Cruz* (1962) are drafts of murals in the style of the mural painter Diego Rivera, which encapsulate social classes in the development of one character or of a group of characters. They offer vignettes as autobiography: in the slang, the lyricism of the popular tongue and in the urban vocabulary spoken by the nation. We must mention at this point the well-bred girl and the taxi dri-



Photo : Mauro Peressini



ver Artemio Cruz, Citizen Kane of revolutionary opportunism, and the ubiquitous Ixca Cienfuegos who presides since the origin of time. Fuentes' work, of great scenic violence, defines the ambition of a modern literature, powerfully universal, epic in its own manner. In *Change of Skin*, *Our Earth*, *Old Gringo*, *Burnt Water* and *Cristóbal Nonato*, Fuentes offers his version of nations as scenic landscapes, of sexuality as a second fatherland, of fiction as synthesis of utopias.

In the opposite perspective, Jorge Ibarguengoitia, in *The Lightning of August* (1965) and in *The Steps of López* (1982), wants to place the myths of heroism in the light of the picaresque. Fable of disenchantment with "the revolution which made itself into government", parody of the feats of armed struggle in Mexico (1910-1930) and of the literature they engendered, mockery magnified by literary deftness, *The Lightning of August* foreshadows what consumes *The Steps of López*, the satire where the past is being demythified only to be buried more deeply, while the distrust caused by the serial miracles of "magical realism" is growing. In other novels of Ibarguengoitia (*The Dead Ones*) of 1977 and *Two Crimes* (1979), the dry tone and and unadorned description are the valued means for fables of evil as the supreme stupidity.

"And just the relatives of Pedro Páramo stayed back in the countryside"

The urban, the measure of all things. In the novels which followed 1968, Mexico City turns out to be, by itself, an inescapable character, the setting of reactions which are as spontaneous as they are fatal, in the opposition between development (the promise of a liberating future) and backwardness (the threat of a never-ending past).

The effects of the literary boom contribute to the transformation: a boom which, in its fashion, gives an impulse to Latin American cultural integration, stimulated by the initial impact of the Cuban Revolution. Aside from how the publicity surrounding five or six authors ("exclusive club") is being perceived, (these authors having been declared as the most representative of the continent), the promotion of the boom allows the dissemination of the diverse Latin American literature, with Spain as a starting point. Until that moment, (and in a contrary sense to the poets), each Latin American fiction writer connected to his own national tradition in addition to world literature, as it is concentrated in some few countries. (mostly USA, France, Britain, Germany).

In an almost deliberate way, this writer wasn't aware of what was produced in the rest of Latin America. But the boom, despite its public profile, amply fuels the growth of the readership. One does not simply invent such virtues as those of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Pedro Páramo*, *The Field of Flames*, *Rayuela*, *The City and the Dogs*, *Conversation in the Cathedral*, *Aleph*, *Ficciones*, *The*

*Dockyard*, *Juntacadáveres*, *No One Writes to the Colonel*, *Morel's Invention*, *Three Sad Tigers*, *Painted Lips*, *The Treason of Rita Hayworth*, but as we integrate them in the panorama of language, we are reminded of what we have already known since Machado de Assis and Ruben Dario: in matters of literature there is no underdevelopment. And the readers are aspiring to partake in the high level of what they admire.

"At last, Spanish no longer is a secret language"

Until 1968, cultural modernity dwells on the defence of criticism as the element correcting authoritarianism; on the opposition — mundane, nonsolemn, informed, ironic — to traditional Mexico, and a nationalism of hopelessness, on the border of patriotic symbols and statements. But if the demolition of tribal survivals is justified, so is the defiance to totemic weights, old and new: the usurpation of the nation by the government and the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the control of free time by the worst television conceivable, the abysses of inequality, the gravity of absolute and functional illiteracy, the absence of a press, not merely one destined to minorities, the lack of — or the bureaucratization — of the cultural infrastructure.

To this one may add the necessity to fill thematic territories (which may well be linguistic universes), and to include the representation of the marginal, the occult, the devalued or merely imagined through the the "Ridiculous". The realistic novel (about farm hands who revolt and pariahs trapped in the prison-like universe of their surroundings) is the reflection of this configuration of the usually invisible, inaudible — of the nameless.

And this representation of "the forbidden" does not correspond to the division into social classes, but to more diverse viewpoints, and this allows within a few years the transformation of the repertory, thanks to the appearance of new protagonists: women who no longer are symbols (nor complacent or devouring victims), the believers in "heterogeneous" forms, the young fleeced of any future; rebelling natives, the homosexuals, the "outsiders" who challenge and unwittingly interiorize the racism victimizing them.

Faced with the great social and cultural leap, narrators find they are obliged to adopt formal changes ranging from experiment to the reuse of traditional methods. The distance with respect to the theme is relativized, an idea which is summarized by the phrase "text production". If the "realistic novel had presented events in the intention that they appear natural" (Jean Franco), contemporary narrative declares monogamous fidelity to tradition abolished, yet expresses loyalty to feelings of "uprootedness"



(cosmopolitanism) and “guilt”(social realism). The position of “middleman to reality” is declared anachronistic.

### “Rock: Notorious sympathy for the devil”

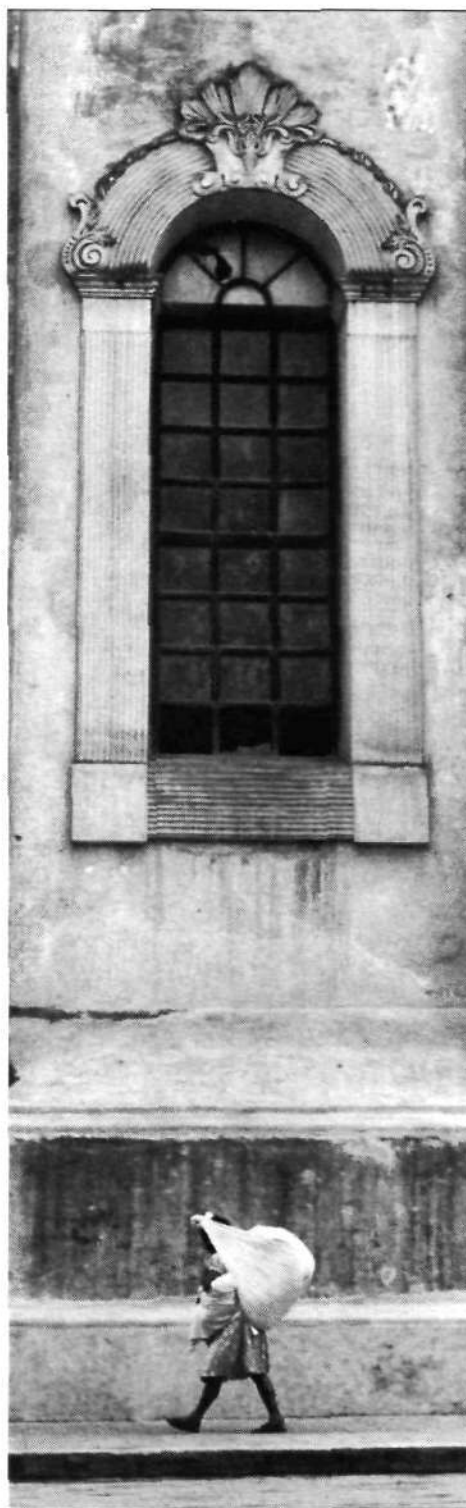
In contrast to the previous generation, trained in literature and in cinema, in all of Latin America, new authors want to give their poetry, or their narratives, the rhapsodic qualities of prose with poetic intentions, along the lines of Bob Dylan, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Lou Reed, U-2, Sting, Patti Smith, Neil Young, Sid Vicious and Kurt Cobain. In these works, there takes hold the tone of literary nightmare which slumber transforms into dreams. In this culture, each idol is a generational superego and automatically a lifestyle. And the characters of tales and novels crave to embody the qualities attributed to the demigods of rock music, and they live for the incisive phrase, for flight from reality, sex experienced as hallucination, induced hallucination perfected by orgasm or its equivalent, the challenge of drugs, the incomprehension of the boring world of the adults.

Some of these books (and their sources, *The Catcher in the Rye* by Salinger, for example) are read as manuals of conduct. To be more specific, José Agustín in *The Grave* (1964), *In Profile* (1966), *It's Getting Late*, *End in the Lagoon* (1973), *Inventing that I dream* (1969) better than any other, creates characters who assault the sky of traditionalism with attitudes both imitative and original, both Americanized and nationalist. Particularly, *In Profile* is notable for capturing the new urban rhythm, and for the recreation of the emerging picaresque. This can't be otherwise, if rock culture is to demolish or to avoid prohibitions and moralistic injunctions, and if the picaresque is to be a method of knowledge. Meanwhile the picaresque hero (the anti-hero of corrupt society, the fun-lover amidst the inertia of the middle classes), lends to his farce the dimensions of a pillage. *La Onda* (the counterculture) is also — and to beneficial effect — an epic of marginals.

### “And how could he commit suicide with 32 bullets?”

Another previously disparaged genre turns up. Before the seventies, it was impossible for Latin America to respond massively to the appeal of the police mystery novel, considered typical of the Anglo-Saxon world. “Who can believe in the efficiency and in the will to justice of our police forces?” is the constant question. Latin America is not fated to be the scene for detectives à la Hercule Poirot (Agatha Christie), Lord Peter Wimsey (Dorothy L. Sayers), Philo Vance (S.S. VanDine), Nero

Wolfe (Rex Stout) or Perry Mason (Earl Stanley Gardner). It is difficult trying to imitate the refined plots, the bizarre solutions to the mystery of the drawing room, the jokes and the homage to strict logic. By and large, two novels stand out: *Rehearsal of a Crime* (1944) by Rodolfo Usigli, and *The Mongol Plot* (1969) by Rafael Bernal. With or without design, based on a kind of homophobic theology, Usigli creates a thriller, having surprising similarities with the world of Patricia Highsmith's novels. “He wasn't a man like any other — reflects Roberto de la Cruz, the anti-hero of *Rehearsal of a Crime*, — he had a destiny, he would be a great criminal or a great saint.” In *The Mongol Plot*, Bernal imagines the antihero alone and intimidated, a Vietnam ex-mercenary carrying on for the satisfaction of vengeance.



In both novels, the atmospheres transcend the limits of the plot.

The discredit of socialist realism undoubtedly did take place, and many writers, when faced with the necessity of “committed art”, opted for working the methods of militant literature into the detective novel. The trail had been blazed by Dashiell Hammett (communist) and by Raymond Chandler (anticommunist): in a corrupt society nothing is what it seems to be; the police is both accomplice and the author of the crime, respectable lawyers are involved in drug trafficking, judges are beings rendered feeble by the good life, corpses found in back lanes are the identifying marks of capitalism, while the spirit of justice is embodied by inflexible and solitary men, who won't say no to either whiskey or rough language. Thus abounds in Mexico a literature (quite abominable by and large) which repeats some familiar patterns: including a trail of private sleuths and murdered businessmen, and whose plot is overstocked with California-style action and events. Despite all this, the vitality of the genre is undeniable.

### Epilogue as a form of prologue

At a time when the interest in poetry is diminishing, the interest in national literature also drops, to the extent that book sales may be representing an indicator. And that, to a large extent, is related to the subjection of the national market to North American best-sellers and to the Spanish publishing industry; but it is also a result of the slight influence of literary critics and of the large role of word-of-mouth publicity. (the boom of oral culture in an era of globalization). This leads to a landscape of growing supply and diminishing demand, to lack of motivation and to writer anxiety. Nevertheless, never has narrative expression been so free and varied and, (with intensity), new generations of novelists and story tellers publish novels of love and of arcaneness, thrillers and guerilla tales, fantastic stories and naturalist obsessions, satires and reconstitutions of the legendary atmospheres of México. Among those who are attracting readers today, it is suitable to mention Juan Villoro (*The Aragón Shootout*), Enrique Serna, Rosa Beltrán, Alvaro Enrigue, Alan-Paul Mallard, Tomás Granados, Ignacio Padilla, Daniel Toscana... The list is unfair, as it leaves out quite a few writers in full productive activity. In spite of everything, Mexican literature, while suffering from a shortage of market incentives, does enjoy the stimuli of talent and sensibility. ■

Photo : Mauro Peressini

# time to die conjugal love

A few years ago we decided to enter into matrimony with the happy assurance of those who embark on their own perdition. It's not that we don't like intimacy; on the contrary, we're indebted to it for a series of unexpectedly cushy jobs because, well, he and I weren't considered respectable people — that is, anyone you could really trust in. As for the rest, I don't think it was unwarranted, because there's nothing respectable about impulsively going into urinals, for example, and writing things on the walls. Or rather, writing to someone, whomever you prefer. Not that I know what he writes — that doesn't interest me. He and I decided it would be like that: each of us would have a separate life. My part has turned out to be forever looking at the same facade while I wait for him. Does this make any sense? I'm afraid that just like with the other one, these desires will also end up getting corrupted by urgent questions or obligations, by the need to live up to the image that we've imposed on ourselves. Before, we had to suffer in silence through the rejection that the others were so determined to point out to us — our indignity was only due to our being unmarried — and now, on the other hand, we can thank our marital status, or the contempt for everything that it's caused us

## ROSA BELTRÁN

Rosa Beltrán was born in Mexico City in 1960. Her first book of short stories, *LA ESPERA*, appeared in 1986. The novel, *LA CORTE DE LOS ILUSOS*, received the Planeta-Joaquín Mortiz Award in 1993. She has also pursued an academic career in comparative literature obtaining a Ph.D. from the University of California in 1990. A revised version of her thesis will be published shortly by the Press of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México where she is presently teaching. *TIME TO DIE* is part of the book *AMORES QUE MATAN* which has been just published by Joaquín Mortiz.

to feel, for the relative ease with which we can busy ourselves fulfilling our desires without suffering any major recriminations. Now we're not considered ostentatious; we're happily married. But there's still a stigma: he keeps on flaunting his former freedom as if he still had it today. Even so, though, bit by bit we've given in to the fatal conventions that at first seemed funny to us, immersed as they were in that mysterious glow that surrounds everything new. Sometimes I think that we still have a lot to share: night and memory, and maybe indifference, too. Or who knows: probably not even that.

He used to like to go to places where no one knew him. He never put down roots; his days were made up of tiny fragments that were impossible to fit together and lacked any kind of meaning. He was never able to draw any clear conclusions from whole strings of recurring acts for the simple reason that there weren't any conclusions to be drawn: whenever he could, he would conscientiously avoid nourishing any idea or continuing any conversation that was beginning to go beyond the trivial. Nor would he ever stay in the same place for very long. He was terrified of being recognized by someone, of being sought out, invited. His terror grew out of the need not to be identified as ordinary



Photo : Manuel Zavala

and not to identify things as commonplace. He didn't want to define himself. He wanted to remain comfortably anonymous, free. And being free meant being formless.

Sometimes he would go to the public baths with the illusion of finding them almost empty; he would avoid all those looks that made him feel that he had to justify something. It was enough for him to tell me that he was going with T. for me to understand. It wasn't T, or anyone else in particular. But it's always better to give a name to things. Beautiful amorphous bodies; bodies without eyes. Sometimes it was enough for him just to brush against a warm leg without touching it, or to give a sole, momentary look into other eyes so he could reject those masculine natures — free of the roundnesses that might warp the perfect erection from its heights — while he, almost prone, looked them over from top to bottom without emotion. His enthusiasm for making accomplices out of people who didn't know him and would completely forget him a few minutes later drove him to carry these furtive contacts a bit beyond the ambiguous stage — and then to leave almost immediately in order to breathe in air crowded with other breaths or to have coffee somewhere, to leaf through a magazine or enter a music store and leisurely select a compact disk that he had no intention of buying. Later on he would come by for me. At seven o'clock. Then my body would open a window and stealthily, little by little, pleasure would creep in.

Intermittently, but very slowly, we were becoming accustomed to other habits. For my part, I adopted faltering particles of a language that had been unknown to me till then, and I began to talk more frequently about the kitchen, the weather, or the latest news — in short, about all those clichés with which I shared the happiness of an uncomplicated life. I began to enjoy the pleasure of recognizing myself every day, identical and faithful to the person I had been the day before. He, on the other hand, remained immaculate. Being faithful to himself meant repeating himself. But in both cases our true world continued to be hidden, and that superiority isolated us in a surprising way from the game that included us and made us identifiable. In the evening, we would leave his parents in the company of their grandchildren — whom they rarely really enjoyed — and would step out to encounter a warm city filled with hope. We would surrender ourselves to the morning of a night that opened to



receive our faded bodies, which longed to observe everything, to drink in all the hidden corners. For him, it would have been an insult to mention how ridiculous he looked in the anachronistic and deliberately out-of-date clothes he wore. He loved hats. It's strange that I should speak of his tastes like this, because at the time I found them enchanting. I used to like it when he sweated, for instance. Now I detest it. But at that time, a pleasant boredom made us enjoy everything we considered sensual. Sometimes we would go into a bar separately and I would move away from him in order to watch him from a distance. When he would invite me over, a few minutes later, to share what in this way might turn out to be more interesting, both of us had to admit that the secret complicity that united us also worked against us. Later we would head back silently to our marital bed, and the whole experience would be enough to put a certain distance between us. I would begin to undress with my back to him, and he, without noticing, would turn away from me on the bed and fall asleep in seconds. Some time passed before the tiredness that would so suddenly overcome him became more of a real motive for lack of communication than a truce: our natures are so meticulously constructed that memory, forever lying in wait for its prey, frees us with a certain efficiency from the problem of unfaithfulness. The fear that lies hidden among the valves of the night was at that time nothing more than comfort and rest.

I do not remember when I began to enjoy the sadness that my adaptation caused me. He would probably have wanted me to look for a lover, to have made a new life far from commonplace banalities, a life like the one we had shared before. He looked at me with his old curiosity without understanding that he was thus betraying my possible adultery, while I smiled at him, overcome with a strange generosity. I began to spend time with my sister-in-law, Alicia, and my mother-in-law. Meanwhile, tenacious as fleas, the children swirled around us, yelling, playing, and shouting:

*Juan Pirulero killed his wife  
with a pin and seven knives;  
everyone thought it was a sheep  
but it was the wife of Juan Pirulero.*

We talked of homework, of the kids' assignments, of the cycles of things. The rituals of daily life made us feel secure, close to the earth; the purification of tireless dialogues isolated us from fear. Small incidents, such as some insignificant mishap that would befall María, Alberto, or Ramón, would interrupt our conversations for a few moments, and as I arose, I would indulge myself in the modest conviction that I was a failure, and was silently rewarded with the pleasurable thought of the humble satisfactions that life still held

for me. Oddly enough, I was happy. My visits to the interior of my desires became ever less frequent, and the absence of caresses was becoming a custom. We had learned to express our affection through the tradition and family life that our relatives had directed us to with skilful protectionism, though I do not remember whether he was ever more than occasionally present at these discussions. I would speak through his mouth, and that was enough. I deliberately disregarded his tastes and opinions in order to reinvent him, and he zealously attended to learning his latest role by heart. He tried to appropriate all the new phrases that referred to him but that he didn't quite understand, accepting them deferentially. Only rarely did some distraction permit a bit of silence to creep in, and at those moments an unknown, overwhelming anxiety would wriggle across our skins. We began to go out less frequently and to



Marie-Hélène Parant

look for simpler diversions: the nearest movie theatre or a corner restaurant. He would still, however, carefully scout out the most propitious moment to exhibit his dissidence. Small things satisfied him: a timorous graffiti, a slight provocation — or a lukewarm attentiveness when he would hold forth too ostentatiously about his pretended exploits, the last of which was to ask me to marry him.

Were we suggesting that we imitate our fathers, or was some kind of design pushing us to act like them? If we had wanted, we could have precisely registered what caused that feeling of complicity to seep into us when we agreed on the same reflection: breakfast at eight/the children at school/ work/a short chat over coffee/ the kids on the way back from work/ the park/work/ supper and sleep. We regarded our past with distrust.

No one can be blamed for hating and loving at the same time, so how could anyone know what reproaches he and I would come up with when we looked at each other? A tepid smile: it was hard for him to convince me that anything would change, and I didn't really want it to. I liked seeing him sitting in front of the television, indolently wasting his time; I liked the fact that everything was always so much the same. "A decorous and timely death is all that can honestly be desired," I used to think.

The children are sleeping. I can almost hear the quiet rhythm of their lungs, and he is finishing undressing: "This rubber doll is ready for bed." But first, just for

a few moments, there is a pale and hopeless larva to attend to: his sex. I take it cautiously between my hands and kiss it. I would also like to mash it, torture it, and bite it. Nevertheless, I kiss it softly as I wait for my next chance to shine: in cooking, cleaning, or a birthday party. ■

— From *AMORES QUE MATAN*, a collection of short stories published in Mexico City in November, 1996, by Editorial Joaquín Mortiz as part of the "Colección Narradores Contemporáneos."

— Translated by Hugh Hazelton

# ARCANO VI LOS AMANTES

VERÓNICA VOLKOW

## ARCANO VI LOS AMANTES

Tus ojos son noches  
en que vive un día,  
tus ojos son piedras  
que sueñan  
y en el sueño un mundo  
que no está.

Todo el cuerpo en la caricia cabe.  
Piel: garganta efímera  
y presa imprecisa,  
sólo aroma el cuerpo que deseamos  
y respiración,  
respiración ávida en la entraña.

En la piel la inmensidad es lo que canta  
tenue voz muy honda,  
en el roce estrépito,  
suavidad ya grito.  
Embriaguez que es música y abismo.

Al amor lo escribe el infinito.  
¿Qué no está  
y en inagotable espejo  
nos habita?

## ARCANO XX EL JUICIO

A Zina

Hay quienes murieron de silencio  
y a quienes mataron por haber hablado.  
Voces hay  
que dan vida  
y voces que matan,  
palabras de nadie para nadie,  
juicios sostenidos sin justicia.

No sólo con aire respiramos,  
también con palabras  
Hay nombres que nacen de la vida,  
son aliento,  
nos habitan con un alma,  
y son un alumbramiento.  
Nacemos a un mundo donde estar  
con la piel entera  
y tocando con las manos.  
Aspiramos al mundo en la voz,  
a luz nos damos.

Pero, hay palabras donde nunca estamos,  
no las vivió nadie  
y no podríamos respirarlas.  
Hay mudez que es como muerte  
y también,  
muertos que hablan.

## ARCANO XVIII LA LUNA

La luna no se disuelve en la noche  
como las otras piedras,  
tras de la luz olvida  
un corazón desierto.  
Empeñado en su sol  
su solo pensamiento  
ni se amortigua en piedra,  
ni disipa la noche con su intento.  
Su día vive encerrado en un espejo  
y so voluntad en un sueño.

Agujero en la oscuridad, la luna,  
como el sueño,  
con su espejo sin tierra,  
sin aire, sin agua y sin fuego.  
Deshabitados siempre,  
la realidad no acaba con los sueños  
y es un pozo la ausencia  
del espejo.

## ARCANO XIX EL SOL

Unidad en el blanco que quieran  
los colores,  
a la luz se le saldría el mundo,  
pero en su acorde es transparencia,  
joya invisible que encerró el tesoro,  
silencio  
que escuchó toda la música y piensa.

Como cosas se encienden las imágenes,  
no hay hogueras en los brillos.  
En luz  
recaudan mundo los espejos,  
quizá con luz se piensa.

Trae sol la luz  
como un origen  
que aclara,  
una memoria  
que ilumina,  
que es pureza.



Photo : Manuel Zavala

*Verónica Volkov nació en la Ciudad de México en 1955. Ha publicado varios libros de poesía: LA SIBILA DE CUMAS (1974); LITORAL DE TINTA (1979); EL INICIO (1983); LOS CAMINOS (1989). Acaba de aparecer Arcanos publicado por el Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las artes. Su último libro publicado es un ensayo sobre la obra gráfica de Francisco Toledo: LA MORDERURA DE LA RISA (Edit. Aldus, 1995)*

## ARCANO 0 EL LOCO

Amarró la noche en su alforja,  
a ese Proteo imprevisto, la penumbra,  
las promesas de lo ignoto y las cosas  
que lo negro atesora:  
el olvido perdido  
y el inasible sueño,  
en el olvido un tiempo sin historia  
y en el sueño sin tiempo,  
una historia extraviada  
y los frutos prohibidos  
que resguarda la sombra.

Lo imposible es inolvidable,  
mitad vivimos cara hacia la noche  
y en el borde del párpado inventamos.  
Anhelo loco por despertar en un sueño  
porque son otros los jardines de la noche,  
otros los puertos y los horizontes.  
Caminar caminar  
hacia lo que aún no existe,  
por lo intempestivo del rayo  
o la vaguedad del naufragio.  
En la noche fundar el día,  
en el día abrir la noche.





# LARVE

## de séraphin

(Fragments)

ERNESTO LUMBRERAS

### Le ciel

*Se donner conjointement  
le souffle et la vision, mais  
non comme simple possibilité sinon  
dans un acte,  
c'est déjà un haut, un ciel pur.*  
Maria Zambrano

Le ciel est un saule déchaîné. Entre ses branches le soleil est un loriot.

L'antériorité provoquera des plaisanteries chez les vagabonds. Cela ne me dérange pas. Le ciel est un saule déchaîné. Il contient dans ses branches, en plus du loriot, un éclair en repos. Autre chose c'est sa réunion de violoncelles. Graves comme pierre de ruisseau. Froids comme une vérité.

Riez *vagues de coin*. Cela m'importe peu. Cherchant mon âme entre les clés de St-Pierre je me suis trouvé un jet d'eau. Maintenant sans retard de plume je peux le dire. Le ciel est un saule déchaîné. Tout son feuillage est une oraison.

Ernesto Lumbreras est né en 1966. Il a publié deux recueils de poèmes, CLAMOR DE AGUA en 1990 et ESPUELA PARA DEMORAR EL VIAJE en 1993. En 1992 il a reçu le prix de Poésie Aguascalientes. Les poèmes que nous publions ici, dont certains sont inédits, appartiennent au livre LARVA DE SERAFÍN en cours d'écriture.

Et  
j'entendis une exclamation ou  
une escarmouche d'écureuils: ciel de San  
Francisco tu es chez Robert Frost  
*colline verte, colline verte(\*)*

et  
C'est aussi une colline verte.  
Comment ne pas être d'accord. Dans  
l'herbe l'horizon brûle. Moi, en revanche,  
je cours jusqu'à son sommet espérant ren-  
contrer une hache de pierre ou un crâne de  
bœuf.

Vous n'aurez pas de problèmes à être  
d'accord avec moi. Un éclat de colombier  
dans l'herbe peut nous donner raison.

(\*) Le nom de Robert Frost me suggère  
un chemin avec des arbres. J'ai dit chemin,  
mais non pour le voyage ou pour les adieux.  
Sinon, seulement, un sentier pour un aller-  
retour avec les yeux ouverts. Oui à l'observa-  
tion, mais aussi la communion: le chemin  
comme oratoire.

La lecture de Frost m'induit d'un  
sentiment de temporalité. Son temps est  
perception, fait seulement de présent, con-  
jure toute descendance ou généalogie.

Il n'est pas un poète moderne. Il  
peut paraître, par moment, un paysagiste  
ou un auteur bucolique. Je l'admire sans  
adjectifs. Lire ses poèmes assume dans mon  
expérience le désir d'avoir la mémoire,  
dans une vertigineuse dispersion, des sou-  
venirs appelés: désert de minuit, porte dans  
l'obscurité, amour pour un mur, poussière  
de neige (sur l'aile d'un corbeau), enfant  
qui balance les arbres.



Photo : Manuel Zavala



Jacques Coumoyer

## Réunion de violoncelles

Copuler et pleuvoir me rappellent la nuit blanche d'un saule. Ce ne fut pas toujours ainsi. Je pos-sédais avant un désir de pierres fossiles quand l'éjaculation (yeux de fourmis) annonçait pour moi une flamme d'alcool. Maintenant le cul d'Élena (une allusion plus festive du ciel) me trouble avec son soufflet : spiral de rouge-gorge/robinet sans vocation. Maintenant je la pénètre réveillée avec ennui. Ce ne fut pas toujours ainsi. Copuler et pleuvoir, dans un temps éloigné, les souvenirs n'illuminent la nuit blanche d'aucun saule. Un cheval boit la lumière aux pieds du ciel. Étanche sa soif avec prudence de crapaud entre les nénuphars. Dans ses yeux, un automne trame un moulin d'eau. A tous je demanderai de ne pas l'apeurer avec les montures et les éperons. Un cheval qui boit des nuages réclame notre regard. Un groupe de castors dans sa fontaine étourdit mon cœur. J'ai pensé aux lèvres du diable quand sur un champ jaune, le ciel laisse couler une légère brise. Mon émotion, une essence de sel dans la nuit, contient ses travaux d'arrosage. Quoi boire comme semence de copulation, fidèle aux constellations d'un saule ? Il devrait y avoir une aurore de fruits pour le savoir.

## Saule déchaîné

Son feuillage : la pitié de celui qui dort un cœur parmi les abeilles.

Son tronc : la lecture des ténèbres d'une couvée/ le printemps dans une brise de givre.

Sa racine : une larve de séraphin dans le sang/ le multiple d'une heure de juin/ le soleil des oraisons que personne n'entend.

## Fainéants dans un coin blanc

Dans un coin blanc on entend ces voix :

goûte le feu                      ruisseau  
plus nuit

robinet sans merci                      cœur pur

pute amoureuse                      vinaigre

*L'un d'eux observe le ciel. Il enfonce sa conscience. Il lui sature de syllabes : averse sur une forêt/ brise sur un étang. Peut-être désire-t-il une tour de limaçons pour calmer la nuit. Hasard renié d'un pubis humide, sans ses mains, font prendre feu à un mouton endormi.*

Traduction faite  
par Carlos Séguin, 1996

Québécois d'origine espagnole, Carlos Séguin est né à Montréal en 1974. Étudiant à la maîtrise (philosophie) à l'Université de Montréal, il s'intéresse depuis toujours à la littérature espagnole et sud-américaine, spécialement celle d'Antonio Gala, de Federico Garcia Lorca et de Pablo Neruda.



# THE POSMA JAIL

## DANIEL SADA

*Daniel Sada was born in Mexicali in 1953. He is the author of several books of poems, short stories and novels. Among the most recent books, we mention the novels UNA DE DOS, 1994 and ALBEDRÍO, 1990; as well as collected short stories such as:*

*REGISTRO DE CAUSANTES, 1992 and TRES HISTORIAS, 1988. His works have been translated into English, German, Dutch and French and have been presented in various anthologies in Mexico and abroad. The text we present here belongs to the book, REGISTRO DE CAUSANTES, which won the Xavier Villaurrutia National Literary Award.*

**T**orreón, or "The Place Where the Rails Meet," as it used to be called, was just a train station a century ago. Of course, there are industries and shops there now: progress? relaxation? Television in English. Piped-in water, said to be pure. A lot of shameless films and more women than you can count: they're the flowers of the desert, though not much has changed about them — except that now they wear pants! Con men and crazies have also proliferated. There's plenty of crime, as well as drunkenness, and you hear cumbias, polkas, and ballads coming out of everywhere.

Of course there's a lot more poverty too, but so what?

That's the way life is now, according to the rich. In the old days, on the other hand, people lived differently — though not quietly, that's for sure, because a while later the Revolution rolled through the place and a lot of local people got involved in the fray. But even that, with all its whining bullets and point-blank shootings, turned out in the end to be entertaining. The kids



finally had a pastime: seeing who could collect the most cartridge cases. There was a dead man a day, not counting the shoot-outs in which no one was killed. But after a while all the terrifying slaughter tapered off a bit and peace returned. Enthusiasm reigned. Deep-rooted convictions about beliefs began to get distorted once reality reasserted itself again.

The public got an enormous idea of progress fixed in their heads — that is, of doing things like the gringos, because people were needed to make it work. Maybe it was for that reason that the youth used to get married so young and then have armies of kids of their own: to help Torreón grow up beyond a settlement as soon as possible. At first, those families used to live all crunched together in boxcars on unused tracks, fifty or so to a car, since they were considered outsiders and pirates that didn't live like people from town, but preferred to settle in wretched shacks or in adobe huts with roofs made of reed mats. They led lives of jubilation and faith and were especially good runners when trains pulled in. That was when they'd sell chile-filled tacos, snacks, equally thick tortillas, torrents of ice-cream and iced drinks: a great blessed spot for wolfing things down, with the trash left along the tracks when the trains moved on for Juárez or Mexico City, as the case might be.

Then came a period of chaos that coincided with all that

growth until we finally got a president; at the same time "Where the Rails Meet" declared itself once and for all a municipality and was designated an administrative centre by somebody higher up. As for its official name, it now became the one we know.

The mayor's office was provisionally located in one of the train cars, which was a good idea and an economical one, too, and ensured that the new government palace could be built with the requisite calm some distance away. The mayor, among other things, was a gentleman with grey hair like a pennant, a great guy, a real buddy who liked having a drink and giving minor orders that were immediately carried out by his men with rifles and municipal chinstraps, who served as a police force. But apart from them, for strategic and civilian affairs, he had at his disposition a combination advisor-inspector who knew all the new legislation by heart and was also versant in the precepts of Machiavelli. For lesser issues, he had a foppish clerk, a loud-mouthed guy in a striped suit and bowler hat — despite the heat — with a little moustache and fancy manners, who was fast on the typewriter and in whipping himself up almost to tears as he delivered rousing harangues about the nation to throngs of listeners.

One day, by the way, the boss got the idea of taking another rail car, putting it next to the green one that served as the mayor's office, and setting up a magnificent casino. Keep in mind that the agricultural sector was beginning to bear fruit about this time and that the desert town needed what you might call some amusement for the men who scratched away at the soil every day from sunrise to sunset. It would be a great way for them to refresh themselves. Aside from which, understand, it would be a means of avoiding the violence that occurred outdoors — not all of it, maybe, but a lot — as well, of course, as the under-the-table sale of moonshine and other things that were even worse. For its part, the local authority would be able to control the betting and any possible lawlessness. Hey, that was the

pretext, anyway, because when you get right down to it, the whole thing was just a big business deal.

As a peremptory rule, there was to be a cover charge and — why not? — a ten-per-cent take of the total bets. Some old boxcar was to be fixed up both inside and out, giving it a colourful façade and putting in three metal tables so that the chips would sound like hailstones in a thunderstorm when they were moved about — a noise that was infamous for attracting clients.

There would also be dominoes.

With the same intention, the boss ordered that black and white photos be put up of women lifting their dresses and showing their tamale-shaped legs. And there had to be a name for the place: "Casino on the Lagoon" or "The Whole Town Casino," although when you thought about it, the main problem was that in reality the boss wanted to get into contact with the future bourgeoisie so they could become a circle of investors, a closed and ultimately exclusive group. With that in mind, he ordered that a brown rug and a turquoise-blue carpet be put in. He would have liked to have had Czechoslovakian mirrors and English playing cards, but it would have made it too obvious that he still didn't have a decent place to put all these dreams. Ah, a casino like the ones in Paris: maybe some day! For the moment he made up an official announcement, and, yes, with oil lamps that would be lit when the sun went down, of course there would be clients. The most powerful men around, he hoped.

The gamblers used to start coming round at about eight o'clock in the evening, carrying pistols in their belts, just in case. They didn't need to: everything's all right, come right on in. But someone got killed almost immediately because of a — trap? What did happen is that the community decided it had had enough: there was a great flap and protest about the recent break down in law and order, and, in general, many people begged that the casino be closed. The big shot said no, just to be stubborn. He had the idea of putting the municipal jail into another rail car next to the casino car, which he did, although — careful, now! — he couldn't throw the most ardent players (that is, the rich ones) into it; to do so would be to risk his position, and business was going from bad to worse. What he did was arm his six men and give them police hats and then leave it up to his pencil-pushing secretary to give a speech to justify the importance of betting and having a good time.

There was the customary agreement as to spies. A requirement was immediately established for entrance to the casino: depistolization — a rule, in the end, that never worked, because one night during the gaming the rich guys started fighting so

hard that they ended up flinging chairs at each other. Then, despite all the injuries and the string of reproaches that was unleashed in the city, there still wasn't one prisoner to inaugurate the incarceration facility, which made it imperative that someone be put inside, in order for people to take it seriously, but who? The inspector-advisor recommended that the boss throw in a few new arrivals from out of town for whatever trumped-up reason he liked just so the jail could truly represent the ultimate in correctional centres.

He'd scarcely finished speaking before the police set out for the most isolated, dilapidated shacks on the outskirts of town to hunt up a few newcomers who above all had to have the faces of wrongdoers and who could be accused of being squatters. It was easy to capture a few. They hauled back the most impoverished ones they could find.

*That night, five innocent peasants slept in the train-car jail.*

*A dark, wretched place.*

*Without ventilation.*

*With a terrible stench in the air, one of heat and suffocation.*

The prisoners were also uncertain as to how much time they were going to be locked up without food and a place to relieve themselves. They talked together indignantly in the bitter darkness; not a single laugh mitigated what had happened. The boss's display of power helped him create a resolute image in everyone's eyes of a man capable of terrible zeal. From now on people were sure to be forewarned of what he could do.

All the same, it wasn't long before the prisoners' relatives were down on their knees wailing and begging the big guy to let the jailed men go the next day, to which he replied, with a show of grand gestures and angry faces, that they'd better start back heading home if they didn't want to get a beating instead of perhaps being shot — or at any rate, ending up hurt. He added that he didn't have to inform them of anything, that the only explanation he would give was based on a very old law that had to do with illegal settlement on private lands, but that the legal codes in which it was written were not presently at hand, and he wasn't about to go looking for them. The sentence, therefore, whether of a month or a minimum of two nights, would depend on the behaviour of both the prisoners and their families. The sorrowful questions of the relatives were basically cries denouncing the punishment as they argued, quite rightly, that in any case there were lots of other illegal settlers.

Their insistence didn't last long: just three or four days. As for the prisoners, they endured it all with courage: slowly starving, in agony, and all agreeing with each other at this point. From the first

night on, as soon as the door was closed, they would begin to kick and hammer with their fists against the metal walls, crying out in despair. Maybe they'd be able to get a bit of sympathy from the guards outside, who would then help them escape: "Go on now, get outta here!" Aside from that, all that was left was a vicious circle of sickness and asphyxiation.

They talked about it: there was no way out. To top it off, they had to answer all their most intimate calls of nature right there, although this wasn't quite the case, because those calls depended on the scraps of food they would get — but from whom? They could only just barely hear any sounds from outside: a noise of a continuous drizzling rain came from the casino next door, and they could hear far-off shots and muffled quarrels. On the other hand, whatever they themselves said sounded muted and feeble.

*A stitch, a tiny beam of light shone through the wall at dawn of the first day.*

The heavy door of the railroad car immediately slid open just wide enough for a fat hand to throw in three small bread rolls, and then, with no further comment, to close the door on them again with sudden ferocity. That, of course, was their breakfast. The shadow was there, but where was the sustenance? They scurried over like hungry animals and fought and kicked each other to tear off a few pieces. The unfortunate sufferers experienced the perversity of survival, hating each other over a crust of bread without even knowing who the others really were. At noon the fat hand opened the door again and left them three oranges and a jar of water. At supper-time they were thrown a half-kilo of nuts as a joke. Over the following days and nights there was progressively less and less food, and the prisoners used their last remaining strength to pound against the rusted metal walls of the boxcar and beg for water. Oddly enough, no one else — no other victims — were put in with them.

*Just an unexpected half a bread roll or three nuts or a tomato.*

Apart from the smells of shit and sweat, there was each one's struggle with his own mental anguish as he resigned himself to his future putrefaction. Their growing anemia gave rise to morbid pleasures, vile and decrepit longings, as they contemplated their filthy deaths — as if dying could ever be anything else.

Every instant was another step on the pathway to nothingness, the well that blots out all possible merit and is thus so friendly and discrete, an illusory future and a present that was gradually suffocating and going blind. The openings and closings of the door no longer troubled them; by this time they attributed their misfortune to divine will. Never again would they see their families or walk through Torreón.



The legendary feat of staying alive was now hanging by a thread; their growing shortness of breath was endured with a minimum of pride. They would take leave of the world like this, forgiving misfortune itself — which was a woman and an evil one at that.

Yes, the door would finally open once again, and someone would put in a peeled grapefruit or an unpeeled prickly pear that the prisoners were too weak to even reach, viewing such things now as treasures that had lost all value. Ah, delayed agonies and confused memories filed through the hours as incidents of their daily routines flickered through their minds, reduced to details such as an embrace, a wave of the hand, a small courtesy — anything that signified warmth, the goodness of warmth.

Nevertheless, their captors kept leaving them food which they, overcome with affliction, no longer wanted as they had before. Treacherous cravings now began to stitch up their guts, which by now had shrivelled up close to their spines. It was better to think about life, of those last moments when everything indistinct and blurred becomes a beautiful relaxation. They remembered their families, whom they knew full well would now fall into the most implacable and macabre destitution, and thus they said good-bye to their beloved desert, to their children, their mothers. Good-bye, Torreón, which — it was true — had now become a real town, with dusty streets. In the casino there were disputes, loud arguments over games, and, if money were involved, there was always a twist that led to an outburst of violence and ended up in gunfire. The fact that opposing groups were involved gave rise to crime and then to lots of people who died for the eternal glory of rancher honour. And nobody was ever put in jail for it. Around their fifth day in prison, a few shots even came right through the metal sides of the boxcar, which in fact was quite beneficial: every bullet-hole, no matter how small, was a salutary filter that let in fresh air and improved their lot. And if they could just drag themselves over and manage to eat it, there was still that food there by the door.

At the end of a week one of them died of hunger; he couldn't survive going without food for so long, and the others were worried about where to put him. Moreover, their strength too was fading, and their unaccustomed weakness insured that any effort to move him would be unsuccessful. Any desire to help would have to be put off till later, because the truth was that they were all about as dead as he was — just as foul-smelling, bitter, and incapacitated.

It was due to these questions of gangs, truces, and vengeance that an unexpected event then took place on the outskirts of town: unidentified men made off with the boxcar-jail during the night. This might be attributed to a group of new arrivals from somewhere else who perhaps had quickly carried out the manoeuvre of firmly coupling the car to a wood-burning locomotive that was just getting ready to pull out. One tug was enough for the row of boxcars to begin to move off without further incident. There was a tremendous racket as the car's worn wheels screeched and swayed beneath the mobile jailhouse.



A. PILON

rying the casino and the mayor's office were directly behind them — and joy was born from their darkness. The casino! That futile luxury was now being carried off! The mayor's office! With all its papers blowing around!

What happened was that while the train moved onward, the sufferers' spirits began to pick up as they staggered toward the door and tried to stand up. The crazy guys who had linked together the row of cars may or may not have known there were people inside; maybe they did, but the fact is that a long time later the train rolled in and stopped at Picardías station and the door slid all the way open, flooding the sepulchral space with light and joy.

It was all a mystery for the prisoners, who looked out of the boxcar without believing what was happening.

No one was guarding the rails. In fact, once the feat — which had been carried out by who-knows-whom — had been confirmed:

Run for it! The feeble prisoners jumped out of the car and managed to scramble across the scrubland, hanging onto the bushes and rocks, without worrying about the possibility of getting killed and ready for anything that could happen next. But nobody shot at them, and nobody was hit, either; everything went all right, despite their exhaustion. Then, losing themselves among the cacti, each of them took off in a different direction for home, at least to see how far he would get. Oof! Now they wouldn't let themselves die; they'd survive to enjoy life with their families. So if one of those prisoners now living comfortably at home reads these lines, may he now know once and for all what is so fervently wished him: that from now on things go the way he wants!

— from the collection of short stories *Registro de causantes*, published by \* (\*, 1992). Winner of the Villarrutia Award for literature. ■

— translated by Hugh Hazelton

Hugh Hazelton is a Montreal writer and translator who grew up in Chicago but has lived in Canada since 1969. He has travelled extensively by bus, foot and train in the Americas, Australia, India, and Africa. He has written three collections of poetry — *Sunwords*, *Crossing the Chaco* (a poetic journal of two years' travel in South America), and *Ojo de papel* — and has also anthologized and translated the work of various Latin American writers, especially those living in Canada.

The prisoners, who had thought they were destined to die within a few hours, were overcome with an anxious happiness. Somebody had not only stolen their boxcar, they had also taken along all the others! OK, but so what? Their agony was turning into a judgement of their persecutors, because it worked in at least two ways. That is, they could at random intervals hear deep voices speaking with a tinge of vehemency, and given what had happened, this led them to surmise that the cars car-

# LE TRÉPASSÉ

ENRIQUE SERNA

POUR ANDRÉS RAMIREZ

Cinq heures de l'après-midi et personne ne m'approche. Pas une seule étreinte en cette foutue journée. En cette fin de quinzaine, des cadeaux seraient trop demander déjà qu'ils ont toutes les misères à joindre les deux bouts, mais au moins, une félicitation, bordel, une crasseuse carte quoi. Les dépenses de mai-décembre s'élèvent à 361 nouveaux pesos. Plus les intérêts moratoires par portefeuilles échus, 394 mille 518. Blanca Estela, se pavanant sans perdre sa grâce — à peine si elle se permet un balancement des hanches —, esquive les bureaux de Bautista y Caceres. Elle est si savoureuse, mais ne devrait pas venir au travail vêtue d'une minijupe si ajustée. Elle est la seule à pouvoir humaniser la vie sociale de la compagnie. Endoctrinée par les manuels de «dépassement du personnel», elle croit que nous sommes une grande famille et elle traîne avec elle la liste des anniversaires de tout le personnel, même les hommes. Elle organise, par sa propre initiative, des collectes pour l'achat de gâteaux, elle rassemble les gens de chacun des étages et les entraîne au bureau du fêté pour lui chanter le joyeux anniversaire. Elle ne peut m'oublier, je suis son ami. Mais Blanca Estela passe au large de mon bureau sans se retourner. Tu me déçois, ma belle. Ne suis-je plus à l'ordre du jour ?

Recettes accumulées lors du premier trimestre de l'année, 546 mille nouveaux pesos. Moins les cotisations de la sécurité sociale, 79 mille 810. Aux autres, on leur prépare une fête au restaurant, avec les mariachis. Ils sont, nécessairement, les gâtés du bureau, les sympathiques professionnels qui se bagarrent avec tout le monde. Comme par exemple Caceres. Il est entré comme auxiliaire à la comptabilité et il y restera parce qu'il est un poltron ; néanmoins, le crétin a du charme. Il faut le voir racontant ses blagues dans la petite pièce de la cafétéria, entouré de secrétaires, pendant que les téléphones sifflent sans que personne ne veuille y répondre. Vous ai-je déjà conté la blague du pilote galicien ? Il en résulte qu'un galicien allait atterrir à l'aéroport et il dut freiner à faire crier les pneus parce que la piste se terminait. As-tu remarqué comment elle est courte ? lui dit

à son co-pilote. Celui-ci bondit au hublot et répondit : oui, mais elle est très large. Comme ils l'admirent et rient de ses blagues. Même Blanquita doit être folle de lui. C'était ainsi au lycée : il y avait toujours un recalé dans toutes les matières, mais avec un talent pour dominer les gens, le véritable minus de la classe, au-dessus des trépassés comme moi, chargés de maintenir l'ordre et la discipline. Luna, assieds-toi. Je vais inscrire ton nom au tableau. Je t'ai vu donner une tape à Reyes Retana ; la

prochaine fois je t'enlève un point pour mauvaise conduite. Qui est celui qui ma mis ce chewing-gum

sur ma chaise ? Qui est-ce ? Pareil comme maintenant, exactement pareil. Il n'y a pas de

grande différence entre un chef de groupe et un sous gérant des ressources humaines. Le même rôle de gendarme, de contremaître qui tourne le dos au spectacle pour obliger les autres à faire leur devoir insupportable. Avant je leur enlevais des points, maintenant des journées de paie. C'est pour cela que personne ne vient me féliciter, ils veulent se venger. Peut-être ai-je été trop sévère avec le personnel. Mais Blanca Estela m'a dit l'autre jour dans l'ascenseur — lorsque je suis seul avec elle, je deviens nerveux et je bégaye — que j'étais une onde positive à l'inverse du dernier sous-gérant, un sot aux cheveux gras qui ne laissait pas manger les employés aux heures

dites normales et, de plus, il leur chargeait le temps pris pour aller à salle de bain. A-t-elle dit cela pour s'attirer les grâces, pour que je ne la pénalise plus pour ses retards ? Ventes totales janvier-juin, 345 mille nouveaux pesos. Moins 15 pour cent de taxes et deux pourcent des dividendes fixes, 292 mille 317. Très bien pour les chiffres, certes très bien. Je ne me plains jamais, les choses sont toujours au clair. Personne ne te félicite, ni ces crétins de chefs. Ils nous emmerdent beaucoup avec leur qualité totale, mais au fond ils s'en balancent et j'ai raison. La vie est faite pour la vivre pleinement. Au-delà d'une certaine limite, le travail devient une prison. Celui qui ne vit que pour travailler est comme une chenille enfermée dans son cocon. Ils doivent penser cela de moi, que j'ai le cœur de porc-épic. Lorsqu'un de mes compagnons me cause à l'heure de la pause, je lui réponds de façon évasive ou bien je le laisse avec ses mots dans la bouche même s'il espère de ma part une distraction.

Bonjour Guillermo. Et tes prévisions sportives ? Comme d'habitude, je me suis trompé, lui répondis-je et au

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et périodiques et il a aussi travaillé comme scénariste pour des séries télévisées. Parmi ses publications récentes, mentionnons le roman *EL MIEDO A LOS ANIMALES*, Joaquín Mortiz, 1995 ; *AMORES DE SEGUNDA MANO* (contes), CAL Y ARENA, 1994 et le roman *SEÑORITA MÉXICO*, PLAZA VALDÉS, 1993. *EL MATADITO* a été publié dans la revue *La Jornada* en juillet 1995.

Photo : Manuel Zavala



lieu de continuer à lui parler comme l'exige la courtoisie, de lui demander comment va la grossesse de sa femme ou de commenter les buts de la journée dominicale, je me sens menacé par sa gentillesse et je retourne à mon ordinateur, cette extension de mon âme où je suis à l'abri des intrus. Ce robot, ennemi du monde, cet ogre goulé esclave du devoir qui n'a jamais rien partagé avec personne, veut qu'on le félicite pour son anniversaire et qu'on lui éteigne les bougies.

Cinq heures et demie, tout est foutu. Bautista se frotte les yeux et bâille avec amertume tout en regardant la rue, comme un singe en cage dans un laboratoire. Il espère sortir. Lui, profite de son temps libre. Je l'ai accompagné une fois à La Via Lactea, la cantine du coin de la rue. Nous commandons quelques verres, la joie nous frappe, une autre ronde s'il vous plaît, en fin de compte le monde ne prend pas fin parce que nous manquons un après-midi au boulot. N'est-ce pas l'innocent ? Tu es très sérieux, mais je t'aime bien ; santé l'ami, pour elles, même si elles payent mal, et nous finîmes saouls dans une banque de Garibaldi, en chantant *Lampara sin luz*. Depuis ce temps, je ne sais s'il accepterait un verre, que diable, un anniversaire est un anniversaire, je ne veux pas retourner à la maison et m'écraser sur le lit en regardant les lecteurs de nouvelles. Jour de chance, Bautista se lève et s'approche de moi. Enfin j'ai un ami enjôlé qui me nécessite pour ne pas boire seul. Écoute, Guillermo, je suis en train de faire la balance que tu m'as demandée, mais ma calculatrice ne fonctionne pas, tu me prêtes la tienne ? Bien sûr, voilà. Bautista me tourne le dos et retourne à son bureau, le regard brumeux comme les hommes qui ont classé leurs illusions. Personne ne veut boire quelques verres avec monsieur le sous-gérant, et puis ? Cherchons le côté positif des choses. Tu t'es sauvé d'une soûlerie. Le voyant ainsi en face, c'est le mieux pour ta santé.

Mais les frustrations aussi font mal, autant ou même plus que les cuites. Vouloir et ne pas pouvoir. C'est l'histoire de ma vie. L'histoire d'un rêve mis à l'écart. Ce qui me fait mal c'est de ne pas pouvoir contrôler les autres, volontairement, comme si je bougeais une jambe ou un bras. Au fond, je suis identique au disciple d'Hitler qui occupait mon poste l'an passé. J'aurais voulu avoir tout sous mon contrôle. Mais les autres ne sont pas où je les nécessite et n'obéissent pas à mes désirs par télépathie. Ils sont libres, ils se dirigent eux-mêmes et personne ne veut me féliciter. Vais-je crier pour cela ? Liste mensuelle, 167 mille 510 plus les liquidations à titre d'honoraires, 182 mille 550, moins les prêts, 174 mille 560 point 67. Un homme sans complexe les aurait déjà engueulés sans gêne : écoutez, messieurs, aujourd'hui c'est mon anniversaire, qu'attendez-vous pour me

faire l'accolade ? C'est ce que faisait Caceres s'il était à ma place. Je ne peux m'humilier à ce point. Ce serait ridicule, une confession d'impuissance, comme si j'admettais que je les ai trompés, que j'ai interprété une comédie et joué un rôle autre, touchez-moi s'il vous plaît, je ne suis pas un glaçon efficient, j'ai besoin d'affection comme vous tous, petit j'ai aussi pleuré lorsqu'on tua la maman de Bambi.

Ils voudraient me voir ainsi, à leur pied, mais jamais je ne leur donnerai l'opportunité de m'implorer. Votre indifférence est un stimulant pour mon orgueil. Je vous importe peu ? Ni vous à moi, salauds, nous sommes à égalité. Le temps passe vite. Six heures vingt-cinq, d'ici peu, plus personne ne sera dans l'édifice. Comme d'habitude, Caceres prépare son sac pour sortir avant l'heure. Je pourrais le retenir à sa place jusqu'à six heures et demie — la gérance m'a donné des pouvoirs pour faire respecter l'horaire —, mais je le laisse partir feignant une distraction. Si je me mets de mauvaise humeur, il va croire que je suis mortifié par l'effort. Bautista me redonne la calculatrice et me salue d'un geste mécanique de la main. Même Blanca Estela a commencé à se poudrer le nez. Aurait-elle un rendez-vous avec un galant ? Trop de maquillage pour son âge. Je lui ai dit une fois, vous seriez beaucoup plus belle le visage propre, elle ne m'a pas écouté. Et si je l'invitais à manger ? Je n'ai pas besoin de lui parler de mon anniversaire ni tomber dans le pathétisme, je l'invite simplement dans un bon restaurant et je lui déclare : savez-vous quoi Blanca, je pense souvent à vous, j'ai de sérieuses intentions, je ne fume pas et ne bois pas en excès, je vis avec madame ma mère et j'ai économisé un certain montant pour vous acheter ce que vous méritez. Mais le crétin à Caceres l'attend à l'ascenseur, retenant la porte d'une allure très courtoise et elle, court à sa rencontre sans avoir terminé de se poudrer le visage. Je m'en doutais : ces deux là sont ensemble. Ce ne sera pas la première fois que Caceres trompe sa femme. Et Blanca doit avoir plusieurs amants, un pour chaque jour de la semaine. On dit même que le directeur du marketing l'a eu dans son lit et c'est ainsi qu'elle se promène en Volkswagen. Avant je ne le croyais pas, calomnies, pensais-je. Maintenant, j'imagine le pire en chacun. J'éteins l'ordinateur, mais je garde les yeux rivés sur l'écran quelques minutes, comme un exercice de yoga, pour ne pas rencontrer les poinçonneurs de l'étage dessous. Je ne peux dégager les mâchoires, j'ai un nid d'abeilles dans l'estomac. Par la fenêtre, j'aperçois Blanca Estela et Caceres entre les piétons de l'axe Central, brillant dans la foule grâce à l'éclat de leur sourire impur. Une carabine, j'ai besoin d'une carabine de haut calibre. Ils tomberaient comme des rats.

Dehors, sur le trottoir infesté de commerçants, à peine y a-t-il de l'espace pour marcher, mon nid se calme un moment, dépassé par l'énorme guêpier à l'extérieur. Je voudrais boire quelque chose, mais où ? Dans les cantines du coin, il y a toujours des gens du bureau et ce serait étouffant d'occuper une table seul comme un chien pendant que les autres boivent en groupe. J'ai déjà eu à le faire, mais je ne suis pas d'humeur à assumer ma solitude comme un défi. Je préfère marcher vers le sud, marcher dix ou douze heures, rien en tête, esquivant les vendeurs ambulants et les regards ébahis des fantoches. Arrêt, un kiosque à journaux. J'achète le journal le plus scandaleux, *La Prensa*, qui est fier d'annoncer en gros caractères un chiffre record : 7 mille suicides pour le premier trimestre de l'année. Il y a des douzaines de bistrots, le difficile est de savoir où on sert une bonne bouffe. Un instant, pourquoi tant de détours si tu n'as pas faim ? Je prends d'assaut le premier bar qui me tombe sous les yeux et je choisis une table éloignée de celles des joueurs de dominos. Un Don Pedro avec coca, si vous me faites plaisir. Nous faisons une promotion, aujourd'hui, nous servons deux verres pour le prix d'un. Vous savez, jeune homme, à cause de la crise nous avons perdu beaucoup de clients et le propriétaire veut relancer le bar. Attention, serveur bavard. Vous êtes seul ? Non, j'attends quelques amis.

C'est la vérité, je les attends en vain depuis vingt ans, lorsqu'ils ont commencé à m'ignorer à l'école à cause de mes allures d'indépendance et de ma solitude hostile. J'ouvre le journal pour chasser le serveur, pendant que je me plonge dans mes années du secondaire. Aimais-je réellement étudier ? Quelquefois non. Les études étaient une forme d'évasion, un subterfuge pour ne pas vivre dans une fourmilière, intégré aux groupes et aux bandes où je me sentais diminué, subordonné à l'approbation des autres. Le terrain de la récré m'inspirait une terreur, c'était une arène de lutte verbale et physique où on devait être un marginal pour imposer le respect. Des tapes, des insultes, prête moi ta soeur. Dans le hall, il y avait des règles claires et je n'avais pas besoin d'être aimé par aucun imbécile, tout dépendait de mon propre effort. Dix en Chimie. Dix en Espagnol. Dix en Géographie. Premier de classe. Médailles, diplômes, une visite à Los Pinos pour saluer le premier ministre. Vous êtes l'orgueil de tout le Mexique, la génération que amènera notre pays vers le chemin du progrès et du bien-être. Luna, le champion de l'athlétisme, exerçait sur moi une pression avec ses prières impératives. Tu me donnes une chance de copier sur toi à l'examen ? Non, le professeur peut nous voir. Allez, ça te coûte quoi. Parfait, mentais-je, mais à l'heure de l'examen, je cachais mes flancs

pour qu'il ne puisse pas voir mes réponses. Crétin, trou du cul, que tu pourrisses, une bourrade et ma galette sur le sol, nageant dans une marre d'eau huileuse.

Mon coca brandy est fort, mais il est si sucré qu'il ne gratte pas la gorge. J'y vais pour un troisième et je me sens abrité,

séraphique, invulnérable.

Après tout, à qui cela importe que mes honneurs académiques se soient retournés contre moi, jusqu'à me convertir en un empesté. N'est-ce pas le destin de toute personne remarquable ? L'amour-propre comme moyen de salut. La grandeur du héros solitaire qui s'impose à l'adversité. Fanfares d'honneur... Image d'un faucon survolant un sommet enneigé. Vos amis ne sont pas arrivés ? Encore une fois le serveur aimable et emmerdant. Comme il embête pour avoir un bon pourboire. Je regarde ma montre, contrarié. J'ai l'impression qu'ils ne viendront pas. Je lui en apporte d'autres ? Non, donnez-moi l'addition, je vais aller les chercher dans un autre bar. Les chaises réservées pour mes amis imaginaires me contemplent d'un air goguenard. Mais je ne suis pas vaincu, ni triste. La solitude me paraît un contretemps facile à remédier. Je peux aller chercher Bautista à La via Lactea, Blanca Estela et Caceres sont, je n'en doute pas, là buvant un verre avec lui. Je savoure avec délectation mon quatrième Don Pedro. Il est l'heure de vaincre mes complexes et de saisir la vie comme elle vient. Mais attention, peut-être que je deviens impertinent, j'insulte Blanca Estela d'être si pute, je me verse le verre sur le pantalon ou je fais sortir Caceres de ses gonds. Disgrédité. Perte d'autorité. Ma réputation renversée dans la boue. Ce serait la saloperie du siècle. Boire jusqu'à éclater, mais non pas devant eux.

Brève trotte sur le trottoir étroit de l'hôtel de ville, cherchant où le suivre. J'entre dans le bar El Éden, attiré par la lumière violette de la marquise et la suggestive pénombre qui se perçoit depuis la rue. Des serveuses en minijupes rouges, nombril à l'air, des sièges avec appui élevé, une télévision présentant des vidéoclips de groupes tropicaux, odeur à désinfectant

de pin mélangé avec le parfum bon marché des dames qui attendent les clients au bar.

Pourquoi si seul ? Tu vois, je cherche une copine et peut-être es-tu une de celles-là. Bien répondu. Ainsi réagissent les hommes du monde, les triomphateurs qui ne suffoquent jamais. La serveuse sourit et par réflexe je tâte la poche intérieure de ma veste, où je trouve les deux cents pesos que j'avais pris soin de prendre dans ma table de nuit, prévoyant que j'allais fêter mon anniversaire avec quelqu'un. J'apporte le journal enroulé sous mon aisselle, mais je ne compte pas me cacher derrière lui. Tout autrement, je trinque avec les occupants de la table voisine, un moustachu avec une veste de cuir, criblé de tâches de rousseurs et un jeune au visage osseux qui lève son verre à ma santé. Que faire ? Rien, je suis venu passer le temps. Et vous aimez boire seul ? quelquesfois. Ne soyez pas timide et venez à notre table. Ruben Montes pour le servir, celui-ci c'est mon confrère Leodegario, mais je l'appelle Leo. Enchanté, Guillermo Palomino, je travaille dans une compagnie d'articles pour le foyer, je suis sous-gérant des ressources humaines, voici ma carte. Et vous, que

faites-vous ? Nous sommes camionneurs, nous apportons de la viande congelée depuis Sonora, mais aujourd'hui nous n'avons pas eu de travail. Portez un toast, les verres s'entrechoquent. Éloges insolents à la serveuse qui m'a servi, équipée de magnifiques fesses. La conversation s'anime et je demande à Ruben si les camionneurs ont réellement des femmes dans chaque village. Pure histoire, sourit, quelquefois on en rencontre quelques-unes dans les haltes. En revanche, elles t'arrivent avec une histoire comme quoi elles vont avoir un enfant et veulent que

tu les entretiennes. À cause de cela, plus de petites poulettes. Mon accouplement avec les camionneurs est instantané et parfait. C'est ma flotte, celle que je cherchais depuis toute ma vie. Nous commandons une bouteille de Don Pedro. On cause de foot, tranchantes opinions sur l'écologie, finances et politique nationale. Prustas, Panistas, Américanisés, tous de la même merde. Leodegario parle de sa terre, la vallée de Yaqui, où sa famille cultive le sorgho. Quel formidable repos, celui d'abdiquer pour un moment du moi, se fondre avec autrui en une cellule indivisible où les autres pensent et parlent pour toi. Ruben propose qu'on appelle quelques filles. J'accepte, enchanté, et je m'assois sur les jambes de la serveuse aux fesses monumentales, qui s'appelle Ana Laura. Pour moi, un vermouth s'il vous plaît. Moi, une charreuse. Et toi ma reine ? un ruso blanc. Ana Laura veut tout faire avec moi et elle me masse la verge avec le dos de sa main. Pense à autre chose, ne va pas éjaculer dans le pantalon. Savez-vous quelle est la nouvelle méthode de détection du SIDA ? Tu te penches et regardes entre tes jambes et si tu as quatre couilles alors c'est qu'on ta filé le virus. Ha ! ha ! ha ! Je m'amuse à leur compter la blague du pilote galicien, en copiant le style de Caceres. Succès retentissant, rires de Leodegario. Sa fille s'étouffe et il doit lui faire boire une gorgée de Coca-Cola. La bouteille tire à sa fin, commandons-nous une autre ? car maintenant, il se fait tard. Je sens que la table commence à se détacher du sol comme un objet vivant. Mesdames et Messieurs, s'il vous plaît gardez le silence : je veux vous faire prendre conscience qu'aujourd'hui c'est





mon anniversaire. Ça te plaît bien ? se surprend Ruben. Seigneur que oui. Regarde, sans plus. Tu ne le manifestais pas beaucoup. Quel âge as-tu ? Trente-huit. Venez par ici, le trio. Innocent, méprisable, je t'aime comme un frère. Voici le joyeux anniversaire que chantaait le roi David.

Ronde d'accolades, Leodegario me défait le dos à cause de ses robustes tapes. Petites caresses avec Ana Laura qui a bu quatre rusos blancs et qui est sobre. Boitelle de l'eau colorée ? Quelque chose dans ma tête rebondit comme une balle. J'ai la nausée, mais je ne veux me défaire de la grande famille que nous avons formée. Ruben et Leo se lèvent pour aller danser. Qu'il ne reste pas de trace avec ses putes. Pour ne pas briser l'unité du groupe moi aussi je vais danser et j'essaie de suivre Ana Laura dans ses mouvements étourdissants. Mal fait. Secoué, la pression se met à baisser et je commence à suer. Avec ta permission ma belle, je reviens tout de suite, murmurai-je, luttant pour contenir mes spasmes de vomissement. Méprisable Guillermo, qui te dis de boire autant. J'ouvre d'un coup la porte de la salle de bain incapable d'arriver à la toilette, je crache dans le lavabo une fumante bouillie noire. Esprit éveillé, tort instantané. Le vieux (de la salle de bain) m'offre une serviette en papier. Qu'il ne reste pas de trace que non que non, qu'il ne reste pas de trace. L'eau du robinet ne réussit pas à laver mon crime parce que les morceaux d'arachides ont bouché la bande du lavabo. J'essaie de les enlever avec le doigt, mais il me prend une seconde attaque de nausée. Je termine d'évacuer mon estomac dans la toilette, après une large succession de nausées. Je ne devrais pas continuer à boire, assez c'est assez. J'arrange ma cravate, me lave le visage et j'achète quelques chewing-gums à la menthe au discret Mathusalem de la porte, qui m'observe avec un mélange de compassion et de mépris.

Dehors, la musique s'est tue. Je suis surpris de ne pas rencontrer à la table mes copains. Tes amis sont partis, sourit Ana Laura, ils ont dit au patron que tu payais. Le patron, un grand aux mains poilues et au visage enfantin, me remet l'addition sans me regarder. 570 pesos, plus ce qu'on veut donner aux filles. Un moment, je vais lui payer ma part, mais les messieurs qui étaient avec moi, venaient de leur côté. Ils ont dit que vous les aviez invités. Ce n'est pas vrai, ils m'ont appelé à leur table, mais ce ne sont pas mes amis. Quelle saloperie, quelqu'un doit payer. Avez-vous une carte de crédit ? Non et j'ai seulement deux cents pesos. Je porte la main à la poche de ma veste, mais les billets ne sont plus là. Décharge d'adrénaline, bourdonnement dans les tympans. Je me rappelle les félicitations et je crois que l'un de mes frères a dû me faire les poches. Quelle peine, capi-

taine, j'avais de l'argent, mais ces salauds m'ont volé. Cherchez bien. Je lui jure que je les avais dans cette poche. Le capitaine me fouille la veste et les pantalons, respirant par le nez, signe qu'il perdait patience. Voyons comment cela se fait, il me pousse contre le mur, ici personne ne quitte sans payer. Écoutez-moi, je ne mérite pas ce traitement. Non ? Qui te crois tu être crétin ? Coup de genoux dans les parties accompagné d'un coup de karate sur la nuque. Obscurité totale. Plié en deux par la douleur, je reçois une bordée de coups de poings dans les côtes. Noiceur totale. J'aperçois en quelques rapides flashes le visage du capitaine se transformant en une autre face odieuse, celle de Luna, mon ancien bourreau d'école. Je ne sais pas qui me donne des coups dans les reins ni celui qui me tire par les cheveux jusqu'à la porte du bar. Une poussée violente et je tombe sur le trottoir où Ana Laura m'enfoncé son talon pointu dans le bas-ventre : ceci c'est de ma part, mon crétin d'enculé.

Après avoir attendu, recroquevillé contre la chaussée, par peur d'une nouvelle volée de coups, je m'essuie les vêtements et je vérifie si je n'ai aucun os de brisé, même si je saigne du nez. 38 ans, 570 pesos, 7 mille suicides dans le premier semestre de l'année. Je fais encore des chiffres. De retour à l'obscurité arithmétique, d'où aucune parole amicale ne peut percer mon armure de fer. Ainsi je me sens mieux, isolé par un rideau de chiffres. Pour un homme comme moi, le langage est entièrement superflu. Mon mouchoir ne peut contenir l'hémorragie et je laisse s'écouler sur le trottoir un mince filet de sang. Joyeux anniversaire. Happy Birthday to you. Ils paraissent si aimables. Des gens francs et simples du nord. Peut-être n'étaient-ils pas camionneurs et ils étaient associés aux gens du bar. Une femme me regarde d'un air méfiant et change de côté de rue. Idiote de merde. Il en résulte que je suis le délinquant. Il doit y avoir une station de métro près d'ici, mais où ? 10 en chimie plus 60 coups dans les reins moins 200 pesos volés égale à 0 ami. Au loin, je vois une avenue illuminée. Est-ce Balderas ? Après tout, je regrette la mort subite de la fête. Si j'avais de l'argent je chercherais à me divertir dans un autre taudis. Finalement ? Ils m'ont tout fait cracher. Traînant les pieds, je marche vers l'avenue, avec l'essaim d'abeilles plus agité que jamais. Enfin la bouche du métro, cette échappatoire souterraine vers l'autre réalité. Notant que les gens s'écartent de moi, je prends conscience de mon odeur de vomi. Vous n'aimez pas ? Alors écarter-vous crétins. Le gâteau, je n'ai pas eu de gâteau. Soudaine et absurde tristesse pour ne pas avoir éteint les chandelles, mêlée à un blâme infini de la foule de passagers qui remplissent le quai. Sournais, troupeau puant. À partir de maintenant je vais être salaud avec tout le monde en commençant

par les employés du bureau. C'est assez de dissimuler les peureux. Le premier qui accumule trois retards dans le mois, je lui enlève un jour de salaire. C'est terminé les bons pour la nourriture, les permissions sans solde, les prêts, et quand Blanca Estela viendra toucher en avance sa prime pour les vacances, je vais lui tourner le dos, je n'ai pas l'autorisation de la gérance, la sécurité sociale a oublié un document, maintenant j'ai besoin de son numéro d'employer, je suis désolé, l'ordinateur a effacé votre nom. En pleine sobriété rancunière, je commence à crier. Qu'est-ce que je suis en train de penser, jamais je ne traiterais un compagnon de cette manière, je ne supplante personne et je me suis repenti des bassesses que j'ai commises dans mon esprit. Peur de vieillir avec ces blessures que je déteste. La possibilité de me convertir en un grand trou est si éloignée. Ce serait la conséquence logique d'avoir reçu une volée après l'autre pour chaque tentative de m'être ouvert aux autres. Où que j'aille les lumières s'éteignent autour de moi. Je n'ai même pas d'ennemis, je suis en duel contre la vie. Le tremblement des voies annonce l'arrivée du métro. Au moins laisser un souvenir, sortir de la scène sans blesser personne, comme un discret acteur secondaire. Courage, un pas en avant et tout se termine. La lumière, l'éclatement orangé de la mort. 38 ans, 456 mois, 13 870 jours. Qu'il ne reste pas de trace, que non...

Des heures après, le licencié Juan Manuel Arriaga, superviseur de la sécurité et de la vigilance de la station, arrive à l'adresse écrite sur les documents du tué-Avenue Consulado 123, intérieur C, colonia Asturias- pour informer à sa famille la tragédie. Il apportait dans un sac en plastique les effets personnels du suicidé ainsi qu'une autorisation du Service médical Forense pour que la parenté puisse réclamer le corps. Le vestibule était ouvert. Il monta et frappa longuement du poing contre la porte C. Quelqu'un lui a ouvert sans lui demander qui il était et a laissé la porte entrouverte comme dans les films d'horreur. À l'intérieur tout était obscur et il ne savait pas s'il devait entrer ou non. Finalement, il décida de pousser la porte. Lumière intense, musique au maximum, des serpentins un peu partout. Madame Palomino avança dans sa direction avec une énorme tarte aux fraises, mais en le voyant elle fit une moue amère. Désillusionné, Bautista et Caceres laissèrent tomber une pancarte où était écrit Félicitations chef. Vous êtes amis de Guillermo ? lui demanda Blanca Estela. Elle s'était enlevé la couche de maquillage et elle était plus belle que jamais. ■

— Traduction faite par Carlos Séguin

# Imagining the Canadian Community: Taking a Cue From our Writers

DANIELLE MILLER

*Since the Canadian crisis is also a crisis of modernity, we are perhaps doomed to remain in Blake's bestiary as long as recognition, authenticity, and identity do not find their peaceful solution.*

— Wladimir Krynski



Jack Chambers, 401 Towards London 1968-9. Art Gallery of Ontario

**O**n display at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia is a series of four paintings "A View of Halifax, Nova Scotia" painted around 1765 by Dominique Serres, an English artist born in France. Despite their beauty and their serenity, these paintings depicting the construction of Halifax from four different perspectives, jar the viewer. The city they portray is less rugged and less

wooded than it is today - after almost two hundred and fifty years of urban development. Given that Dominique Serres had never set foot in the New World and had executed his series from sketches provided to him by a British officer, it is little wonder that "A View of Halifax, Nova Scotia" resembles a view of any English countryside. Commissioned by the British government, these works were used to promote

the settlement of the colony by presenting it as a mere extension (annex) of England. These four paintings also demonstrate the problem of imagining Canada, or any New World country, with Old World representational techniques.

A hundred years after Serres painted "A View of Halifax, Nova Scotia" the problem of representing Canada remained unresolved. In what is recognised as one of



the first Canadian novels, *Roughing It in the Bush*, the British immigrant author, Susanna Moodie, wavers between enthusiastic Romantic descriptions of her voyage up the St. Lawrence River, and the horror at the vastness and the roughness of the land. Her ambivalence raises the more fundamental question of how to imagine and describe the Canadian landscape with the English language? Can one really use the word "lake" in reference to the continental seas that are lakes Huron, Erie, Michigan, Ontario and Superior? Is the St. Lawrence really a "river" in the British sense of the word?

The dilemma of defining Canada has also haunted political debate. In 1867, little more than an entity entitled British North America, throughout the twentieth century our country has become bilingual, multicultural, and even post-national! None of these labels seems to fit, however, and each has its critics. Furthermore, what is Quebec's place in this union? A defining feature of Canadian identity, the province now feels that it would like to leave the nation that it has helped to create. But should we even speak of national identities in an age of *globalisation*? Does a national narrative mean exclusion, or worse, genocide for those who don't fit the mould?

To sketch out an answer to these questions, let us turn to the writings of six Canadian authors (Anne-Marie Alonzo, Douglas Coupland, Thomas King, Janice Kulyk-Keefer, Monique Larue, Michael Ondaatje) to understand the various ways in which Canadian have imagined their community. A survey of our literature shows there to be no such thing as a work (or identity) that is formally or thematically Canadian. In its place exists a dynamic and evolving story that provides a new definition for the old concept of "nation". In some senses, Canada as described by its authors, is a microcosm of the global village that is to say a community that recognises, explores and is entrenched in plurality.

As each of the six authors demonstrates there is no such thing as one Canadian identity but rather a multitude of differing relationships to Canada. These stories voice the many, frequently conflicting concerns of women, men, Natives, immigrants, Francophones, Anglophones, who are speaking from various spaces and times within the Canadian community. Influenced by popular/media culture, oral mythology and literary images, these stories interact and merge with each other and with other stories thereby contributing to the evolution of a hybrid national literature and identity. More specifically, these writings force the red-coated Mountie to move over and share his status as Canada's national symbol with Thomas King's Coyote and Ondaatje's Cinnamon Peeler.



Photo : Jean Facchin • Traitement de l'image : Guy Verville

The most striking and important feature of these texts in particular and of Canadian literary and cultural space in general is their hybridity that is to say their constant birth and rebirth from a mixture of various cultures and concerns. Anne-Marie Alonzo's poem, "Galia s'était cloîtrée", depicting the encounter between two friends from different backgrounds (Jeanne who speaks Italian and English and Galia who speaks French) explores the relationship between the female body and writing. Once excluded from the male dominated field of literature, the feminine author must reinvent language or at least re-negotiate her relationship to it so that it represents the experiences of her physical being - the basic element distinguishing women from men. Through her fluid and lyrical text Galia writes her body and its various pains and pleasures (eating, drinking, love-making, death and separation).

In stark contrast to Alonzo, but just as "Canadian", stands Douglas Coupland's "It Can't Last" excerpted from his famous novel *Generation X*. It represents the effects of popular media culture on three friends' (Andy, Claire and Dag) perceptions of themselves and of their place in the world. The protagonists' irony, disillusionment and cynicism toward life have come to symbolise - perhaps unjustly - the attitude

of a post baby-boomer generation that not only finds itself engulfed in the nostalgia of their parent's generation but excluded from the global economic order. In the words of one reviewer: "Andy, Dag, and Claire are underemployed, overeducated, intensely private, and unpredictable. Like the group they mirror, they have nowhere to direct their anger, no one to assuage their fears, and no culture to replace their anomie".

Frustration and restlessness, as Monique Larue's text proves are not sentiments limited exclusively to the X generation. "Prison Humaine" describes the anguish of a college professor, Garneau, a washed-up disillusioned baby boomer who feels trapped by his job, his friendship and the tangled web that is his family. Jealous but unable to emulate his unconventional ex-brother-in-law, Dubuc, who uses his imagination to transform what was once a broom closet into an office resembling an Henri Rousseau painting, Garneau finds himself going slowly mad. Larue's kafkaesque story, portrays the despair of a man imprisoned by his own fears and neurosis.

The most formally conventional text among the six, Janice Kulyk-Keefer's "April Showers" describes Louise's painful homecoming. Not only must she reconcile herself to her pregnancy but to the various

spaces, times and cultures that constitute her identity. Kulyk-Keefer's story explores and exposes the ambiguities and conflicts that mark both personal and national identity. Like Louise, a French speaking Acadian girl who becomes a well-to-do Vancouver lawyer and who must acknowledge her rural past and cosmopolitan present, Canada is at once rural, urban, English, French, and many other things... In both cases identity emerges as a fragmented, heterogeneous phenomenon from a juxtaposition of spaces and times.

Beneath the humour and the simple language of Thomas King's two stories lies a scathing condemnation of the effects of Western society and Christianity on Native values and culture. Ahab's statement that "This is a Christian world, you know, we only kill things that are useful or things we don't like" reminds the reader of the Old World's decimation of New World plants and animals. King does not simply criticise the effects of Western consumerism on Native culture but underlines its exclusion of anyone who is different and marginal. In his writing history becomes a

or cold objectivity. In "White Dwarves" the narrator begins by citing general reasons for composing this work ("This is for people"), only to betray his own need to create for fear of losing his talent ("There is my fear/ of no words off/falling without words/ over and over of mouthing the silence").

On another level, Ondaatje's work illustrates the evolution of a Canadian literature from a tension and symbiosis among various cultures and spaces. For example, in "In A Yellow Room" Ondaatje's blends Fats Waller's world with the author's present location in Southern Ontario. Although jarring at first, the narrator's assertion that "This is [Fats Waller's] first visit to the country, though he saw it from a train window the day before he died", forces the reader to recognise that this space called Canada is both a distinct geographical entity and a space into which other spaces have collapsed. Like Waller who transforms Harlem heat and smells into music, Ondaatje blends Waller's space and time into his own present text to create a work that includes other places and

in Canada one point on which they seem to confer is that the Canadian community cannot be organised around discourses privileging origin and based on a hierarchy of who arrived in Canada first. These narratives fail to reflect the plurality of Canadian cultural space - especially since roughly 20 % of people living in this country were not born here. The six texts portray Canadian identity not as a fixed and homogenous narrative written by two founding peoples or three founding nations but as a constantly fluctuating and porous narrative issuing from a tension between the stories of people who live in Canada and the tales and images of people like Galia, Alonzo's protagonist who join the community.

Alonzo's, Coupland's, Kulyk-Keefer's, King's, Larue's, and Ondaatje's, writings challenge the possibility of a single entity called Canadian literature. They oblige the reader to redefine the concepts of nation and national identity so as to recognise their fundamentally heterogeneous, diverse and fluctuating character. This is not a weakness but a strength for in the words of Octavio Paz:

What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of differences, their attraction and repulsions. Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarities, by eliminating different civilisations and cultures, progress weakens life and favours death. The ideal of a single civilisation for everyone, implicit in the cult of progress [of] technique, impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears diminishes a possibility (*Multiplicity* 186).

The plurality of contradictory narrative within the imagined Canadian community represents the life and the dynamism of our culture. As described by Ondaatje, Fats Waller's impression of Canada from a train window is perhaps, in

the end, the most accurate impression of the country. Like any landscape viewed from a moving vehicle the Canadian community is not static but constantly changing and evolving. As the twentieth century draws to a close, Canada need no longer be defined by the Old World but instead is poised to provide Europe and the rest of the world with an example of how various cultures can live together and co-operate. ■

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ludicrous exercise that instead of describing what happened, constantly portrays the superiority of the bumbling White man. King's texts forces the reader to rethink our values and our knowledge of the past.

Michael Ondaatje's writings challenges readers by leading them willingly on a journey through various places and emotions, a journey fraught with images of violence, sexuality, art, power, domesticity and anguish. While the languid and sensual rhythm of the "Cinnamon Peeler" seduces the reader, the sheer panic of "Heron Rex" leaves her breathless. Ondaatje also possesses the rare ability to blend both subjective and highly personal experiences without falling into either self indulgence

cultures. Larue creates a similar effect through her references to Poe, Baudelaire, Emile Nelligan and Rimbaud.

But since there is no such thing as a body of literature that is formally and thematically Canadian can one speak of a national narrative (or Canadian identity)? Can we even speak of a Canadian nation? Once again we look to our authors for cues.

The X generation's rejection of global culture and their quest for some form of community suggests the need for a regrouping of people - call it a nation - in an age of globalisation. The problem still remains, however, how to organise this common community. Although the six authors speak from various conflicting spaces with-



it can't last



Art : R. Akstinas / Photo : K.S. Frey

## DOUGLAS COUPLAND

So now you know a bit more about Dag (skewed as his narrative presentation of his life may be). But meanwhile, back at our picnic on this throbbing desert day, Claire is just finishing her mesquite chicken, wiping off her sunglasses, and replacing them with authority on the bridge of her nose indicating that she's getting ready to tell us a story.

A bit about Claire here: she has scrawl handwriting like a taxi driver. She knows

how to fold Japanese paper cranes and she actually likes the taste of soya burgers. She arrived in Palm Springs on the hot, windy Mother's Day weekend that Nostradamus (according to some interpretations) had predicted would be the end of the world.

I was tending poolside bar at La Spa de Luxembourg then, a far more lofty place

than lowly Larry's and a resort complete with nine bubbling health pools and patterned imitation silver knives and forks for outdoor use. Weighty stuff, and it always impressed the guests. Anyhow, I remember watching Claire's incalculably numerous and noisy siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings chatter incessantly out in the sun by the pools, like parakeets in an aviary while a sullen, hungry tomcat prowls outside the cage's mesh. For lunch they would only eat



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fish, and only the tiny fish at that. As one of them said, "The big fish have been in the water a bit too long, and God only knows what they've had a chance to eat." And talk about pretense! They kept the same unread copy of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* lying of the table for three days running. I tell you.

At a nearby table, Mr. Baxter, Claire's father, sat with his glistening and be-gemmed business cronies ignoring his progeny, while Mrs. Scott-Baxter, his fourth (and trophy) wife, blond and young and bored, glowered at the Baxter spawn like a

mother mink in a mink farm, just waiting for a jet to strafe the facility, affording her an excuse to feign terror and eat her young.

The whole Baxter clan had *en masse* been imported from L.A. that weekend by the highly superstitious Mr. Baxter, a New Age convert (thanks to wife number three), to avoid a most certain doom in the city. Shakey Angelinos like him were luridly envisioning the strangely large houses of the valley and canyons being inhaled into chinks in the earth with rich glottal slurps and no mercy, all the while being pelleted by rains of toads. A true Californian, he joked: "Hey, at least it's visual."

Claire, however, sat looking profoundly unamused by her family's spirited, italicized conversations. She was idly tethering her paper plate loaded with a low-calorie/high fiber lunch of pineapple bean sprouts and skinless chicken to the outdoor tabletop while forceful winds, unseasonably fierce, swept down from Mount San Jacinto. I remember the morbid snippets of chitchat that were being prattled around the table by the hordes of sleek and glamorous young Baxters:

"It was *Hister*, not *Hitler*, Nostradamus predicted," one brother, Allan, a private school Biff-and-Muffy type, yelled across a table, "and he predicted the JFK assassination, too."

"I don't remember the JFK assassination."

"I'm wearing a pillbox hat to the end of the world party at Zola's, tonight. Like Jackie. Very historical."

"The hat was a *Halston*, you know."

"That's so Warhol."

"Dead celebrities are, *de facto* amusing."

"Remember that Halloween a few years ago during the Tylenol tampering scare, when everyone showed up at parties dressed as boxes of Tylenol..."

"...and then looked hurt when they realized they weren't the only ones who'd come up with the idea."

"You know, this is so stupid being here because there are three earthquake faults that run right through the city. We might as well paint targets on our shirts."

"Did Nostradamus ever say anything about random snipers?"

"Can you milk horses?"

"What's *that* got to do with anything?"

Their talk was endless, compulsive, and indulgent, sometimes sounding like the remains of the English language after having been hashed over by nuclear war survivors for a few hundred years. But then their words so strongly captured the spirit of the times, and they remain in my mind:

"I saw a record producer in the parking lot. He and wifey were heading to *Utah*. They said this place was a disaster area, and only *Utah* was safe. They had this really hot gold Corniche, and is the trunk they had

cartons of freeze-dried army food and bottled water from Alberta. Wifey looked really scared."

"Did you see the pound of plastic lipo-fat in the nurse's office? Just like the fake food in sushi restaurant windows. Looks like a dish of raspberry kiwi fruit puree."

"Someone turn off the wind machine, for Chissake, it's like a fashion shoot here."

"Stop being such a male model."

"I'll hum some Eurodisco."

(Paper plates loaded with beef and chutney and baby vegetables were, at that point, gliding off the bright white tables, and into the pool.)

"Ignore the wind, Davie. Don't cosign nature's bullshit, It'll go away."

"Hey ... is it possible to damage the sun? I mean, we can wreck just about anything we want to here on earth. But can we screw up the sun if we wanted to? I don't know. *Can we?*"

"I'm more worried about computer viruses."

Claire got up and came over to the bar where I was working to pick up her tray-load of Cape Cods ("More Cape than Cod, please") and made a shrugging, "*My family, zheesh!*" gesture. She then walked back to the table, showing me her back, which was framed by a black one-piece swimsuit — a pale white back bearing a Silly Putty-colored espalier of scars. These were remnants, I discovered later on, of a long-past childhood illness that immobilized her for years in hospitals spanning from Brentwood to Lausanne. In these hospitals doctors tapped vile viral syrups from her spine and in them she also spent the formative years of her life conversing with healing invalid souls — institutional borderline cases, the fringes, and the bent ("To this day, I prefer talking with incomplete people; they're more complete").

But then Claire stopped in midmotion and came back to the bar, where she lifted her sunglasses and confided to me, "You know, I really think that when God puts together families, he sticks his finger into the white pages and selects a group of people at random and then says to them all, 'Hey! You're going to spend the next seventy years together, even though you have nothing in common and don't even like each other. And, should you not feel yourself caring about any of this group of strangers, *even for a second*, you will feel just *dreadful*.' That's what I think. What about you?"

History does not record my response.

She delivered the drinks to her family, who delivered a chorus of "*Thanks, Spinster*," and then returned. Her hair then, as now, was cut short and Boopishly bobbed, and she wanted to know what on earth I was doing in Palm Springs. She said that anyone under the age of thirty living in a resort community was on the make



somehow: "pimping, dealing, hooking, detoxing, escaping, scamming, or what have you." I obliquely told her I was merely trying to erase all traces of history from my past, and she took that at face value. She then described her own job in L.A. while sipping her drink, absentmindedly scanning her complexion for *arriviste* pimples in her reflection in the mirrored shelf behind me.

"I'm a garment buyer — daywear" she fessed up, but then admitted that fashion was only a short-term career. "I don't think it's making me a better person, and the garment business is so jammed with dishonesty. I'd like to go somewhere rocky, somewhere Maltese, and just empty my brain, read books and be with people who wanted to do the same thing."

This was the point where I planted the seed that soon bore such unexpected and wonderful fruit in my life. I said, "Why don't you move *here*. Quit everything." There was a friendliness between us that made me worrilessly continue: "Clean your slate. Think life out. Lose your unwanted momentums. Just think of how therapeutic it could be, and there's an empty bungalow right next to my place. You could move in tomorrow and I know *lots* of jokes."

"Maybe I will," she said, "maybe I will." She smiled and then swung to look at her family, as ever preening and chatting away, arguing about the reported length of John Dillinger's member, discussing the demonic aspects of Claire's stepsister Joanne's phone number — which contained three sixes in a row — and more about the dead Frenchman Nostradamus and his predictions.

"Look at them, will you? Imagine having to go to Disneyland with all of your brothers and sisters at the age of twenty-seven. I can't believe I let myself get dragged into this. If the wind doesn't knock this place down first, it'll implode from a lack of hipness. You have brothers and sisters?"

I explained that I have three of each.

"So you *know* what it's like when everyone starts carving up the future into nasty little bits. God, when they start talking like that — you know all of this sex gossip and end-of-the-world nonsense, I wonder if they're really only confessing something else to each other."

"Like?"

"Like how scared sick they all are. I mean, when people start talking seriously about hoarding cases of Beef-a-Roni in the garage and get all misty-eyed about the Last Days,, then it's about as striking a confession as you're ever likely to get of how upset they are that life isn't working out the way they thought it would."

I was in heaven! How could I *not* be, after finding someone who likes to talk like this? So we continued on in this vein for an hour, maybe, interrupted only by my serv-

ing the occasional rum drink and Allan's arrival to grab a dish of smoked almonds and to slap Claire of the back: "Hey, Mister — is Spinster putting the make on you?"

"Allan and my family consider me a freak because I'm not married yet," she told me and then turned to pour her pink Cape Cod cocktail down his shirt. "And stop using that awful name."

Allan didn't have time to retaliate, though. From Mr. Baxter's table there arose a commotion as one of the seated bodies slumped and a flurry of middle-age men with tans, paunches, and much jewelry crossed themselves and gathered around that slumped body — Mr. Baxter with a hand clutched to his chest and eyes wide, resembling those of Cocoa, the velvet painting clown.

"Not *again*," said Allan and Claire in unison.

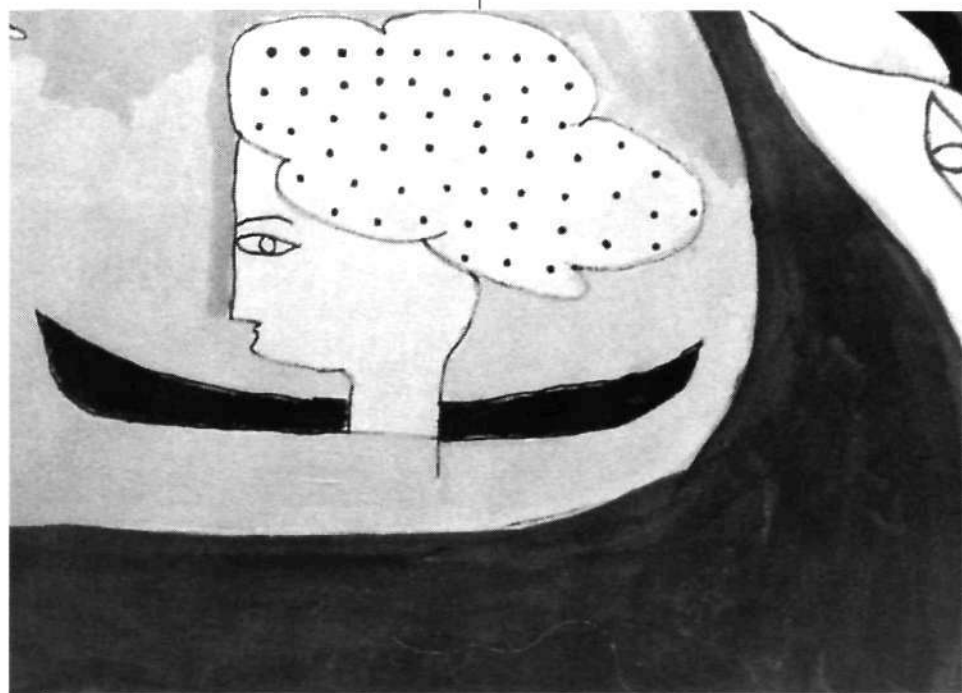
"You go this time, Allan. It's *your* turn."

Allan, dripping juice, grudgingly headed over toward the commotion, where several people were claiming to have already alerted the paramedics.

quartz crystals into his hand (she was a New Ager, too), carted him away, only to hear loud clanging sounds that stopped the whole poolside crowd in their tracks. Looking over toward the cart they saw that several stems of tableware had fallen out of Mr. Baxter's pocket. His ashen face looked mortified and the silence was both incandescent and painful.

"Oh, *Dad*," said Allan, "How could you embarrass us like this?" he then said, picking up a piece and looking at it appraisingly. "It's obviously only *plate*. Haven't we trained you properly?"

The taut cord of tension broke. There were laughs, and Mr. Baxter was carted away, only to be treated for what turned out in the end to be a genuinely perilous heart attack after all. Claire meanwhile, I noticed peripherally, sitting over the edge of one of the ocher-silted mineral pools, her feet dangling in the honey-colored murk of water and staring at the sun, now almost set over the mountain. In her small voice she was talking to the sun and telling it she was very sorry if we'd hurt it or caused it any pain. I knew then that we were friends for life. ■



Art : R. Akstinas / Photo : K.S. Frey

"Excuse me, Claire," I said, "but your father looks like he's had a heart attack or something. Aren't you being slightly, oh, I don't know ... *bloodless* about the matter?"

"Oh, Andy. Don't worry. He does this three times a year — just as long as he has a big audience."

It was a busy little scene, that poolside, but you could tell the Baxters amid the chaos by their lack of concern with the excitement, pointing languidly toward the hubbub when the two paramedics and their trolley (a familiar sight in Palm Springs) arrived. There, they loaded Mr. Baxter onto the trolley, after having told a novice Mrs. Scott-Baxter to stop trying to stuff

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# PRISON HUMAINE

MONIQUE LARUE

Photo : Martine Doyon

Entrez entrez cria Dubuc.

Jean-Luc Dubuc ne se soustrayait pas à la loi commune, mais la nature à la fois implacable et secrète de son caractère, l'extrême habileté avec laquelle il manipulait l'image, l'intelligence et l'instinct qu'il avait toujours su conjuguer comme si, de son statut d'intouchable, dépendît le sort de l'humanité, l'en avaient au fil des années exempté sans que les autres s'en rendent compte, sans que les autres du moins trouvent la force de protester devant les légers passe-droits qu'il réussissait à se conquérir, de sorte que ces privilèges, bien que dérisoires en soi, étaient devenus des droits et qu'il se trouvait maintenant officiellement exempté par le groupe des contraintes que le groupe avait lui-même secrétées tout ce temps tel le névrosé s'enfermant lui-même dans son cruel cocon. Ainsi, il n'était pas question pour Dubuc d'obéir au principe de rotation qui obligeait chacun à déménager ses pénates après deux ans consécutifs dans le même bureau. Son repaire ne figurait pas non plus sur la liste des places susceptibles d'être squattées par les amateurs de chaise musicale chez qui l'éternel retour du Même, en mars, alimentait la fureur de bouger, titillait le fou désir de mettre en branle la moulinette des critères administrativo-professionnels, d'en forcer les délicats rouages comme l'avait fait Laverdure pour empêcher Vézeau de prendre la place de Chenail dans le 149.

À quelques mètres du bureau 149, le renforcement qu'occupait Dubuc avait été à l'origine un vestiaire, lequel avait ensuite servi de rangement de poubelles et abrité une boîte à incinération, disparue pendant



les années où Garneau avait interrompu son séjour au collège sans se douter qu'il ne faisait que se préparer à s'y incruster si parfaitement qu'un jour viendrait où il ne pourrait envisager d'en partir jamais. On n'a qu'une vie.

Tu n'as qu'une vie, se disait-il comme tout un chacun en pénétrant dans la caverne de Dubuc, écartant le rideau de velours écarlate que le dernier des Jésuites avait il y a longtemps donné à Dubuc à titre de chef des enfants de chœur, et qui feutrait ses audiences, camouflait sans doute d'autres bruits inavouables — personne n'a jamais su ce que mon ex-beau-frère fabrique en compagnie de ses laiderons. La fausse lampe à huile rapportée du chalet après la mort du père de Dubuc était allumée comme toujours, question d'atmosphère. Pauvre pauvre Garneau. Tu n'as qu'une vie et c'est ici que tu la passes. Entre ton bureau et le cagibi extravagant de ton ex-beau-frère. Car cette annexe,

haute de plafond, de bonnes et anciennes dimensions, sombrement éclairée par un carreau de vitre dépoli donnant sur le mur des toilettes, Dubuc l'avait au fil des années habillée à son image. Il avait peint de nuit, à la faveur de la politique permissive qui avait caractérisé l'administration du collège avant le règne de Jean-Marie Néron, les murs de planche en vert Nouvelle-Angleterre, il avait tapissé le plafond avec les posters de Rimbaud, d'Edgar Poe, de Baudelaire, de Nelligan, et celui de la tombe de l'infortuné Morrisson au Père-Lachaise, il avait réussi à adapter une jungle de plantes grasses à l'éclairage des néons et à l'atmosphère désertique du collège et y avait

hébergé un moment la perruche de Mélodie, délogée uniquement parce que la petite Sandra, asthmatique, était allergique aux plumes de perruche, et certainement pas parce que les fientes les plumes les cris inhumains et les raids intempestifs de la bestiole importunaient légèrement ses collègues, les amis avec lesquels il partageait depuis des années le corridor du programme Lettres. L'endroit, qui n'avait pas, comme les bureaux, de numéro, mais était identifié par les lettres TGX, constituait non seulement un fief mais avait au fond les mêmes fonctions sociales que la folie. Critique affirmée de la minable décoration privilégiée par l'équipe artistique de Jean-Marie Néron, le nid du camarade Dubuc était une enclave d'humanité, une œuvre d'art, la marque personnelle et l'expression de la position de son locataire face à l'ordre académique, la démonstration que l'habitat est un mode de l'Etre-là comme disaient ses amis philosophes, et en fin de compte l'af-



firmation de l'antériorité de Dubuc *intra muros collegii*. Comme tout véritable bastion, l'endroit lui valait prestige, renommée et pouvoir, visites d'étudiants voulant faire la connaissance du prof de français sauté qui offrait naguère de l'herbe à ses visiteurs, en avait fait le commerce larvé durant les années soft de la courte histoire du système d'éducation et en prônait encore ouvertement la légalisation.

Le prof reste quand même la base. Un prof populaire, c'est certain, garde en main quelques lambeaux de pouvoir dans un collège se disait Garneau, en accommodant son œil à l'éclairage vacillant dans lequel se plaisait à vivre l'ex-conjoint de sa sœur qui se levait pour l'accueillir, moqueusement. Monsieur le coordonnateur ! Dubuc n'avait jamais refusé la fonction de coordonnateur car on n'avait jamais osé la confier à un individu aussi alambiqué et retors. Cela ne l'avait pas empêché de prendre sa place récemment dans le collège, à titre de spécialiste d'une école de pédagogie américaine sise au Wisconsin et actuellement en faveur auprès des amis de la nouvelle ministre de l'Éducation nationale. Comme il ne portait jamais, sur son éternel pantalon gris à pli permanent, que les amples blouses qu'il achetait en Grèce, dans les souks d'Afrique du Nord et un peu partout dans les boutiques ethnologiques de la ville, comme il dédaignait la chemise masculine normale, le costume et la veste à l'euro-péenne, le blouson à l'américaine, pour des burnous, des sahariennes, et même, parfois, des blouses de paysan, en lin ou en vieux coton amidonné, telles qu'on en voit sur les tableaux du dix-huitième siècle, et qui dataient du temps où il appartenait à une équipe de folklore, on ne remarquait pas trop que Dubuc avait pris du ventre. Dubuc a un je ne sais quoi de pathétique, constata Garneau en pénétrant dans cette enclave qui sentait toujours un peu la pelure des agrumes que son locataire consommait en quantité. Pour avoir imprudemment choisi Lettres au lieu de Droit, Médecine, Génie comme mon père, comme mes grands-pères et arrière-grands-pères, je suis condamné, se dit-il, à côtoyer toute ma vie la folie. Les départements de français recrutent par définition des anxieux des névrosés des compliqués des hypersensibles des frustrés et la littérature, pensa-t-il, c'est évident, Garneau, est à notre époque plus que jamais une impasse, un échec un véritable cul de sac du moins si on la considère comme profession, idem pour l'enseignement. L'enseignement et la littérature n'ont pas seulement perdu la bataille, ils sont en dehors de la bataille ! Nous les profs de littérature sommes enfermés dans une ligne Maginot imaginaire et nous combattons notre époque ni plus ni moins que Triste Figure. Le prof de maths, de chimie, de physique perd la bataille en tant que professionnel de l'enseignement,



Photo : M.R.

c'est tout et c'est assez, mais le prof de littérature française la perd deux fois, trois fois, mille fois. Avec ses cheveux teints, ses bajoues rubicondes, son œil vif de perroquet patraque, son cou ridé, sa poitrine grisonnante et ce rire niais qu'il a depuis qu'il s'est soumis à ses séances analytiques et qui devient gênant à la longue, Dubuc s'est humanisé c'est sûr, il a je ne sais quoi d'attendrissant, Dubuc, pauvre hère mon semblable mon frère, usé à la corde par une vie passée à ressasser les poètes maudits dans un ancien vestibule. Tu deviens bisarroïde, mon vieux, un inclassable, un vrai zombi quoi, un épouvantail à moineaux comme nous tous, comme Vézeau, comm fixant des rendez-vous, en ne s'y présentant pas, en laissant des messages genre Mélodie G.-D. veut vous parler chez Poulhazan, ou à Stella Laverdure, en se plaignant à elles de ne pas le trouver à son bureau aux heures de disponibilité inscrites sur sa porte alors qu'il était de notoriété publique que jamais une seule minute de disponibilité n'avait été volée à l'Etat par l'enseignant Garneau, en refusant de divulguer ses coordonnées de sorte que personne actuellement, ni Dubuc ni Lise ni Claire, ne savait au juste où habitait Mélodie ni de quoi elle vivait. Seul Tobie le savait et Tobie ne dirait rien. Et voilà qu'elle était là, assise au bureau de son père, écrasée plutôt dans la chaise de rotin de Dubuc. Et son ombre, la chipie Line Lortie, venait d'échanger avec Dubuc un clin d'œil, un demi-sourire à la limite de ce que l'éthique, pensa Garneau, permet comme intimité entre un professeur et une étudiante,

Monique Larue a publié quatre romans : LA COHORTE FICTIVE (1979), LES FAUX FUYANTS (1982), COPIES CONFORMES (1989) et LA DÉMARCHÉ DU CRABE (1996). Elle est également coauteur, avec Jean-François Chassay, des PROMENADES LITTÉRAIRES DANS MONTRÉAL (1989).

ante, fût-elle ex-étudiante, Ah ah ! Ah ah ! il y a quelque chose il y a quelque chose entre Dubuc et Lortie, nos collègues croulent sous la loi d'Édipe. La chipie fixait obstinément — plutôt mourir que saluer un incompetent, le bout de ces bottines de travailleur à lacets rouges dont le port signalait plus ou moins clairement depuis déjà deux décennies, chez les élèves des deux sexes, l'engagement politico-social. Allez savoir avec ces gonesses qui ne songent qu'à nos queues pensa Garneau, encore outré des fantaisies sexuelles exprimées par sa filleule dans son carnet d'écriture, un objet tout de même destiné à une évaluation sommative chiffrée, assigné à valoir 50% des points du cours de création du programme Lettres menant, au même titre que tout programme dûment approuvé, au Diplôme d'Études National.

Dubuc et Fafard, Mélodie et Line, les quatre s'étaient tus instantanément à son entrée, un silence gêné planait maintenant sur le groupe. Survenir, même en s'étant annoncé, dans un bureau fermé, causait toujours un malaise, cette impression d'être de trop de déranger. Comme si j'avais interrompu quelque chose, surpris un complot un secret pensa-t-il. Mais quoi. Si Fafard savait pour Mélodie que fait-il ici. Si Fafard sait ce que Mélodie écrit que fait-il pour clarifier la situation. Fafard a l'âge d'être le grand-père de Mélodie. Grand-père Édipe. Garneau, tu n'auras pas la jouissance pleine et entière de ta vie tant que la fille de ta sœur va traîner sa carcasse dans le collège.

Un boa constricteur héréditaire se lovait depuis toujours autour de son tube digestif. Ce boa avait manifesté de manière particulièrement désagréable son existence à la mort de Chenail et depuis ce temps il était resté tranquille, tenu en respect par le Chevalier de l'Humour appelé de toute urgence au secours de l'enseignant Garneau. Mais Mélodie avait le don de réveiller le boa. Et même sous la protection du Chevalier de l'Humour, taquiner le boa était un sport éminemment périlleux. L'anxiété est toujours l'anticipation d'un danger. Et la dérision, pensa Garneau, n'est que l'homéopathie du désespoir. ■

# THE CINNAMON PEELER

MICHAEL ONDAATJE



From *The Cinnamon Peeler* by Michael Ondaatje. Used by permission of McClelland & Stewart Inc., Toronto, *The Canadian Publishers*.

## THE CINNAMON PEELER

If I were a cinnamon peeler  
I would ride your bed  
and leave the yellow bark dust  
on your pillow.

Your breasts and shoulders would reek  
you could never walk through markets  
without the profession of my fingers  
floating over you. The blind would  
stumble certain of whom they approached  
though you might bathe  
under rain gutters, monsoon.

Here on the upper thigh  
at this smooth pasture  
neighbour to your hair  
or the crease  
that cuts your back. This ankle.  
You will be known among strangers  
as the cinnamon peeler's wife.

I could hardly glance at you  
before marriage  
never touch you  
— your keen nosed mother, your rough  
brothers.  
I buried my hands  
in saffron, disguised them  
over smoking tar,  
helped the honey gatherers ...

When we swam once  
I touched you in water  
and our bodies remained free,  
you could hold me and be blind of smell.  
You climbed the bank and said

this is how you touch other women  
the grass cutter's wife, the lime burner's  
daughter.  
And you searched your arms  
for the missing perfume

and knew

what good is it  
to be the lime burner's daughter  
left with no trace  
as if not spoken to in the act of love  
as if wounded without the pleasure of a  
scar.

You touched  
your belly to my hands  
in the dry air and said  
I am the cinnamon  
peeler's wife. Smell me.

*Michael Ondaatje was nine years old when in 1952 he left his birthplace, Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to attend Dulwich College in England. In 1971 he joined the faculty of Glendon College, York University, with which he is still affiliated as a professor.*

*With the publication of THE COLLECTED WORKS OF BILLY THE KID (1970), the winner of a Governor General's Award, Ondaatje's characteristic mode of writing (poetry, prose, illustrations and deliberate distortion of facts) took flight. His most recent novel, THE ENGLISH PATIENT (1992) won, among other prizes, the Booker Prize.*

## A HOUSE DIVIDED

This midnight breathing  
heaves with no sensible rhythm,  
is fashioned by no metronome.  
Your body, eager  
for the extra yard of bed,  
reconnoitres and outflanks;  
I bend in peculiar angles.

This nightly battle is fought  
with subtleties:  
you get pregnant, I'm sure,  
just for extra ground  
— immune from kicks now.

Inside you now's another,  
thrashing like a fish,  
swinging, fighting  
for its inch already.



## HERON REX

Mad kings  
blood lines introverted, strained pure  
so the brain runs in the wrong direction

they are proud of their heritage of suicides  
— not just the ones who went mad  
balancing on that goddamn leg, but those

whose eyes turned off  
the sun and imagined it  
those who looked north, those who  
forced their feathers to grow in  
those who couldn't find the muscles in  
their arms  
who drilled their beaks into the skin  
those who could speak  
and lost themselves in the foul connec-  
tions  
who crashed against black bars in a dream  
of escape  
those who moved round the dials of imag-  
inary clocks  
those who fell asleep and never woke  
who never slept and so dropped dead  
those who attacked the casual eyes of  
children and were led away  
and those who faced corners for ever  
those who exposed themselves and were  
led away  
those who pretended broken limbs,  
epilepsy,  
who managed to electrocute themselves  
on wire  
those who felt their skin was on fire and  
screamed  
and were led away

There are ways of going  
physically mad, physically  
mad when you perfect the mind  
where you sacrifice yourself for the race  
when you are the representative when you  
allow  
yourself to be paraded in the cages  
celebrity a razor in the body

These small birds so precise  
frail as morning neon  
they are royalty melted down  
they are the glass core at the heart of  
kings  
yet 15-year-old boys could enter the cage  
and break them in minutes  
as easily as a long fingernail

## WHITE DWARFS

This is for people who disappear  
for those who descend into the code  
and make their room a fridge for  
Superman  
— who exhaust costume and bones that  
could perform flight,  
who shave their moral so raw  
they can tear themselves through the eye  
of a needle  
this is for those people  
that hover and hover  
and die in the ether peripheries

There is my fear  
of no words of  
falling without words  
over and over of  
mouthing the silence  
Why do I love most  
among my heroes those  
who sail to that perfect edge  
where there is no social fuel  
Release of sandbags  
to understand their altitude —

that silence of the third cross  
3rd man hung so high and  
lonely  
we don't hear him say  
say his pain, say his  
unbrotherhood  
What has he to do with  
the smell of ladies,  
can they eat off  
his skeleton of pain?

Marie-Hélène Parant

The Gurkhas in Malaya  
cut the tongues of mules  
so they were silent beasts of burden  
in enemy territories  
after such cruelty what could they speak  
of anyway  
And Dashiell Hammett in success

suffered conversation and moved  
to the perfect white between the words

This white that can grow  
is fridge, bed,  
is an egg — most beautiful  
when unbroken, where  
what we cannot see is growing  
in all the colours we cannot see

there are those burned out stars  
who implode into silence  
after parading in the sky  
after such choreography what would they  
wish to speak of anyway



## IN A YELLOW ROOM

There was another reason for Fats Waller to record, on May 8th, 1935, 'I'm gonna sit right down and write myself a letter.' It is for this moment, driving from Goderich towards and past Blyth, avoiding Blyth by taking the gravel concessions, four adults and a child, who have just swum in a very cold Lake Huron. His piano drips from the cassette player and we all recognize the piece but are mute. We cannot sing before he does, before he eases himself into the lyrics as if into a chair, this large man who is to die in 1943 sitting in a train in Kansas City, finally still.

He was already moving, grand on the street or the midnight taxi rides with Andy Razaf during which it is rumoured he wrote most of his songs. I have always loved him but I love him most in the company of friends. Because his body was a crowd and we desire to imitate such community. His voice staggers or is gentle behind a whimsical piano, the melody ornamental and cool as vichyssoise in that hot studio in this hot car on a

late June Ontario summer day. What else of importance happened on May 8th, 1935?

The only creature I've ever met who disliked him was a nervous foxhound I had for three years. As soon as I put on Mr Waller the dog would dart from the room and hide under a bed. The dog recognized the anarchy, the unfolding of musical order, the growls and muttering, the fact that Fats Waller was talking to someone over your shoulder as well as to you. What my dog did not notice was the serenity he should have learned from. The notes as fresh as creek washed clothes.

The windows are open as we drive under dark maples that sniff up a rumour of Lake Huron. The piano energizes the hay bound into wheels, a white field of turkeys, various tributaries of the Maitland River. Does he, drunk, and carrying his tin of tomatoes — 'it feeds the body and cuts the hangover' — does he, in the midnight taxi with Razaf, imagine where the music disappears?

Where it will recur? Music and lyrics they wrote then

sold to false composers for ready cash and only later

admitting they had written "Sunny side of the street" and 'I can't give you anything but love' and so many of the best songs of their time. The hidden authors on their two hour taxi ride out of Harlem to Brooklyn and back again to Harlem, the night heat and smells yells overhead from the streets they passed through which they incorporated into what they were making every texture entering this large man, a classical organist in his youth, who strode into most experiences, hid from his ex-wife Edith Hatchett, visiting two kinds of women, 'ladies who had pianos and ladies who did not,' and died of bronchial pneumonia on the Acheson-Topeka and Santa Fe, a song he did not write.

He and the orchestra of his voice have now entered the car with us. This is his first visit to the country, though he saw it from a train window the day before he died. Saw the heartland where the music could disappear, the diaspora of notes, a rewinding, a backward movement of the formation of the world, the invention of his waltz. ■

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# Changing woman, old woman

THOMAS KING

“OH, OH,” says Coyote, “I don’t want to watch. Changing Woman is stuck on the island by herself. Is that the end of the story?”

“Goodness, no,” I says. “This story is just beginning. We’re just getting started.”

Changing woman is on that beautiful island by herself for a long time.

So.

One day she is watching the ocean and she sees a ship. That ship sails right to where Changing Woman is standing.

Hello, shouts a voice. Have you seen a white whale?

There was a white canoe here a while ago, Changing Woman shouts back.

Canoe? shouts the voice. Say, are you an able-bodied seaman?

Not exactly, says Changing Woman.

Close enough, says the voice. Come aboard.

Okay, says Changing Woman. And the one swims out to the ship.

I’m Ahab, says a short little man with a wooden leg, and this is my ship the *Pequod*.

Here says a nice-looking man with a grim mouth, and he hands Changing Woman a towel. What’s your name?

Changing Woman, says Changing Woman.

Call me Ishmael, says the young man. What’s your favorite month?

They’re all fine, says Changing Woman.

Oh dear, says the young man, looking through a book. Let’s try again. What’s your name?

Changing Woman.

That just won’t do either, says the young man, and he quickly thumbs through the book again. Here, he says, poking a page with his finger. Queequeg. I’ll call you Queequeg. This book has a Queequeg in it, and this story is supposed to have a Queequeg in it, but I’ve looked all over the ship and there aren’t any Queequegs. I hope you don’t mind.

Ishmael is a nice name, says Changing Woman.

But we already have an Ishmael, says Ishmael. And we do so need a Queequeg.

Oh, okay, says Changing Woman.

“My favorite month is April,” says Coyote.

“That’s nice,” I says.

“I also like July,” says Coyote.

“We can’t hear what’s happening if you keep talking,” I says.

“I don’t care much for November,” says Coyote.

“Forget November,” I says. “Pay attention.”

Pay attention, says Ahab. Keep watching for whales.

Why does he want a whale? says Changing Woman.

This is a whaling ship, says Ishmael.

Whaleswhaleswhaleswhalesbianswhal esbianswhaleswhales!

shouts Ahab, and everybody grabs their spears and knives and juicers and chain saws and blenders and axes and they all leap into little wooden boats and chase whales.

And.

When they catch the whales.

They kill them.

This is crazy, says Changing Woman. Why are you killing all these whales?

Oil. Perfume, too. There’s a big market in dog food, says Ahab. This is a Christian world, you know. We only kill-things that are useful or things we don’t like.

“He doesn’t mean Coyotes?” says Coyote.

“I suspect that he does,” I says.

“But Coyotes are very useful,” says Coyote.

“Maybe you should explain that to him,” I says.

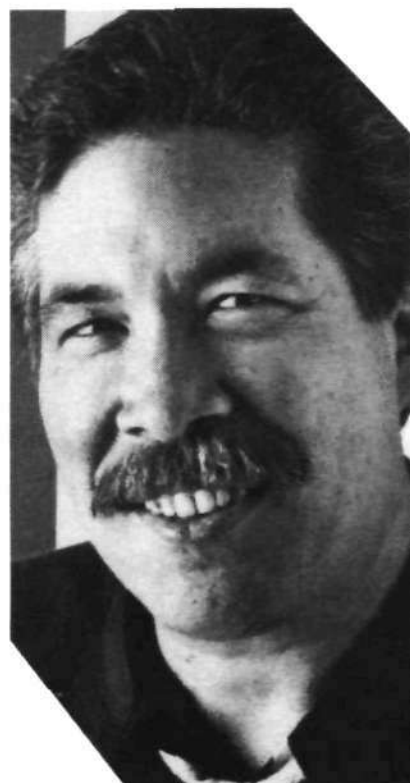
“Just around the eyes,” says Coyote, “he looks like that GOD guy.”

We’re looking for the white whale, Ahab tells his men. Keep looking.

So Ahab’s men look at the ocean and they see something and that something is a whale.

Blackwhaleblackwhaleblackwhalesbianblackwhalesbianblackwhale, they all shout.

Black whale? yells Ahab. You mean white whale, don’t you? Moby-Dick, the great male white whale?



*The son of a mother of Greek and German origins, and a Cherokee father, King was born in Oklahoma, but doesn’t think of Oklahoma as home...it’s the Alberta prairies where he spent ten years with the Blackfoot people.*

*King was professor of Native Studies at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, for ten years, where he had an enormous impact on young Native writers.*

*King’s first book was the novel MEDICINE RIVER (1990). It was followed by a children’s book, A COYOTE COLUMBUS STORY (1992), which won him his first Governor General’s Award nomination. His second nomination came with the publication of his second novel, GREEN GRASS, RUNNING WATER (1993). His short stories have been collected in ONE GOOD STORY, THAT ONE (1993).*

*Green Grass, Running Water, copyright © 1993 by Thomas King. Published in Canada by HarperCollins Publisher Ltd.*

That's not a white whale, says Changing Woman. That's a female whale and she's black.

Nonsense, says Ahab. It's Moby-Dick, the great white whale.

You're mistaken, says Changing Woman, I believe that is Moby-Jane, the Great Black Whale.

"She means Moby-Dick," says Coyote. "I read the book. It's Moby-Dick, the great white whale who destroys the *Pequod*."

"You haven't been reading your history," I tell Coyote. "It's English colonists who destroy the *Pequots*."

"But there isn't any Moby-Jane."

"Sure there is," I says. "Just look out over there. What do you see?"

"Well...I'll be," says Coyote.

\* \*

It's Moby-Dick, Ahab tells his crew, the great white whale.

Begging your pardon, says one of the crew. But isn't that whale black?

This could be a problem, says Ahab.

That is a very beautiful whale, says Changing Woman, but I don't think she looks very happy.

Happy, happy, there you go again, says Ahab. Grab that harpoon and make yourself useful.

But Changing Woman walks to the side of the ship and dives into the water.

Hello, says Changing Woman. It's a good day for a swim.

Yes, it is, says Moby-Jane. If you'll excuse me, I have a little matter to take care of and then I'll be back.

And Moby-Jane swims over to the ship and punches a large hole in its bottom.

There, says Moby-Jane. That should take care of that.

That was very clever of you, says Changing Woman as she watches the ship sink. What happens to Ahab?

We do this every year, says Moby-Jane. He'll be back. He always comes back.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Look," says Coyote, "I haven't much time. The old Indians need my help."

"I thought maybe you would like to tell this story," I says.

"But if you're too busy, I guess I can do it myself."

"No, no," says Coyote. "I want to do that. I'll just tell it fast."

"Okay," I says. "Just get it right."

"Okay," says Coyote. "Where were we?"

"Well," I says, "Old Woman just fell through that hole into the sky and then she fell into -"

"I know, I know," says Coyote. "A whale!"

"We already had a whale," I says.

"A fiery furnace!" says Coyote.

"No," I says. "Not that either."

"A manger!" says Coyote.

"Nope," I says. "Old Woman doesn't fall into a manger."

"Give me a hint," says Coyote.

"Old woman falls into the water," I says.

"The water?" says Coyote. "That's it?"

"That's it," I says.

"Okay, okay," says Coyote. "Old Woman falls through the hole, falls through the sky, and falls into the water."

"That's right," I says.

"Great," says Coyote. "What happens next?"

"Well," I says, "Old Woman falls into that water. So she is in that water. So she looks around and she sees -"

"I know, I know," says Coyote. "She sees a golden calf!"

"Wrong again," I says.

"A pillar of salt!" says Coyote.

"Nope," I says to Coyote.

"A burning bush!" says Coyote.

"Where do you get these things?" I says.

"I read a book," says Coyote.

"Forget the book," I says. "We've got a story to tell. And here's how it goes."

So Old Woman is floating in the water. And she looks around. And she sees a man. Young man. A young man walking on water.

Hello, says Old Woman. Nice day for a walk.

Yes, it is, says Young Man Walking On Water. I am looking for a fishing boat.

I just got here, says Old Woman. But I'll help you look.

That's very kind of you, says Young Man Walking On Water. But I'd rather do it myself.

Oh, look, says Old Woman. Is that the boat you're looking for over there?

Not if you saw it first, says Young Man Walking On Water.

Throw that man overboard, says Ahab.

Begging your pardon again, says another one of the crew.

But isn't that whale female?

Throw that man overboard, too, says Ahab.

"Look out! Look out!" Shouts Coyote. "It's Moby-Jane, the Great Black Whale. Run for your lives."

"That wasn't very nice," I says. "Now look what you've done."

"Hee-hee, hee-hee," says Coyote.

Moby-Jane! the crew yells. The Great Black Whale!

Throw everybody overboard, shouts Ahab.

Call me Ishmael, says Ishmael, and all the crew jumps into the boats and rows away.

How curious, says Changing Woman. Where are you going? says Moby-Jane.

Someplace warm, I think, says Changing Woman.

Come on, says Moby-Jane. I know just the place.

"I know the place she is talking about," says Coyote. "Italy."

"No," I says, "that's not the place."

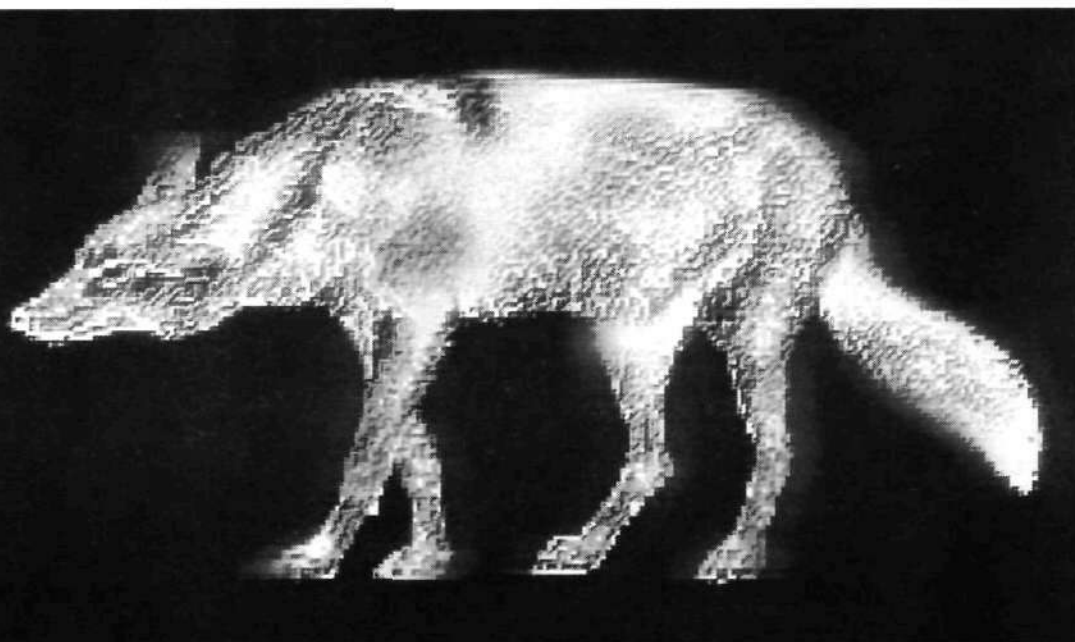
"Hawaii?" says Coyote.

"Wrong again," I says.

"Tahiti? Australia? The south of France? Prince Edward Island?" says Coyote.

"Not even close," I says.

"Hmmm," says Coyote. "How disappointing."







So there is a boat. A small boat. And there are a bunch of men in that boat. A big bunch. And that boat is rocking back and forth. And those waves are getting higher.

Rock, rock, rock, rock, says that Boat. Whee, says those Waves. We are getting higher.

Help us! Help us! shout those men.

Pardon me, says Young Man Walking On Water. But I have to rescue my ... rescue my ... ah...

Factotums? says Old Woman. Civil servants? Stockholders?

You must be new around here, says Young Man Walking On Water. You don't seem to know the rules.

What rules? says Old Woman.

"I know, I know," says Coyote. "Young Man Walking On Water is talking about Christian rules."

"Yes," I says. "that's true."

"Hooray," says Coyote. "I love Christian rules."

Christian rules, says Young Man Walking On Water. And the first rule is that no one can help me. The second rule is that no one can tell me anything. Third, no one is allowed to be in two places at once. Except me.

I was just floating through, says Old Woman.

But you can watch, says Young Man Walking On Water.

There's no rule against that.

Wee, says Old Woman, that's a relief.

So that you're not confused, says Young Man Walking On Water, I am now going to walk across the water to that vessel. I am going to calm the seas and stop all the agitation. After that, I will rescue my...my...ah...

Deputies? says Old Woman. Subalterns? Proofreaders?

And they will love me and follow me around.

"That's a really good trick," says Coyote.

"Yes," I says. "No wonder this world is a mess."

"Maybe the...ah...would follow me," says Coyote.

"Now that's a really scary thought," I says.

So Young Man Walking On Water walks on the water to that Boat. With those men.

Help us! Help us! says those men.

And Young Man Walking On Water raises his arms and that one looks at those Waves and that one says, Calm down!

Stop rocking! He says that to the Boat. Stop rocking!

But those Waves keep getting higher, and that Boat keeps rocking.

Help us! says those men. Help us!

Whee, says those happy waves.

Rock, rock, rock, rock, says that Boat.

Calm down! Stop rocking! Calm down! Stop rocking, says Young Man Walking On Water.

But that doesn't happen, and those men on that Boat begin to throw up.

Yuck, says that Boat. Now look what happened.

Well. Old Woman watches Young Man Walking On Water. She watches him stomp his feet. She watches him yell at those Waves. She watches him shout at that Boat. So, she feels sorry for him. Pardon me, she says. Would you like some help?

There you go again, says Young Man Walking On Water. Trying to tell me what to do.

Well, says Old Woman, someone has to. You are acting as though you have no relations. You shouldn't yell at those happy Waves. You shouldn't shout at that jolly Boat. You got to sing a song.

Sing a song to waves? says Young Man Walking On Water. Sing songs to boats?

Say, did I tell you about our Christian rules?

It's a simple song, says Old Woman. And Old Woman sings her song.

Boy, says those Waves, that is one beautiful song. We feel real relaxed.

Yet, says that Boat, it sure is. Maybe I'll take a nap.

So that Boat stops rocking, and those Waves stop rising higher and higher, and everything calms down.

Hooray, says those men. We are saved.

Hooray, says Young Man Walking On Water. I have saved you.

Actually, says those men, that other person saved us.

Nonsense, says Young Man Walking On Water. That other person is a woman. That other person sings songs to waves.

That's me, says Old Woman.

A woman? says those men. Sings songs to waves? They says that, too.

That's me, says Old Woman. That's me.

By golly, says those men. Young Man Walking On Water must have saved us after all. We better follow him around.

Suit yourself, says Old Woman. And that one floats away.

"Not again," says Coyote.

"You bet," I says.

"Hmmm," says Coyote. "All this floating imagery must mean something."

"That's the way it happens in oral stories," I says.

"Hmmm," says Coyote. "All this water imagery must mean something." ■

# Galia s'était cloîtrée

ANNE-MARIE ALONZO

Galia n'avait vu personne depuis des milliers d'heures, elle s'était cloîtrée sous sa tente remplissant des cahier et des cahiers d'écriture, elle avait écrit, avait lu et relu, elle avait raturé, recommencé, effacé, laissé tomber, elle avait repris, refait des phrases, des pages, des chapitres complets.

Galia se dit alors: je ne sais pas écrire dans la douleur mais écrit-on jamais autrement?

Galia savait que Jeanne, son amie de l'autre rive, écrivait toujours ainsi, laissant sur le papier, sa peau, ses yeux, ses larmes y laissant ses doigts et ses ongles, y laissant tranquillement sa vie entière, Jeanne jurait de ne plus jamais écrire, le jurait pour des siècles et des siècles, le jurait la main droite sur Le Livre, Jeanne avait écrit deux livres que l'avaient engloutie, *the book that ate me*, Jeanne parlait ainsi de ses livres, Jeanne l'amie vivait au loin dans une ville large et froide, une ville que Jeanne l'amie Jeanne n'aimait plus, une ville disait-elle où sa langue se desséchait où sa langue italienne n'avait de lieu où s'étendre et prendre place.

Galia écoutait l'amie parler de ses livres, de ses mains frottant les pages de ses livres comme elle avait frotté les parquets des maisons où elle avait travaillé, lavant, frottant, cirant, Jeanne regardait ses mains bleues, Jeanne avait cessé d'écrire comme elle avait cessé de laver les parquets des dames de société, elle avait quitté la ville large et froide, partait vers l'autres lieux, des lacs de l'ouest, des montagnes qu'elle savait rocheuses, des

pays touffus où les jungles cachaient des pièces d'eau, Jeanne cherchait leçon de vivre et leçon d'âme, *I'll find a teacher* disait-elle et Galia entendait la voix de Jeanne dire encore, *I am so happy, I can feel it, I will fly*, Jeanne disait cela le croyant, elle volerait chantant les noms des pays de rêves, Perù, Venezuela, Argentina, Mexico, Jeanne épelait M E X I C O en souriant, *I'll go there, I will*.

Galia avait reçu Jeanne dans sa tente, elles y resteraient ensemble, enlacées, parlant de nuit et de jour, se lisant leurs écrits, buvant du vin, et de l'alcool blanc, mangeant des mets épicés que Jeanne préparait, *magiamo un poco, o fame*, Jeanne avait toujours faim, elle mangeait avec joie, elle mangeait, buvait, riait, Jeanne taquinait Galia puis l'emmenait marcher dans les dunes, l'obligeait à sortir au soleil, l'étendait sur le sable, s'étendait près d'elle, lui faisait de longs massages de dos, de rein, de cuisses, de hanches.

Galia aimait les massages de Jeanne, elle se laissait enduire d'huiles d'amandes douces, de parfums de mandarines et d'épices, de crèmes de tilleul, Jeanne allumait des tiges d'encens et des feuilles de papier d'Arménie, Jeanne massait bien, elle massait longuement, sans se fatiguer, ses bras étaient musclés, ses mains solides.

Galia soupirait, les mains de Jeanne la soulevaient, entraient en elle pour la retenir, épousaient son corps pour le faire danser, les mains de Jeanne prenaient Galia, la laissaient la reprenaient la laissaient à nouveau, Galia semblait naviguer en haute mer, ses

hanches s'essoufflaient, le plaisir lui chatouillait les cuisses puis entraient en elle comme si les mains de Jeanne la pénétraient, Galia gémissait, Jeanne ralentissait, reprenait encore, les mains de Jeanne connaissaient le corps de Galia, elles le conduisaient lentement, écoutaient, comprenaient, racontaient des contes de fées aux côtes de Galia, les mains de Jeanne voyageaient et Galia voyageait, courait, galopait, suivait les mains de Jeanne, le souffle de Jeanne, voulait garder les mains de Jeanne en elle, sur elle, Galia souriait, Jeanne souriait, les mains de Jeanne souriaient sur le dos de Galia.

Galia sentait son corps renaître, le cou, la nuque, le dos, les bras de Galia se déliaient, se détendaient, ses mains s'ouvraient sur le monde, cela faisait tant de jours que Galia vivait courbée à écrire, tant de jours que son corps flétrissait, se refusait à vivre, retenait son souffle, ne froissait pas les feuilles, ne séchait pas l'encre, ne coupait pas le fil, mais il n'y avait pas d'histoires à son histoire, Galia écrivait aveugle, alignait les mots, se disait: j'écris.

Galia insista pour que Jeanne l'amie prolonge son séjour, Galia dit: tu partiras, tes voyages te mèneront loin, je ne te verrai pas pendant longtemps, reste! Jeanne l'amie sourit, rien ne pressait elle avait envie de rester, les heures étaient douces entre elles, il leur arrivait de ne pas s'entendre, les langues se traduisaient mal, les cultures différaient, l'une vivait en ville, l'autre en désert, l'une vivait, ne voulait que vivre,



Photo : Véro Boncompagni

Née en Alexandrie en 1951 vit depuis 1963 à Montréal. Cofondatrice de la revue et des éditions TROIS, elle est aussi membre de la rédaction de la revue ESTUAIRE. Son recueil de poèmes BLEUS DE MINE a obtenu le Prix Émile Nelligan en 1985.





Johanne Beaulieu

s'acharnait à trouver la vie belle, l'autre mourait, appelait la mort, lui disait : viens, aime-moi, choisis-moi avant toute autre, ne me laisse pas trop vivre, je ne le supporterai pas.

Galia et son amie ne s'entendaient pas sur tout, Jeanne insistait : *I need life*, Galia disait : *je veux, j'attends la mort*, la décision de l'autre attristait l'une, elles se prenaient alors dans les bras, elles s'embrassaient les joues, le cou, les mains, elles se disaient des mots de tendresse avant de se coucher, elle se couchaient pour dormir, ne s'endormaient qu'à l'aube, Jeanne l'amie tombant de sommeil, s'endormant au milieu d'une phrase, la continuant au réveil sans savoir qu'elle avait dormi.

Galia regardait Jeanne son amie dormir sans fermer l'œil.

Galia prépara une petite fête pour l'arrivée de l'an neuf, elle sortit des gobelets d'argent que lui avait laissés en partant son amour aux yeux de barque, déboucha le vin, ouvrit la bouteille d'alcool blanc, servit des œufs de cailles et œufs de lompe, fit du riz aux lentilles, trancha des oignons, une tomate et du concombre, ouvrit un sac d'olives noires, du fromage de chèvre et du fromage à l'aneth, elle fit une salade de persil et citron, pila des pois chiche, mélangea une salade d'aubergine avec de l'huile de sésame, fit de petits desserts de pâte feuilletée et de pistaches puis mit une table entre les dunes.

Galia alluma trois chandelles.

Galia appela alors Jeanne son amie qui s'était endormie sous la tente, Galia dut appeler trois fois tant l'amie dormait profondément, elle appela dans sa langue, puis en anglais et en italien, l'amie dormait, Galia entra sous la tente, s'étendit près de l'amie, lui caressa le visage, les tempes où se chamaillaient quelques cheveux blonds, le nez et les lèvres, c'est en posant ses lèvres à la base de cou que Jeanne s'éveilla lentement, elle sourit d'être si fatiguée, sourit de sourire, sourit sans raison, demanda : *when do we eat ? let's have a drink, I'll serve*, Jeanne se leva d'un bond, elle emplut la cuve, se

lava le visage et les bras, enfila des bracelets, une robe fraîche, des sandales, Jeanne l'amie se faisait belle, c'était soir de fête, elle avait envie de boire et manger, elle avait envie de rire.

Galia regarda la table mise, les plats colorés, les vins, les alcools et les desserts, elle vit qu'elle avait oublié les fruits, courut les chercher, les disposa au centre pour qu'elles puissent se rafraîchir entre les mets, regarda l'amie, la trouva élégante, se sentit aussi en humeur de fêter et souhaita à l'amie une heureuse nouvelle année en l'embrassant.

Galia raconta à l'amie comment, depuis des mois, son esprit la quittait, elle voyait ce qui n'existait pas, imaginait, elle pourrait le jurer, des contes d'horreur, ne se rendait pas bien compte de ce qui lui arrivait — les arbres poussaient — il n'y avait jamais d'arbres au désert, ni arbre, ni plante, ni fleur, sa main ne touchait que des grains de sable depuis si longtemps, sa main brûlait tant le sable était chaud, mais, dit-elle à Jeanne l'amie : le sable brûlait moins, elle se penchait, touchait le sable, y posait la main, la sentait glacée, se disait : j'ai froid ! pour se rassurer, se croyait malade, peut-être l'était-elle, Galia ne mangeait plus, ne s'en souciait pas, pourquoi boire ou manger, elle ajoutait à Jeanne l'amie : pourquoi vivre ?

Galia marchait.

Galia marchait depuis plus de trois lunes, elle avait traversé trois États, s'était assise une fois par jour de marche, une fois par nuit, ne restait que douze minutes assise, les comptait en secondes pour allonger, ne trouvait pas le temps long, Galia n'avait pourtant pas dormi, s'était enveloppée de châles, s'était souvent habillée, déshabillée, la route était longue et loin son amour à abattre.

Galia parlait à Jeanne l'amie pendant ce repas de fête, elle répétait : *mon amour à abattre*, le répétait tristement, à regret, Galia se sentait nostalgique des yeux de barque, disait : mon amour est morte, Jeanne l'écoutait, lui touchait la joue, dis-

ait : *I understand*, ne demandait d'explication ni d'excuse, levait son verre la regardant, Galia levait aussi son verre, buvait du vin et de l'alcool blanc, offrait à Jeanne l'amie une tranche de mangue, une grappe de raisins, continuait de parler, il y avait encore tout un livre à dire, elle le dirait.

Galia voyait cet arbre, le voyait bien, elle se disait : c'est un mirage comme on dit : c'est une blague ! elle voyait cet arbre, le voyait s'assombrir de feuilles, le sentait charnu, ample, le voyait de près et de loin, reculait pour l'observer, se disait : cet arbre bouge ! en surprise.

Galia se frottait les yeux, devait-elle se pincer pour y croire ? l'arbre changeait de lieu, entraînait ses racines dans le sable, soulevait les dunes, les déplaçait, s'installait pendant que Galia le suivait, se cachait, se couchait de peur que l'arbre ne la voie, puis elle se relevait, l'arbre avait bougé à nouveau, poussait et poussait, devenait géant à ses yeux.

Galia crut le voir l'écraser, elle eut peur et peur pour mille, ouvrit la bouche pour crier et dire : non !

Galia se réveilla, elle n'avait que dix minutes volées au temps de jour, il y avait si longtemps depuis son départ, l'âne même dormait, épuisé, elle tenta de le réveiller, le poussa, lui dit : hue ! lève-toi, il nous faut partir et partir, l'âne ouvrait un œil, le refermait, l'ouvrait alors qu'elle hurlait à ses oreilles, il se mit en route, il alla au pas, puis au trot, vite, vite, lui criait-elle, il y a du retard.

Galia se levait, allait chercher une autre bouteille, le vin avait été bu, Jeanne l'ami souriait, le repas était bon, l'air doux d'une nuit de juillet, leurs paroles emplissaient les dunes, faisaient écho, elles étaient seules, bien d'être ainsi seules ensemble. ■

# April Showers

JANICE KULYK-KEEFER

*From Transfigurations, Charlottetown, Ragweed Press, 1987*

A mistake, an irretrievable error. From the moment Louise walked inside the door she knew. Splutters and sniggers from the living room: a sugary cloud of scent, and, visible from the archway separating Tante Roselle's kitchen from her parlour, the chair. A wooden rocker painted powder-blue, padded with kleenex-roses and ribbon-bows hoarded from Christmas, birthday, wedding presents. Waiting expectantly, almost rocking itself in anticipation under the crêpe-paper streamers someone had suspended from a hook in the ceiling. And then, from all corners of the suddenly illuminated parlour: "Surprise, surprise! Didn't you guess? Why didn't you bring your hubby, Louise? — the guys are all over at Delphis' place, watching the play-offs — your mom should of sent him along. Eh, Nicole it worked, eh? She didn't suspect a thing? Who's got the ladle for the punch? Come on Louise, there's only one place for you to sit and that's right here, on the throne. Look, we've already started your hat."

And they had. A paper plate with ribbons — one pale pink, the other baby-blue — stapled to either side. She hadn't noticed the plastic laundry basket, also larded with ribbons and bows, brimming with packages wrapped in paper bearing the bleached-out icons of fertility: storks with baby-burdened diapers hanging from impossibly slender beaks, roses with baby-faces where stamens and pistils should be, teddy bears, rattles, watering cans .... Louise stood awkwardly before the rocker, peering down into the basket and searching the wrappings for some less genteel symbol to connect this pastel extravaganza with the present state of her mind and belly: egg and sperm patterns instead of raggedy Anns and Andys. Someone handed her a glass of punch (pink, of course, and full of maraschino cherries which bombarded her lips as she took a sip) while her mother took her coat and disappeared into the kitchen. All the seats were taken — she had no choice but to sink down into the ribboned rocker and smile at everyone assembled round her: smile and take up mental knitting needles, furiously connect-

ing faces and names and memories of how they'd all looked seventeen years ago, at high school dances and assemblies.

How could she even respond to their cries of "Louissette"? She'd been Louise for all those seventeen years at university and law school, in practice in Toronto and then Vancouver. "I am a lawyer," she reminded herself as Ginette asked her to stand up again and show off her outfit, "a lawyer, not a housewife with five kids between the ages of six and sixteen: Ginette could very well be a grandmother by now." "That's some —

different," called out Simone: she was pregnant too, but hiding her



Photo : Ruth Kaplan

*Born in Toronto, Kulyk-Keefer launched her career with WHITE OF THE LESSER ANGELS (1986). Her stories, about expatriate Canadians in Europe and Europeans living in Canada, reflect the critical distance she believes a writer ought to keep from her background. A Professor of English at the University of Guelph, Ontario, since 1990, her most recent book is her novel, REST HARROW (1992).*

beachball belly under a dotted-swiss tent dress: pale mauve, with tiny satin bows cascading from chin to hem. "Well, Simone, that's west-coast fashion for you — bizarre, right?" Louise sat down again, cursing herself for having spoken in standard French, for finding it impossible to switch back to *acadien*. At the office she handled all of their French clients using the accent she'd picked up during her years in Paris. And with David she spoke English — as she had with the mother and brothers most of this visit, as if it were the least awkward, the safest form of discourse between them, one in which reproaches, accusations, irritation couldn't be accommodated. Polite, they'd all been so polite it had been like staying in a hotel instead of what had once been her home.

Her mother had said they were going out to pay a call on Tante Roselle, and so she hadn't dressed for a party, this kind of party. Brilliant yellow cotton sweatshirt, emerald green pants — she looked like an overblown daffodil. "Yes, I'm excited — it's hard to believe I'm finally having a baby." In Vancouver tulips and daffodils were already past their best, petals crumpled like brown paper bags, green leaves bleached and sere at the tips. "We're very happy, thank you."

Against Tante Roselle's window sleet vied with snow: the last storm of the season, everyone was assuring her. Still, the chimneys would be smoking until June — even the dandelions wouldn't hazard bloom until well past May. How long had it taken her to elect west coast weather as a norm? "No, unfortunately he couldn't get away — in the summer, maybe." Eight years they'd been there now. Five years since her last visit home — her father's funeral, where she must have seen all these women crowded now into her great-aunt's parlour; seen but noticed them no more than she had the gulls ganging on the wharves, the orange nets and plastic bottles washed up along the shore. "I'm really not that hungry — of course, it looks delicious but — you know what the doctors say — you shouldn't gain more than — all right, just a tiny piece."

Wanda moved on with the tray, leaving Louise's plastic plate heaped with egg



salad and cream cheese sandwiches, Rice Krispie squares — the kind she hadn't set eyes on since she'd given up reading the backs of cereal packages — little marshmallows of various carcinogenic shades cemented to graham crackers, Nanaimo bars capsizing in the heat of the overcrowded parlour. Louise had already hidden her glass of punch, full except to that first cherry-laden sip, behind the laundry basket. Now she picked up the smallest of the sandwiches and was cautiously sliding the heaped plate under the rocker just as everyone burst into applause. For her mother, who'd just come into the room flourishing a twenty-sixer of Gordon's Gin.

"Way ta go, Nicole — after all this is a party!" Nicole held her finger up to her lips: Tante Roselle — a teetotaller from the age of sixteen — had gone off to her bedroom in search of photo albums. Nicole moved with astonishing deftness for a woman her age and size — bounding over to the punch bowl, pouring the entire bottle into the sea of expiring ginger ale and bleached out cherries. Then she threw the empty Gordon's bottle into a huge garbage bag hidden under one of the drawn curtains — for the wrapping paper Louise would tear off the baby presents, once the eating and drinking had been done.

Everyone was crowding round the punch bowl, refilling glasses. By the time Tante Roselle came back with an enormous album boasting a photo of every baby born to the entire Cormier clan, the whole character of the party had changed. Nobody making conversation about the weather or asking Louisette about her due dates, how many ultra-sounds she'd had, how long her bouts of mourning sickness had lasted. Tante Roselle was deaf: as long as the women took turns scanning photographs, nodding their heads at her unravelling of knotty genealogical tables, the old woman was satisfied. Around her, behind her, the talk was turning from consommé to a rich spicy chowder as the gin quickened the woman's tongues:

"She walked out on him after fifteen years. Fifteen years, then back to her mother's house. About time, too — all he ever did was waggle his cock at her. Twelve kids — He used to — broad daylight — once the priest was making a call and he found them doin' it right on the dining table —"

"Why is a woman like a piece of meat? Because the more she's beaten, the tenderer she gets."

"— not so bad for a guy his age. Don't you think so, Rita? But I'm telling you, my Charlot — he's a friggin' stallion —"

"What I really like to see on a man is a good bum — you know? Angèle thinks her Joey's such a prize but Jesus, he's like a tray of jelly buns when he walks —"

"— says those things are like wearin' a friggin' wet suit, that it's my responsibility!



Shit, he knows the doctor said I can't take them no more, 'cause of my high blood pressure —"

"She said she was comin'. They used to be best friends, remember that summer Jeanne and her hitched a ride all the way to Truro and Delbert went after them with his truck, even though the muffler was shot all to hell — they said you could hear him clear across the Bay of Fundy and up Northumberland Strait."

Louise jerked her head up from Tante Roselle's album — she'd used it as an excuse to get out of the sacrificial chair and onto the less conspicuous loveseat. They were talking about Jeanne, they were saying something about Jeanne Arsenault, and the sound of that name was like the first time the baby had moved inside her — had become real. Jeanne was supposed to have come tonight — she hadn't showed up — because she was still angry? If anyone had the right to be angry it was she, Louise. Jeanne had answered none of her letter that first year away, and once Louise had found out why, she'd never written again.

*"Put your sweet lips/A little closer to the phone."*

Someone had started up the record player. Tante Roselle's head was nodding — her hair, which she still dyed jet black, was fine as a baby's and the scalp glowed rosily underneath. "She must be eighty-nine at least," thought Louise, getting up from the loveseat as gently as her seven-months' bulk would permit, propping a pillow under her great-aunt's head and turning down the lamp. Tante Roselle had lost her fiancé in the first war — she'd never married, but had gone to teacher's college; she could have become principal of the high school at Meteghan, if they'd allowed women to ascend to those dubious heights. Instead she'd taught geography (though she'd never set foot outside her native province) and done career-counselling. It was she who'd suggested Louise try for a scholarship, she who'd persuaded Delbert and Nicole to let the girl go off to Halifax on her own to study. And she'd arranged single-handedly for Jeanne's admission to Saint Joseph's, the same year Louise had

Martine Doyon



gone off to Dalhousie. If Tante Roselle had been disappointed by Jeanne's failure there, she hadn't confessed a word of it.

"You can tell your friend out there/He'll have to go."

A fork tapping a plastic punch glass. "Okay ladies. Ladies! Let's not forget why we're here tonight." Betty, Louise's cousin — and twenty years older than she — clapping plump pink hands, her spectacles flashing as she walked towards the sofa and drew Louise up. "Now, Louise, it's time for you to get back on the throne — I've got a toast I want to propose — Nicole, where's the champagne? And the glasses?" Louise wishing that, just this once, she didn't have to notice it was Château-Gai; didn't have to remember David consulting his Hugh Johnson every time they went out to dinner — her embarrassment at his sending back that bottle of what had seemed to her a perfectly good Chambolle-Musigny, the first night of their honeymoon. If he were here — but then they'd agreed that neither one of them would foist their family on the other. Except this baby, now — weren't they having it in order to become a family, which meant readmitting their own? Would she ever have come back to the French Shore, even for a visit, if not for-

"How happy we all were to find out that our Louise, who's been gone such a long time — not that we'd forgotten you, you'll be one of us till the day you die — was coming back home — and in such an interesting condition. Let me add — it's about time — it better be quintuplets, if you want to catch up with your friends here, Louise. New we know you're a great success, you work in a big office in Vancouver, and you married an important man, and even if he's not *acadien* you know he's welcome here, we want to see this guy of yours one day -"

"Eh, Louise, has he got a good cock on him? How come he took so long to shove in that bun, eh?"

"Shut up Réjeanne. Anyway, it's time to finish talking. Let's drink a toast to the mother-to-be and that baby she's hatching: To old times and old friends — *salut!* Okay, let's open some of these presents — Ginette, you get the ribbons off them first — Lise, you're good at tying them on, we want this hat to be bigger than that belly of hers — who's got the polaroid?"

One by one she unwrapped them: boxes with embroidered bibs and Nuk-brand pacifiers which she decided she could never use, simply because of the name. Cartons of Pampers — how was she supposed to take them home on the plane? Unless they were for her mother to keep, to have a supply on hand whenever Louise visited. Ruffled plastic pants, flannelette receiving blankets, burping cloths, bunting bags with bunny ears, stretch-suits in pale

yellow and mint green, the only two "safe" colours. She thought of the nursery she'd already stocked at home, the brightly coloured, functional baby clothes she'd bought, detesting pastels, bunny-ears, ruffles. And to everyone she smiled her thanks, her throat dry, her words as emotional, as meaningful as fingernail clippings. They wouldn't know "*mignon*"; she'd have to say "*mah c'est cute*" as they were doing. But she couldn't, it would sound false, coming from her now.

Someone was passing around fudge and brownies and molasses taffy — why this mix of sweetmeats and salacious talk at baby showers? Hadn't she sworn she would never, ever let herself be given one — hadn't she moved to a place, into circles where these things were beyond the pale? She'd go back to Vancouver and have the baby and the her friends would come round — friends from work, the wives of David's colleagues, come round with Kate Greenaway friezes and exquisitely illustrated volumes of Mother Goose; computerized toys or else extremely expensive wooden trains and boats. The day she'd told David she was pregnant, he'd ordered a bottle of champagne from a dealer in Paris — it was waiting in the refrigerator for her and the baby. He'd told her that the first thing she'd hear after the baby's cry in the delivery room would be a cork popping. The day after she'd told David she was pregnant he'd registered with an agency: she'd have a whole crew of potential nannies to interview when she flew home. How would that be, flying back to Nova Scotia to show off the baby, stepping off the plane at Yarmouth followed not by her husband but by the nanny? "David's sorry, he's so busy, he's in Tokyo right now, but he promised to phone and say hello while I'm here. And you could always come out to see us, we'd pay for the whole family to come out, it would be our treat." Knowing that none of them had ever accepted her offers before, or were likely to change their minds now.

"You look great!" Réjeanne, tying the ribbons so tight under Louise's chin she thought she'd surely be strangled. Feeling

the paper plate, heavy, absurd as a twelve-tiered wedding cake atop her head; feeling like an animal fattened and dressed for slaughter as the camera snapped away, blinding her with the flash, so that she couldn't see, only heard her coming into the parlour: "Jesus Christ, Lou, look at the tits on you — I guess getting knocked up's good for somethin'."

Jeanne, slouching with her hands on her hips, jeans and a sweater that had been washed so many times it hung round her like a dead sheep. Her hair, the black hair



Marie-Hélène Parant

she used to wear braided down her back, now cut so short you could see the tips of her ears, the nape of her neck as she turned to get a beaker of champagne. Louise fumbled with the hat, yanking it off her head, catching her hair in the staples. Jeanne was nowhere to be seen, or rather, everywhere, slapping her friends on the back, joking, bantering, her white teeth flashing in the darkness round Tante Roselle, whom she looked at for a moment, then passed by. The baby presents were all clumped back in the laundry basket; women clung limpet-like to corners, whispering back and

forth; someone started up the record player again — and Louise's ordeal was over.

From the moment Jeanne slouched into the room, everyone forgot about Louise. For her the change was as palpable as a sudden shift in temperature, as if the sleet outside had thawed into a warm spring rain. How like Jeanne to have drawn everyone's attention away from the absurd and truly awful crown with which the women had both decorated and mocked the prodigal: pregnant for the first time at thirty-five, and with no husband to send

reach shore through mile-high breakers. The room was full of chins wagging, heads nodding, hands holding cake-laden plates to balloon-bosoms: her belly kept getting in the way. She pressed through as best she could, forgetting Jeanne — she had to find a bathroom, she'd wet herself if she wasn't careful. Somehow she squeezed her way into the kitchen and reached the toilet off the entrance hall. It was freezing in there: her teeth rattled in time to the sleet stinging the windows, she had to negotiate herself on and off the seat, so tiny was the

wedge-shaped space. She washed her hands and reapplied her make-up in the cracked glass over the sink, but waited for a few moments before going out — as long as she could stand the cold. Her breasts felt painfully full — if it was this bad now, what would happen when the milk came in? And how could she breast-feed — she'd be going back to work a month after the baby's birth. David didn't like big-breasted women, he'd told her that the first time they'd made love. Where was David, why wasn't he with her — where was her mother, why had she brought her to this awful party? She bit her lips, feeling suddenly bereft, abandoned. Who was she to be having a child when she was still a child herself?

She was padding back to the kitchen to find her mother and tell her she wanted to go home, though it wasn't yet ten-thirty.

She could say she was exhausted, she could say she had to finish packing, though her suitcases were already standing by the front door, ready to go. Someone was coming to use the bathroom — if it was Réjeanne she'd trip the bloody cow — just who did she think she was? *Got a good cock on him?* Why hadn't she been able to toss one back at her — that's how you played the game. *Cockadoodledoo* she could have said.

"Cocka —" but that wasn't Réjeanne, it was Jeanne, and she wasn't off to use the bathroom. "So there you are — got a light?" She was pulling from the pocket of her ski jacket a small plastic bag. "Christ,

Lou, don't look like it was cocaine or somethin' — hell, a baby could smoke this and have sweet dreams. So come on, let's find somewhere warmer. Come on."

They slipped their coats off the hooks in the hallway, and Louise followed Jeanne blindly out the kitchen door. Dodging the sleet-stiff wind they ran to a truck parked at the end of Tante Roselle's drive. "Careful," Jeanne shouted. "We don't want no premature births here — Kenny'd kill me if I messed up his new upholstery." She hoisted Louise up into the cab, then ran around to the other side and banged the door shut after her. Started up the engine, switched on the heat and they sat there side by side, motor running, going nowhere, staring at the ice-encrusted windshield.

"Some fuckin' spring, eh? Want a toke?"

"No thanks — it's not good for the baby."

"Christ, Lou, you think you're sittin' on eggs? I've had six kids and I smoked — and drank — through every one of them. Oh, not too much, mind you — I'm not that dumb. But what the hell — if you fuck, you get pregnant, right? And if you can't enjoy yourself while the kid's still safe inside, not needin' his ass wiped or a tit shoved in his mouth, then you're really up shit creek without a paddle. I mean, I might as well have stayed at St. Joseph's, for all the fun I'd of had, right?"

Sweet smoke making Louise's head spin. Sickly sweet, like the iced cakes and marshmallow squares. She opened the window an inch, letting the air sting her face for a moment, then closed it and turned to Jeanne. "Look, we don't have to talk about it if you'd rather — I mean, I don't blame you, Jeanne, I'm not making any kind of judgment. All I know is that you were at the convent and then — you were out, not even a year later. You were so sure you wanted to be there instead of here — what happened?"

Jeanne rubbed her hand across her scalp, flicking up the short black hairs. She closed her eyes, drew on her cigarette. Then turned to Louise and puffed the smoke in her face. "Nice, eh? How'd you get so stuck up, Lou? Stuck-up or fucked-up — some choice, eh? What happened — how the hell do I remember — it was fifteen, sixteen years ago. Six kids ago. Be sixteen kids if I hadn't got Kenny pissed out of his mind one night and got him to sign the papers."

"Papers?"

"For a tubal litigation -"

"Ligation, you mean"

"Scuse me for breathin' — of course you're right, the lady's always right. Shit, this stuff isn't worth the paper it's rolled up in. Anyway — what happened, what happened ... Maybe the nuns didn't like my



looks — too much Indian in my blood. Maybe I didn't like the look of the nuns — maybe I couldn't fit into those steel-capped bras of theirs — eh? Or maybe I'm merely human after all — some of us are, you know? I came home for a visit halfway through my novitiate and — well, I sneaked out one night and went down to the Fish and Game. Kenny was there — remember, he was a year ahead of us at school — that's to say, he dropped out a year before we graduated. But he was a handsome bugger — still is. And he screws like an angel — I thought I was in heaven that night. Didn't think so nine months later, of course — it was like someone hackin' me open with a dull knife, gettin' that first one out. Sorry, don't mean to scare you — it'll be different for you. I didn't exactly have the best of care, if you know what I mean. I married Kenny — sorry, got him drunk enough to marry me — a month before Janette was born. She's a good kid — Christ, she's no kid, she's nearly fifteen, smarter than her dad and me put together. And she'll be goin' to university — scholarship and all, just like you. Gonna study somethin' important and make lots of money and buy up the whole French Shore. Yeah, we got it all figured out. She'll but the senator's house — you know, that big white one with the little tower and the stained glass? We'll set up house and live happily ever after, just the two of us. And I'll get to wear a mink coat, instead of just skinnin' the buggers — that's what I do with my spare time. Roselle never told you? It's not so bad — better than spendin' your life on your knees, with ice up your — Sorry, better watch my tongue. Had enough of this shit, anyhow." She opened the window and tossed the joint onto the roadside.

"Better get you back inside — they'll be missin' you." Jeanne reached for the handle on her side of the cab, but Louise put out her arm and stopped her.

"Jeanne? I'm sorry."

"I don't need no pity, lady."

"I don't mean sorry for you. I'm sorry I never wrote after I found out you'd left St. Joseph's. That I didn't keep — in touch."

"So, you're sorry. Let's go."

"It hasn't exactly been a bed of roses for me either, you know. Oh, sure, I've got my degrees, and my job, and David. We got married three years ago. I'd been too busy for anything more than a couple of flings before I met him. It's not exactly a love affair, but we get along well, we both want the same things out of life. Except —"

"Except for what?"

"He's the one who wants this baby. He said he'd leave me if I didn't take steps to get pregnant. So I went off the pill and here I am seven months full of a baby I'm petrified of having. Because I don't love it, I don't fell anything for it, it's like something that's invaded me. I even tried — I haven't told anyone else this, but I tried to get rid of it. I booked into a clinic in Seattle — and cancelled out at the last moment. Not because I had a change of heart, but because I couldn't leave the office."

"So? You think you're the only one? You think none of those women in there ever felt like you do now? Only it's a whole lot worse for us — we got the priests showin' us pictures of dead babies in garbage bags — and we can't get the cash to book into any clinic in Boston. Oh come on, let's get out of here."

"No, wait, just a moment. Please, Jeanne. What am I going to do? Two more months and this baby will be here and everyone will know I don't want it — that it's not really mine. It belongs to David — it belongs to my mother more than it does to me. I can't even think of this ridiculous belly of mine as a baby, even when it kicks and shoves. So what do I do?"

Jeanne pushed open the door. "You move your ass and go back to the party."

"I can't."

But Jeanne had jumped down from the truck — was wrenching Louise's door open, tugging her out. The two women made their way back to the house arm in arm, rain slicing at their unprotected hands and faces.

In the kitchen women were packing up leftovers. A heavy smell of cellophane, flashes of tin foil. Plastic cups and plates being chucked into garbage bags. Nicole gave a little cry as she looked up at her daughter.

"There you are — we didn't know what was going on. So Jeanne's been looking after you? I'm glad you two got together at last — been a long time. Too long. We're not going to let you get away with it again, are we Jeanne? I want to see this baby before it's twelve weeks old, never mind twelve years. Good night, Simone. You should phone her tomorrow and thank her, Louise — she spent an hour scotch-taping the cards to the presents, so you can remember who gave what. Tante Roselle's asleep in her room — poor thing was ready for bed hours ago. Maybe you can stop by tomorrow on the way to the airport, and

say good-bye. You on your way now, Jeanne? How're those kids of yours — young Kenny doing okay now?"

"Yeah, he's fine — doctor says it'll take him another month before he's back to normal. He could of lost a leg on that Jesus motorcycle. Damned if I know what to do to keep him off it. Wish I didn't give a damn, that's all."

"Oh, but you can't help caring. Once a mother always a mother. You're not going, Jeanne? Look, there's some coffee left — you girls still have a lot to catch up on."

"Sorry, I gotta run, my old man'll be waitin' for the truck. Christ, I nearly forgot — Here, Lou. I was all out of wrapping paper. Go on, take it — it's for the baby."

Louise held out her hand. A carton of Q-tips. Disappointment sharp as sleet against her face. "You shouldn't have, Jeanne. But — they'll come in handy. I mean, they're something you can always find a use for."

"Shit, Lou- do you really think I'd give you Q-tips? Open it, for Christ's sake. Look, it's no big deal, just open it will you?"

Inside the box, a pair of shoes. Sky-blue felt, with beads stitched into the shapes of birds and flowers. Small straps to fasten round the ankles of a child. Louise stroked the soft felt, tracing beaded patterns with her fingertips. She closed her eyes. For a moment she could image the feet inside those shoes — then the child's whole body, even the colours of her eyes and hair. Stick figure, taking on flesh....

By the time she opened her eyes, Jeanne had gone. The storm was worse: rain against the windows like a hundred glasses smashing. They heard a door slam, a truck pulling away. "Careful, Louise, you're crushing them." Nicole took the shoes from her daughter, smoothed them out and slid them back into the box. "It's a shame," she sighed. "Jeanne does beautiful work, but these shoes aren't good for much. An active child could wear through the soles in five minutes flat. You'll see. Louise — you all right? Don't cry, honey, it's bad for the baby. There's nothing to worry about — you're just tired, over-excited. You sit down in the rocker there — I'm going to help Charline rinse out the coffee cups and then we can go home."

Louise shook her head, and walked past the ribboned rocker to the parlour window. Hands gripping the sill, she peered into the black storm where Jeanne and the truck had vanished: where her baby kicked and whirled. ■

## SPECTRAL AGONY

Isaac Augustine

Unable to cut in between  
Screaming mother and infant  
girl whose soul is being  
raped by her prison food of hate  
from being overweight.

Glued to the sight I walk  
away never forgiving myself for  
stealing the child.  
when I could. When I could.

# BETWEEN THE EXILE

## *Interview with novelist Leandro Urbina*

# AND THE IMMIGRANT

WILLIAM ANSELM

**V**ice Versa — Leandro Urbina, what does it mean to write in Canada today?

**Leandro Urbina** — The concepts we use here to define certain things are somewhat foreign in terms of my culture. I was an exile, a political exile. Here, *ethnic*, for example, defines things never thought about in my culture. So, I thought of myself as a political exile and also, as a writer and an intellectual who came to Canada because of the political situation in Chile after Pinochet's *coup d'état* in 1973.

**V.V.** — What made you then come to Canada and how were you received here as a political exile?

**L.U.** — In Canada at the time was Pierre Elliott Trudeau, there was a very open climate and a very generous spirit towards the Chileans. The Chilean community was very well organized. I came in 1977. So, in the most basic way it had a kind of "soft landing".

**V.V.** — In terms of your own identity what do you think that you are in this context?

**L.U.** — The pain came after learning the language. The tough part became a part of my daily reality. Because there was a political organization here mainly working towards Chile at that moment, the whole thing of Canada was very transitory and not well defined. We were working towards Chile, we talked about Chile all the time, we met daily with our friends, we were living here in Spanish. Canada was the place where we were living in the most basic sense. To turn from an exile to an immigrant; to realize and accept that you're an immigrant now, that you have to live here was a process that took many forms. For me, one of the first steps was to marry a Canadian woman.

**V.V.** — This process did it mean a loss of that community based on a political motivation?

**L.U.** — It meant not only the loss of the community. What we thought was a political régime became very well established and all discourses about its imminent fall became a kind of litany.

**V.V.** — You've portrayed a certain disenchantment with this transformation from political exile to immigrant in the novel *Cobro revertido* which appeared in 1992, won Chile's most prestigious literary award and has now been translated into French as *Longues distances*.

**L.U.** — The novel tries to grasp a change of state. It's situated in the moment where you have to change your identity to be able to function in a normal way because you can't live in Chile and in Canada at the same time. At that point, all the discourses about the return to Chile, became completely ridiculous. There was no reality in them, it

was more or less an attempt to hold on to a certain identity and to refuse to accept the fact that you were in a different country.

**V.V.** — Is there a trajectory from the political exile to finally *Cobro revertido* in which there is an adult awareness of becoming conscious of a particular history in a different space?

**L.U.** — My first published work was a short-story book that deals only and exclusively with the *coup d'état*. The second novel that I attempted to write in Argentina (where I moved to in 1973) and in Canada, is about the exile in Argentina. I could never write anything about Canada at the time because I didn't know anything about this country. When I married my Canadian wife who was a translator (therefore she could speak my language), I attempted to bring her into my world but, of course, there was "contamination" she showed me a lot about Canada as well. That is when I started to live in this kind of island that was half-Canada and half-Chile or Latin-America.

**V.V.** — You did finish *Cobro revertido* though...

**L.U.** — But only to get rid of the bad omen of my previous failures and also to be able to ground the experience. I tried to write about one of the experiences in Canada that was closer to my own experience which is the problem of Quebec's sovereignty. There were a lot of Chileans in Quebec who lived that process half-understanding the political drama through which Quebec was going.

**V.V.** — The protagonist of your novel not only seems to fail with the women but at the same time seems to have lost his relationship with his mother.

**L.U.** — That relationship is already gone in Chile because he rebels against his mother through another woman who was the ideal.

And he fills that void with speech. The characters talk and talk and analyze because when you can't show your emotions you have to rationalize everything.

**V.V.** — So, in a way, *Longues distances* seems to have closed a chapter in your life as a writer, it seems to have come to terms with a particular experience.

**L.U.** — I don't know if I have closed the chapter of the exiled immigrant experience because I think that even when people try to dismiss it because it's difficult to assimilate and they don't want to hear about it. One of the main problems is the exiles and movements of populations, of displacements.

**V.V.** — What did it feel like to win Chile's most prestigious literary award for a work that is indicative that you were forced into exile by your mother country?

**L.U.** — When *Cobro revertido* (*Longues distances*) came to Chile, it came through Argentina because it went through the Planeta contest for the whole Spanish-speaking world and had been chosen as the only Chilean novel to be short-listed.

Planeta-Chile (because Planeta is a multinational corporation) decided to publish it immediately, the day after it was known that it was the only Chilean novel to be short-listed.

**V.V.** — So it was meant as an act of normalization of the process now that Chile was once more a democratic country.

**L.U.** — Exactly. And since they had to choose a novel that reflects the exile situa-



tion, they chose this one because it had already been sanctified in Argentina.

**V.V.** — Well, Pinochet was still in power.

**L.U.** — No, he wasn't in power but he was there. When I came back to Canada in '93, I was invited by Planeta to publish my first book -the book of short-stories about the *coup d'état*.

**V.V.** — What does it mean to you to publish this novel translated in French in Quebec?

**L.U.** — I think that the novel belongs to Quebec in a way. The fact that someone like Jacques Lanctôt, who has been involved in the nationalist fight, would decide to publish it tells us something about the political climate in Quebec. There is a dawning idea of accepting other discourses about Quebec and reflecting on what the 'Other' thinks about Quebec and about the political situation there. ■



# De cómo Esquivel perdió el García

O RECUPERE SU PASADO EN SAM

THE RECORD MAN

GRACIELA MARTÍNEZ-ZALCE  
Coyoacán, Ciudad de México

**T**uve que viajar a Montreal para recuperar parte no sólo de mi pasado genealógico sino del de la cultura de mi país. Mi amigo Will Straw, autoridad en el campo de la música popular, me preguntó si no conocía a Esquivel, músico mexicano de gran éxito entre cierto grupo de conocedores en Estados Unidos y Canadá. ¿Who is Esquivel? Entonces, comenzó la descripción de lo que, perdón por la ignorancia, a partir de su obra se había denominado algo así como space age bachelor pad music. Los ruiditos, los metales usados de determinada forma, y conforme la descripción seguía yo escarbaba en mi memoria hasta que, de repente, supe de quién me estaba hablando: alguien que mis padres escuchaban, por tanto, vedado para mi generación por no ser suficientemente cool.

Juan García Esquivel, que en su exitoso paso por el norte había perdido el apellido paterno. Lo recordaba vagamente como esa figura nerdosa que aparecía dirigiendo orquestas en las películas en blanco y negro de los inicios del rock and roll en México, de cuando yo aún no había nacido, cuyos protagonistas estudiaban en el Politécnico o en la UNAM, y que pasaban en el canal cuatro después de la hora de la comida. En realidad, para mí un desconocido.

Fue entonces cuando hice el nexo: mi abuelo fue saxofonista y clarinetista y durante muchos años trabajó en la XEW que por décadas fue la estación de radio más importante en México. Su casa siempre estuvo llena de músicos. Mi madre tenía que acordarse de algo. Así que, mediante la magia del internet, le pedí que me contara sus recuerdos de niñez.

Como toda madre que se precie de serlo, la mía tiene una desdibujada idea de lo que hago para vivir, pero no tiene ni remota de cómo manejar la computadora. Instalada en la desconianza, vía correo electrónico se lanzó a contar; sin embargo, ¿qué podría ella decir que pudiera tener importancia para el trabajo académico? Sus descubrimientos fueron muy importantes para cosas que yo sólo imaginaba sin haber documentado nunca.

García Esquivel inició su carrera como pianista en la XEW. Iba de joven a los estudios, se quedaba por ahí, oyendo y luego ensayando, hasta que un día un pianista faltó y él lo substituyó para quedarse. Eso nos lo contó en su casa de Cuernavaca. Pero para llegar allí hay un capítulo del cual no

quiero prescindir.

En un primer mensaje, mi madre me contaba acerca de la época de oro de la XEW: dos orquestas eran las más importantes, la de Luis Alcaraz y la de Juan García Esquivel; la de Alcaraz era muy parecida a las estadounidenses, las de Glenn Miller y Tommy Dorsey; la de García Esquivel era diferente, más moderna, se atrevía a hacer innovaciones, por tanto, menos accesible al gran público.

Sin embargo, desconfiando de su memoria, comenzó a hacer averiguaciones; quería encontrar a García Esquivel para que confirmara su versión. Su primera llamada fue para el sindicato de músicos, donde le dijeron que creían que el maestro ya había muerto. Luego, se comunicó con la asociación de intérpretes y compositores sólo para descubrir que no guardaban archivos. Después, en la XEW le dijeron que mucha información se había perdido durante el terremoto del 85. Por último, llamó al canal dos, en donde uno de los cantantes y actores de aquellas películas rocanroleras conduce un programa matutino. Fue finalmente él quien le informó que García Esquivel vivía en Cuernavaca. El último paso de la búsqueda fue una llamada a la operadora telefónica que la comunicó con Sergio, el hermano de Juan. Y fue así como conseguimos la entrevista. Porque García Esquivel se sintió encantado de saber que alguien en Canadá estaba interesado en saber qué hacía actualmente.

De ese modo, el 17 de agosto, en una mañana lluviosa, Will y yo nos lanzamos a Cuernavaca, sintiéndonos los reservoir dogs (aunque mi hermano dice que parecíamos Dumb and Dumber), para llevar a cabo la entrevista. García Esquivel vive en una típica casa clasemediera de fin de semana, con una pequeña alberca, buganvillas y muebles estilo mexicano. En su recámara, el espacio es ocupado por una cómoda llena de folders con recortes de las notas que le mandan periodistas y admiradores del extranjero, que archiva en orden cronológico; una cama pequeña; una cajonera donde se apilan fotos de García Esquivel en los Estados Unidos, con Johnny Carson, con Frank Sinatra; un aparato de sonido, con discos compactos y cassettes de otros músicos, que también le mandan por correo; y, contra la ventana,

un piano y un restirador, donde trabaja. Las partituras están trazadas por él mismo, con portaminas; los trazos de los pentagramas son muy pequeños y minuciosos, limpiños.

Llevamos pensado un cuestionario que tiene mucho qué ver con la primera etapa de su carrera, con su trabajo en la XEW; sin embargo, de una anécdota pasa a la otra. Pasamos imperceptiblemente del inglés al español. Nos muestra los archivos, que son muy recientes. Toda la documentación anterior la perdió en una maleta en un aeropuerto. Tampoco tiene las partituras originales de sus arreglos. Alguien se las pidió prestadas y nunca se las devolvió. Una y otra vez le pregunto de sus años en México. Pero siempre vuelve a sus recuerdos acerca de los Estados Unidos. Se fue por una casualidad; se quedó casi sin pensarlo. Aún se sorprende del *revival* del cual es objeto. Porque lo cierto es que esto sucede allá, en el norte del norte.

Will y yo vamos a Mixup. Sus discos están clasificados con la música en español (?). Sólo hay una edición mexicana. El resto son las reediciones de BMG, importadas, que yo compré en Canadá. En la noche, durante la cena con amigos, todos se sorprenden de escuchar nuestra historia. La música de fondo, por supuesto, es la del *space age bachelor pad*. Todos recordamos las películas de nuestro 007 local, las de partidos de fútbol americano Poli vs. Universidad. Sin embargo, a todos les sigue resultando incomprensible el obsesivo interés de cierto grupo en esa música que no les dice mayor cosa. Como se dice acá, no cabe duda de que nadie es profeta en su tierra. ■

# Esquivel, Yé-Yé and Me

WILL STRAW  
Montreal

**I**n Mexico City, on the morning before we set out to interview Esquivel, I sit in Graciela's apartment and watch MuchMusic, from Canada. 'The Nation's Music Station,' by now a global operation, has been available to cable subscribers in Mexico for many months. There is the lure of the illicit for me in this. Where I live, in Montreal's Plateau district, MuchMusic is denied to me by a cable company which has decided (rightly, perhaps) that MusiquePlus, the French-language music video network, is all I need. In Coyoacán, I can watch MuchMusic slightly altered for the Mexican market, see the 'Canadian Concert Listings' interspersed with ads for Sean Connery films dubbed into

Spanish. MuchMusic's presence in Mexico means that hip young Mexicans actively seek out records by Treblecharger or The Rheostatics, Toronto bands who are by now better known in Mexico than in nearby New York State. Canada is one source for the musical obscurities which help rock fans in Mexico and

elsewhere define their tastes as underground.

My academic travels are almost always a pretext for seeking out music. Over time, I have become preoccupied with the ways in countries dispose of their cultural waste, the records and books whose lifecycles as commodities have reached their final stages. In Quebec, forty years of local music production have left behind the thousands of records which fill the Maisons du disque and other second-hand record warehouses scattered around Montreal. Inside these structures, I find the fake Tijuana brass albums produced in Montreal in the mid 1960s, the French-language Hawaiian records, the disco symphonies celebrating the 1976 Olympics. Quebecois popular music has its canonized moments and monuments, its chansonniers and political rockers, but its historical superiority over English Canadian music rests just as firmly on the ways it has produced its own kitsch. English Canadian music almost always bears the marks of a laboured earnestness, and its most innocent musical pleasures are imported from elsewhere. It has produced little which might serve as the soundtrack for cocktails or elevator rides, or lend itself to an anthropology of musical ordinariness.

In Mexico City, after several visits, I am perplexed by the apparent absence of used record stores. At the weekly record market in the El Chopo district, hundreds of young punks exchange tapes or CDs of hardcore and techno music, but there are few of the wrinkled old albums of easy listening music I expect and crave. The Sunday flea market is only marginally better, and I still wonder where a city with almost as many people as Canada has sent its old records to die. On the sidewalk of a side street, finally, I find hundreds and hundreds of old records leaning against the side of a building, and a vendor who furnishes me with a stool on which to sit as I finger through them. I buy a dozen or so. Some of these are titles I have seen for sale at collector's prices in the 'International' section at Disquível, the Montreal record store named in homage to the Mexican godfather of Space Age Bachelor Pad Music.

On earlier trips to Mexico, I bought, from street vendors, tapes of Mexican hits from the early 1960s. Most of these hits are Spanish language covers of American post-Presley pop or British invasion songs, part of the global explosion of translated pop that has been called the Yé-Yé International. In Montreal, people are struck immediately by the similarity of this music to Québécois pop music from the same period. Group names are similar — Los Hooligans/Les Hooligans — and the same Animals or Chuck Berry songs circulate through the repertoires of dozens of groups in both countries. By the end of the 1960s, in Mexico as in Quebec, musicians and fans had come to see this earlier explosion of musical activity as an embarrassment. At best, it was remembered as a frivolous moment on the road to an indigenous, serious rock tradition; at worst, as one more sign of each country's colonization and underdevelopment. The recuperation of yé-yé would come only twenty or thirty years later, when, with hindsight, it could be seen as one moment in a political and social awakening from the sombre moral climate of the 1950s.

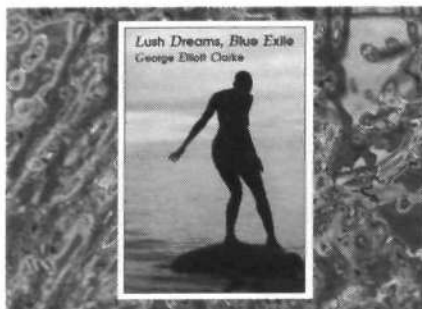
The night before we interview Esquivel, Graciela holds a dinner party at her apartment in Coyoacán. Mischievously, I put on a CD I have purchased earlier that day: 'Las Chicas del Rock & Roll,' a compilation featuring Mexican female singers from the 1960s and early 1970s. Mayte Gaos sings 'Susi La Coqueta' ('Runaround Sue'), Anina sings 'Luces de la Ciudad' ('Downtown'). Reactions are mixed, but recognition is widespread, and I adore the music. (Later, in the U.S., I will buy 'Romanticas del Rock' from the same series.) I am curious about the audience for these compilations: is there a subculture of young connoisseurs devoted to this music, as in Quebec, or do such collections appeal exclusively to nostalgic thirty-somethings?

Most of these compilations are on a label called 'Orfeón', and I discover, near the end of my trip, that they all bear the logo 'Made in Canada.' This is one more effect of NAFTA, of course, but it is another twist in the circuits of exchange that take MuchMusic to Mexico and leave Esquivel, forgotten in his own country, memorialized in the name of a Montreal record store. ■

GRACIELA MARTÍNEZ-ZALCE es doctora en Letras Modernas por la Universidad Iberoamericana investigadora del área de Canadá del Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte, donde es responsable del proyecto "Dos herencias en busca de una identidad", sobre cultura canadiense contemporánea. WILL STRAW is Associate Professor in the Graduate Program in Communications at McGill University and Director of The Centre for Research on Canadian Cultural Industries and Institutions. He is an editor of the book *Theory Rules: Art as Theory/Theory and Art*, and (with Simon Frith) of the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Popular Music*.



# Books • Libros • Livres



## *Lush Dreams*

Clarke, George Elliott. *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile*. Nova Scotia: Pottersfield Press, 1994. 95p. \$9.95.

Although not a recent publication, George Elliott Clarke's collection of poetry provides, among other things, a rich portrait of Black Nova Scotian culture, a culture that has been a part of Canada for over 200 years but to which insufficient attention has been paid (at least outside the province). To do so, Clarke draws upon an extensive store of imagery that is both personal and general, be it the October Crisis, Negro spirituals, Biblical stories, the Halifax waterfront (dockyards) or Paris bistros. Some poems even make direct reference to specific literary influences like T.S. Eliott ("Marina: The Love Song of Lee Harvey Oswald"), Pierre Valière, and Alan Patton ("Crying the Beloved Country"). Clarke weaves these various experiences into a poetry that is intensely private but yet open and never bitter.

Perhaps one of the most refreshing elements of Clarke's work is the definition of identity that it endorses. Never original, always hybrid and constituted of various other cultures this approach to identity figures most prominently in the title of a group of poems, "Africadia". In the introduction to his work Clarke explains the etymology of this word that designates the nation of Black Nova Scotians. Composed of the word "Africa" (a reference to the history of Blacks in America) and of the word Acadia (designating the Maritimes' French speaking inhabitants), a word that is itself hybrid because it borrows the Mi'kmaq suffix "cadie" signifying "abounding in", "Africadia" describes the various cultural influences that have shaped the Black Nova Scotian identity. Instead of limiting his experience to a narrow cultural ghetto, Clarke explores the various heritages both local and global that have contributed to his identity and to his poetry. This collection of poems is a pleasure to read. Not only has Clarke something to say but he says it beautifully! ■ S.F.



## *Inside The Statues of Saints*

George Szanto, *Inside The Statues of Saints, Mexican Writers Talk About Culture and Corruption, Politics and Daily Life*, Vehicule Press, 1996, 160 p. \$16.95

Perhaps, George Szanto is a saint himself and so reluctant to probe deeply that after reading his book, Mexico remains as mysterious as ever. Perhaps, the writers interviewed are too well ensconced in their literary careers to bring the fire and dark side of Mexico from the streets onto the page. There is a strange space that pervades the book, the distancing space between the Mexican writers, their audience, their country, their history. Is this Canada in a different form?

However, the book offers interesting nuggets and is thoroughly enjoyable albeit a bit sketchy. From Maria Luisa Puga: "...I realised that an ideal society cannot exist for long if it does not relate to the societies which are not yet ideal. So it has to get contaminated again." Or, from the same author: "...the culture of our nation emanated from Mexico City, and there is nothing more alien to our nation than the idea Mexico City has about the nation."

This book has much to do with the role of the writer within his or her society and the Margo Glantz interview is a curiously fascinating study in identity. The tone of this book is casual, friendly and likeable. My regret is that the dates of these interviews are not mentioned. But all in all, a worthy introduction to what obviously is a more complex subject than we Canadians can imagine, and no doubt, we need to hear much more about Mexico and her culture in the near future. ■ R.A.



## *When Fox Is a Thousand*

Lai, Larissa. *When Fox Is a Thousand*. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1995. 236p

When *Fox Is a Thousand* is about history, sexuality, mythology, friendship, family and death. Lai collapses various spaces and times to create a novel that recounts the stories of: a ninth century poetess, Yu Hsuan-Chi, of Fox, a mythological creature whose powers enable him to become female, and of Artemis, a history student at the University of British Columbia. The three stories blend and separate as Fox describes episodes from its thousand year existence and worries about his recent protégé, Artemis. Adopted when she was a child, Artemis meets Diane one day during a photo session with Eden, a male friend with whom she shares a bed but to whom she does not make love. The two women become friends and lovers until a complicated love circle develops between Artemis, Diane, Ming and Claude; a circle fraught with mystery and murder. Who killed Diane's gay brother? Could she have prevented it? Did Artemis kill Ming or was she too attacked in a public park because she looked different.

Although the story seems to weave dreamily in and out of reality, mythology, history, and present day Vancouver, it is not devoid of poignant commentary. Lai explores the intricate relationships among women, their cruelty, their violence and their the manipulation. She describes the violence suffered by women at the hands of men as well as that suffered by homosexuals and immigrants. Instead of preaching to a blasé reader, the author lets several subtle but shocking scenes speak for themselves. *When Fox Is a Thousand* is a well crafted text that is frequently addictive and very difficult to put down. ■ T.P.





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