



# OREAD

**AN INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE  
OF LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION**

**Spring 2021**



# **OREAD**

**A MAGAZINE OF LITERATURE  
IN TRANSLATION**

Published by OREAD Poetry Magazine Ltd.

Managing Editor: Antonio D'Alfonso

Managing Editor: Stephen Bett

Circulation manager: Bernard Gastel

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*Oread* is published four times a year in Victoria, BC. Back issues are available at \$11.00. A one-year subscription is \$30.00. Please send a cheque payable to **Oread**.

*Oread mailing address for all inquiries:*

Oread

1251 Rudlin Street

Victoria, B.C. V8V 3R8

Canada

*phone & fax:* (778) 350-0883

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Printed in Canada

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H.C. ten Berge  
*Translation by Pleuke Boyce*

*from Speaking in Tongues*

## The Surrounding and Nearby

1

The first light so close by, so far away  
that life is wondering where it will stay.  
It once fulfilled itself  
under that birch tree, at that window, on the path  
to the shed, when it snowed, the door stood ajar  
for a while, a boy felled something, the blow of an axe  
cut open the milkwhite wood.

Awake from night cold behind the window.  
Stripped of honey and autumn, the winter  
took possession of the eye. The body  
evaporated like a nut scent in December.  
Was it then that the blue of the berries  
blackened, the mud hardened, a snow hare  
in whitened grass moved its ears?

As long as nothing tapped or sighed, the images that would last were germinating. While he looked and not looked, sat at the window, greeted the cold earliness, as ice stood in the bucket and the wind sometimes abruptly stroked the ground or sobbed dryly in the hazelnut, everything exposed itself easily: before his eyes was the garden of clear death and misty life.

Moon white sank into the terrace, shadow images retreated from the shutters.

First steps around the house, frozen gravel, walkable mud,  
old snow between the hedges. Light from light, still  
borrowed, without colour, was creeping closer through the bushes.  
Forgotten things in the empty yard, a hat, a stick,  
a chair by the oak, a doll on a nail. The axe,  
recently sharpened, on the block beside the door.

Marvels of simplicity existed. That an incinerated  
briquette on the grate had kept its shape.  
How the dark hermitage in which he lived still made  
for a warm sight: the glow in the ashpan, the bed  
in the corner, the bread on the table, a teapot, a book.  
Remembered silence, never found again. To retain that.  
And that the cold had not yet corrupted into a heartless chill.

The fire was stirred or rounded up. Powderblack descended on the hearth stone. To bed, fully clothed, with hot-water bottle and scarf and papers everywhere against the draft. The wooden walls creaked, each night a blanket slid to the floor.

There was no difference between in- or outside.

But when he dreamt, it became summer and he was standing, flustered, beside a dark woman on a dusky forest road.

7

Was this the life that would go on?

Then too villains seized power or weapons  
and the world cried out.

But he had to guard what would one day disappear: the garden,  
the terrace, the shed in the grass and weathered faces  
under the lindens. To be standing there like that, pollarded, ossified  
embracing each other with wintry joints.

# On Piazzolla Street

1

Often it's  
the placing of objects  
on a table  
    someone once wrote in a letter.  
The drinking glass, the hairpin,  
a rose in a bottle,  
just sprinkled and given  
fresh water.

How you begin  
is a question  
that matters each time again.  
The end yet unknown, the path  
never cleared  
you follow inborn strategies,  
conflicting ideas, pliant  
or unbending,  
and held together by the rules of a mysterious game.

That you start, time  
and again, while you don't matter yourself.  
And what it is about  
is of less importance than music  
in the street, a deserted station, a pain  
that permeates life.

Shadow and light fall, lucid  
manoeuvres,  
feelings about, thoughts of,  
sometimes also  
an object of friendship, of rapture or hate.

Only seldom now and without illusions  
you conjugate  
to invoke (invoked, has invoked).

It comes down to  
birth and death and in between some love  
that lives and passes.  
Platitudes that are each time  
phrased anew  
on a run-down terrace in a backstreet.

Yet each time there are still eyes that shine.  
Yours.  
You drink in what you've seen and refill the glass.  
The end is in sight, the path cleared, a poem  
almost done  
you know hardly anything matters.

You are sailing on a damaged planet  
through ill-fated and indifferent space.

‘Where to start,’ someone wrote you  
in a letter.

Often it’s close by:  
an animal along the road (the armadillo  
that was crossing blindly), a landscape, a fox  
on the barn, a sparrow  
in the hedge, an empty house  
at the edge of a wood – a downpour  
lashing the plane trees.

Or perhaps a hare  
riddling a sleeping  
hunter with gunshot.

Or as here,  
glued together, eyes half closed,  
a tango-dancing pair  
on the corner of a street at night.  
The bar badly lit, plastic chairs  
on an empty sidewalk.  
He, wrinkled and earnest, in old jacket and hat  
a silk scarf around his neck.  
She, a ruined beauty  
in a tight dress with a slit  
who somewhat slowly, as in passing,  
has just accomplished a swing of the leg  
with finesse:  
Raw and intimate this dance  
a poem  
that with casual mastery  
leaves everything else behind.

This hole in the wall, a dump beyond redemption:

*Perro* with mange at the door, a rundown  
cantina, people living  
on the doorstep with absinth, bile-green  
paint on the wall  
flaking into the glasses.  
How Felipe is sucked off behind the counter  
and Mary Jane has her pussy eaten on a table –  
Backpacker from the U.S., stranded  
here one day  
    when a tango abruptly  
bit into her soul.  
And no one dancing or drinking  
can foresee  
that the lovers, like mangy dogs,  
will only get to the end of the film  
of the book  
– ripened by experience, struck dumb by grief –  
in cruel isolation.

Mary Jane Reed: *Selfportrait, or  
What a Sexy Tango Did to Me.*

The physical universe  
of a tango-dancing pair –

Tango is Tao:  
banned chaos  
nature subdued.

This is how it starts again every night:  
The bodies are slightly apart  
and yet inextricably  
entwined.  
The man in the old jacket,  
the woman with a rose in the dyed-black hair  
move sternly and daringly  
through the light  
on the corner of a seedy street.

Music sucks the dirt  
from invisible wounds.  
Restrained love breaks out  
from the hole in the wall.

The shoes shine as ever.  
Shoes are the pride and dignity  
of those who hardly own anything.  
This dance a closed domain.  
A body-to-body on the road to oblivion.  
Elsewhere a home altar waits  
with plastic flowers and the smile of the Holy Virgin.  
A heavenly hour equal to Her  
and yet to be of mortal flesh.  
Rarely fit, forever tired, not yet  
gone under from life  
they wheel with measured steps through the night.

Deep chant. Bandoneón.  
It ends with the body and the earth.  
It ends in the quarter, the street, the bar.  
Bitterness and sadness in the heart.

*El cuerpo y la tierra*

Bitterness sweetened by pain.

*¡La calle Piazzolla en mi corazón!*

Naïm Kattan

*Translation by Antonio D'Alfonso*

*from Celebrations*

Dear Deborah,

I'm writing you with confusion, overflowing with emotion. Every time I think back at our meeting at the birthday party, I feel ashamed. I had passed on your name to the event organizer not sure if I had your most recent address. The last time I heard from you was six years ago. Then three years ago your mother told me that you were talking, that you were doing fine, that your husband took care of you, and that your children had grown. This news put me at ease, though still bitter. Your name did not figure on the list of guests who had confirmed their presence. As I stumbled into the hall, a grey-haired woman rushed up to me. With the crowd all about, I wasn't sure it was you, and only recognized you later. You stood in front of me and said, 'It's Debbie.'

Debbie? I never got used to that name you started to use after you moved to California. My daughter's name is Deborah. Your mother and I spent many hours discussing your name. Debbie. I notice questions and worries on your face. 'I'm Debbie, your daughter. Don't you recognize me?' After eight years of absence, here you come to me as Debbie; of course, I didn't recognize you. The horror. My only daughter, my only child. You were a triumph. You had it right all along. I'm every bit the kind of father you accused me of being: absent, ungrateful, self-centered, selfish. I approve of you using these adjectives which you pinned on me. Kisses and hugs do nothing to smooth over my shame. My daughter, you're the person I loved most in this world, the one I adulated, and yet I didn't even recognize you. You didn't get upset. It even made you giggle, comforting as your silence had been, offering an excuse that wasn't compelling.

Did you purposely sit in the corner so that from the stage I could not notice you? On the following morning, you phoned to tell me you were leaving. I spent all last night looking for you. Did you walk out before the

end? You said you had no intention of embarrassing me publicly. My dear Deborah, you came to see me. You took a trip to be here. So why did you run away before I could see you, touch your hands, look inside your eyes, and express my never-dying and faithful love to you?

When Maurice, the organizer of the party, claimed standing on stage that my life was a success, bitter irony struck me down. When I think back to you leaving, I feel regret and am angry with myself and deeply sad. I should have put a stop to everything and carry you away from the event, the crowd, just to be alone with you, hold you tightly in my arms, like when you were a baby, my child. How many times you pointed your finger at me, cursing at me for not understanding. You might have been right. What can I do if no one suggests on how to act or think? Let me say again and again before I continue, for I fear you will stop reading this message, this calling out to you: 'I love you.' You were, you are, and you will always be my greatest love, the most important person in my life. I'm aware that for you I am responsible for every ill, and that your anger, disapproval, and dislike of me will never dwindle away. But you once loved me, your love has not faded out totally, though it might have a duller light at the moment, but I am certain that love is waiting. Otherwise, you would never have undertaken such a come-and-go trip to see me. You didn't stop to say 'Goodbye.' Though I am older, I am very much alive. I'm not ready to leave this world. Your mother and I separated after much quarreling and conflict. During our twenty years together, we fought non-stop. These battles lasted for hours on-end and sometimes went on for days. But you were present, and you being there provided some equilibrium, bringing us back on track. I know, you would run to your friend's house and spend days and nights there just to avoid coming back home and having to deal with the flames tearing down strength and breathe. I had to take a decision. I had to leave, not because, as you tend to believe, for another woman. Lily was a pretext, a life-jacket. She led me to the shore. Then we parted ways.

As a child, you would ask me, 'Why did you marry Mother?'

These were words emitted by a jealous little girl learning about her own body. I sang your mother's beauty. That was not a dream. Your mother is still the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She repeats that I never really loved her. Perhaps I didn't live up to her expectations, didn't fulfil her desire. I was immersed in my research, spending evenings and nights consulting documents at the archives, devising connections between photocopies, making my own discoveries. I was living in another world, in

history, a world I was unearthing, perhaps inventing.

I admit that for your mother all of this must have been frustrating, more so when she began to lose interest in teaching in a highschool. My coming back home at the end of the day would begin and end with fighting. Any excuse was good enough, even the most stupid and futile one.

I would often fall in some trap or other and had but one wish: to run back to my files in the archives.

You felt abandoned? You're right. You were the victim of a great misunderstanding that ripped your mother and me apart. You are old enough now to listen to me say that between your mother and I there was never a physical or a sexual problem. I longed for her and she longed for me, I think. I should confess that we found peace in bed. Immediate making up but it was transient. Your mother became frustrated, and my love didn't help matters. I put my passion for her on the back burner. I didn't realize that depriving her of passion would frustrate you.

People consider my life successful. You have seen your mother weep, complain, suffer. You blamed me for her unhappiness. It might be that this was your way of spurting out your resentment for my not looking out for you.

Years later, I found out that while I was away you argued violently with your mother. In the end you chose the quickest, the most direct, the least painful path: departure.

Followed the divorce and the never-ending bickering about financial matters. You concluded – or was it your mother who convinced you – that I was going to remove you from the heritage and to pass my belongings on to another woman. Foolish. In vain I tried to deny this and to defend myself. Nothing worked. I produced a will, but I could not get hold of you. I didn't have your address.

Deborah, my sweetie, you are my sole heir. In order to avoid disappointing you, let me spell everything out to you. Your inheritance will be modest. Except for my simple furniture and an old house that you will be able to sell after renovating it substantially, there are my books but no one wants books and my meager royalties. I don't repudiate the idea that I might be famous, it procures me happiness, but no reader is rushing out to buy my books.

You are the sole heir – I stress this fact – of a father who did not learn how to communicate to you the great wealth of love he had for you, who will bequeath you so little. Fortunately, you have a job and a husband who brings in a good paycheck; and from what I hear you really do not need the

booty of my inconsequential heritage.

Deborah, why then this long, unbearable silence? This is a question I repeat to myself. I blame myself and acknowledge my fault, yet I still believe that I have been a victim of injustice. Many times I tried getting in touch with you, always making sure to call you more than once. In vain. Each one of my calls remained unanswered. I have resigned myself to this failure; what other choice have I but to dive deeper into history books. I wonder if Canada – where I spent the greater part of my life – and, in particular, its history were not pretexts with which I could rid myself of suffering, lessen shock and forgetting. Paradoxically, history can become an uncanny, sly, and vicious manner of forgetting altogether.

There has not been a single day when the images of my little girl returning from school, sitting on my lap, wrapping her thin arms around my neck, haunt me, throb in my head like a disease that will not let go of me. In order to protect myself and to keep intact whatever emotion and strength within, maybe also through selfishness, I had to take the decision never to ask about you. Then yesterday there you were. My cherished daughter, my beloved daughter who appears out of nowhere, blowing away the dark clouds of despair. You are alive. What luminosity. What glory. You showed up and spoke to me. I don't content myself with facile solutions, as you might think. At my age, I have to take the cards that life has dealt me. I might dream of knowing my grand-children, of speaking to them, of spoiling, of disclosing my life to them so that I might not fade into nothingness, a pure loss.

As you might have noticed, by appearing to me in a flash, you have rekindled my strength and childhood dreams, bringing forth my capacity for expectations, the aptitude to still believe in promises. There were times when I accused your husband for everything gone wrong. I scarcely know him. I see you as a twenty-year-old woman. Beautiful, alive, the world in the palms of my hands. You didn't get along with your mother. I understand you, since I too felt the same way. Such was my fate. Nevertheless, complicity between us tore us apart instead of bringing us closer to one another. You started to blame me for your fights with mother, which were, as you have said, the results of my fighting with her. Not only did you drop all blame on me, you accused me for being responsible of all misunderstanding. Then, one day, Tim rang the door bell. He had come to pick you up. You introduced him to me for the first time. He stood there, a tall wimp, incapable of speaking a word of French, the language my parents had taught me. Like you, Tim is American. A fact that later you would throw to my

face. How could you have expected me to accept this man springing out of nowhere, a man I knew nothing about, a man who had come to steal my pearl, my treasure?

Your mother suddenly screamed at me: 'Jealous.' A second more and she would have led you to his arms as a way to get back at me, pushing me into my despair. It is true, I didn't welcome Tim. We must stress the fact that he did nothing to endear himself to me. He kept running away. You claimed that he was shy, afraid of me, and dealt with my hostility by rejecting me with silence. I told myself he was a man passing through, the relationship a stopover before he would hit the road again. Silence kept us apart, a silence that lasted months, an entire year. It was your mother who said he had come back. He had not given up. By making himself invisible, he finally won.

You moved to California. It was your mother, now your ally, who mentioned your stay in Montreal. Was she trying to get rid of you in order to reign alone and totally? We were both wrong about you. With you gone, living with your mother on a daily basis became intolerable. You got married and had children. I hope you have found happiness; may Tim be up to the task at hand, truly deserving of you. Why this damage? This hurting? I'm at the doorstep of old age, on the verge of moving on, I'm here by myself with my love. So much emotion abandoned, never felt, so much smothered desire. Such impetus frustrated. I don't have the energy to run after it all. I'm deprived of my grand-children. Why? You are old enough to confront resentment and overcome anger. You have made the first step. I beg you not to stop. You can and you must drop by with your husband and children. If you call me, I'll jump on a plane and fly down to California. I want nothing more from life. My time is up. The past is long gone, the future is stop. This would be life's last gift to me. Maybe I'll finally know contentment. I demand no explanation. Yesterday you took off in a flash. Were you upset that I had not recognized you? What matters is that you came to see me. You took a trip, and I was able to see you again. From now on, I will live waiting, impatiently expecting your return, your words that will make me happy, your eyes that will revive me.

Extend my best wishes to your husband. Kiss the children for me. I send you hugs and kisses, my dear child, woman, light of my life.

Your father,

René.

I fall on my knees in front of Deborah. I welcome her presence at the ceremony as a beggar receiving his first quarter. I prostrate myself, I humiliate myself. She came against her will, perhaps a pretense to visit her mother. She did not fly up here to please me. Maybe all she wanted to do was revenge herself. If so, it worked. I did not recognize her. My own daughter.

I confess that I have never loved anyone as I loved her. Affirmation of emotion: her always absent father. I have always been an absent father. For years, she scorned me, sending me no sign of life. When her children were born, I was not informed. They are grown-ups now, yet I, their grandfather, am not permitted to contact them. I am at loss for excuses, I admit all wrong-doing. Nothing doing. What terrible sin have I committed? Yes, D., I loved you so dearly. You call yourself Debbie. You see, I dare not call you by your name. Yes, you are no longer Deborah.

You have cut yourself from your real name. You have lost your name. In my mind, you have become D., the shadow of the young girl who became an adult and paced into the anonymous throng and have gone for good. The day you were born, gravity could not hold me down. Weightless, I jumped about, a buoyancy instilled in me by an intensity of feeling I had never experienced before, nor will ever experience again. I was a father, the tiny pink creature pawing me was my queen, my princess. The world would never be the same.

In those days, Marianne and I were very much in love. Your mother was enchanted to pick you up, breastfeed you, and I fed you with a baby's bottle and changed your diapers. A couple of years later, the bickering between your mother and I began. What could have happened? I cannot say you were to blame. A pretext, no doubt. These words, you will not read them, they are for you. You are not listening. You never have. I am aware of the faults I might have. Still, I ask you to forgive me.

Too busy with work, I spent evenings in my office. Have you ever asked yourself why? For my career? What a joke. They are celebrating me, singing praise about me, about my life, yet all I long for is to hear your snotty-nosed laughter. You liked nothing, neither meat, nor fruits. Except perhaps chocolate, and even then, sparingly. You disliked your clothes, refused to slip on shoes, for which your mother paid a fortune. You like neither your mother, nor your father. All the time I was blamed for it. A selfish father who thought only of his work, who never was there in the evening to kiss you good night in bed. You did not like your mother. You were jealous, rightly so. Since no woman was as beautiful as she. Unfortunately, you inherited

my looks.

We can accuse parents for many things, but children are not above blame. At three, you wanted to play with no one. When we went to the park or kindergarten you would steal other children's toys and break them to pieces. Belligerent, violent, you clammed yourself in silence and sulked the day long. You spent hours crying for no apparent reason. When you were older, you studied perseveringly, wanting to be top of your class in every subject. You abhorred competition. My friend would exclaim, 'You must be proud of your daughter.' Proud? Yes, I was. Disinterestedly. I had hoped for a loving and cuddling daughter who would jump on my lap and hug me. At two, you were already untouchable. A kiss? Never. A hug? Never. You were not pretty, not even possessing the charm of a child.

Too often we mistaken immaturity and indecision with novelty and innocence. You were dry, and people mistook this for timidity. I still loved you. I was hoping for the impossible to happen, for a miracle. As you grew, your eyes saw the world. You had no friends and, at fourteen, you were followed by pitifully plain boys. Guys stood at your beck and call. Losers. Weak men who expected help from you, who obeyed you. Frugality became synonymous of you. They bent over backward for you. Often I wanted to grab them by the collar and give them one hell of a jerk. But you were my daughter. I was not going to side with them.

Ensued the crowning incident: half-witted, white-lipped Tim. He must still be there standing, night and day, waiting for your next order. You would never have stayed with him otherwise. You married him, and he gave you children. As inept as he might be, he has a job and then expects your parsimonious signs of contentment. Where did you come from? How do you manage it? Years fly by, and not a sign from you. I write and phone you, but you avoid me. Even when you pick up the receiver, you pretend not to be there. I have given up.

One day your mother told me that you were ashamed of me. Ashamed? Who are you to be ashamed of anyone? In your mind I was an immigrant flown in from some dark corner of the globe. A foreigner. Nonsense. Then people decide to throw a party and celebrate your dad, and suddenly here you are. You jumped on a plane. What did you bring back with you? There is no lucre and glory is not transferable. When I was sick and alone, I received no postcard or call from you. Nothing. But I have turned that page. You have no mother or father. Of course, you were concerned about your inheritance. You inquired and, once reassured, you kept your mouth shut.

The day you caught a glimpse of me with a woman. You crossed over to the other side of the street. More than once. You often saw me in the presence of women. That's normal. There was no way I was going to dignify this behavior by defending or excusing myself. You disapproved of me, were angry with me. Is this an excuse for me to humiliate myself? Or should I, the naive man that I am, still wait for a miracle to happen? A loving daughter who traveled the continent to visit her father. Or was it because you had an appointment at the bank? The insurance company? A lawyer?

You are to me a nagging reminder of suffering, pain, and failure. Misfortune. I expected the impossible at your birth. A crucial moment, essential, snatched from existence. I am a broken man. Nothing is worse than losing one's child who is very much alive. The gaping wound awaits the wake.

You appeared to me and everything disappeared. I was willing to compromise on everything. Life could start anew, begin on a different footing. But you vanished, accusing me of not recognizing you. When I finally did recognize who you were, I whispered: 'This is the only woman I have ever loved.' I know you would bring up your mother. I have not forgotten how insolent you can be, how you enjoyed provoking me: 'You've never freed yourself from your mother.' You seem to forget that I had no knowledge of what desire was when on the rare occasion I pressed myself against her. Even today I am unable to say she was a woman with me. I watched you grow into a woman, with your generous breasts, your portly waistline. You were my daughters. When I say you are the woman I loved the most, it is not without reason; you were a dream broken by hardship.

You rejected any manifestation of emotion or affection for me. Thus, my greatest love was lived in frustration, bitterness, and ultimately anger. Hopelessness. I am upset with you today and probably until the day I die. Yet you wrap your arms around my shoulders and all the walls would forthwith collapse. This would be the miracle, and I could finally step into the circle of life, a truly celebrated man. To be recognized once and for all as your father and the grandfather of your children that have been kept away from me.

Dear Adrian,

Your presence at the soiree and comment and support were moving and gratefully appreciated.

It must surely be a decade since our paths last crossed at the university or at some departmental committee meeting, without truly talking. Always courteous toward one another, it was maybe our way of not stepping on one another's feet, or worse avoiding one another. Your note and you being there carried me back in time, enabling me to relive our precious memory-laden past. Then the unexpected break-up. Unexpected? Maybe not. In truth, true friendship survives circumstance, rising above the tribulations of everyday existence, grows with the vagaries of personality, volition, and ambition. It is too easy to pull oneself out of a strange relationship by pretending it never existed, or by convincing ourselves that it was never a tight relation in the first place.

You came to the event and shed new light over the past. Perhaps I got it all wrong about the meaning of our friendship. By putting a stop or (with a sense of hope) by pushing our friendship on the back burner was my way of fulfilling the need to review my responsibilities. What ever happened to us? When we first met as students, we shared a similar thirst and hunger for research and ambition. There never was any sort of rivalry between us. Our research was guided by a commonality of efforts. We could celebrate every individual discovery and respective accomplishment. We drank the water from the same well, and shared our gains in order to furnish the supply. Our tacit goals bound us, and we never felt the need to openly discuss this connection.

Gradually, imperceptibly, however, our paths led us in different directions. Slowly and patiently I directed myself to the study of original archival documents and texts. My activities were for you synonymous of boredom. You rejected my work, claiming it was all for naught. You yourself were driven by impatience, seeking for shortcuts and parallel paths. You would repeat that you wanted to avoid dead ends, steering away from mazes where

our colleagues would lose themselves, eventually withdrawing from the work because there was nothing to find. Consenting to this fruitlessness, or the unexpressed wish to back down when confronted by fact: such was the reality of archival analysis. With no need for explicit terms or precise explanations, you jumped about to avoid the required effort and constraints of research. You got intuitive flash concepts, often correct, which required the backing of proof. Without asking the help of others, you expected others to finish what you started, someone strong-willed, like myself, colleagues you considered Benedictine monks.

When your book *de Maisonneuve* came out, I was astonished by the quantity of facts and dates you were able to gather. In my article – which I think I should never have written – I was outrageously severe. I panned you for borrowing information from the work of fellow historians, whom you meticulously quoted but to which you added nothing.

I should have written that the merit of your contribution lay elsewhere, in the evaluation, in shedding light on historical characters and their society and the conjunction where both overlap. You shed light on the role of one man in history. Your book was reflective, not a research study. It was a personal book, more personal than anything I could have ever written. I was also clearly, though never admittedly, frustrated and flustered for not having produced anything, whereas here you were with a monumental achievement.

The rivalry between us was comprehensible. We were becoming adults and stepping into the social game. However, between friends rivalry can be disastrous. Surprisingly, inequality, or what we think is inequality, sets in. The road ahead remains unchanged, long and arduous. When one of the friends overpasses the other, separation follows, and soon resentment develops. One feels betrayed, neglected, deserted, the victim of injustice. One reacts with pernicious envy in silence and the unspoken. With hindsight it is easy to understand our behavior. We have reached the end of the road, each respectively, and with commendable perseverance, both with our share of mistakes and failures.

At the time, you did not say a word or ever alluded to my first article. I could sense your reaction in the tone of your voice, by the manner you peered at me. Your attitude toward me had changed. We no longer were allies, accomplices, friends. We turned into simple colleagues and rivals.

I did not lose by being patient. When my book, *Vaudreuil*, was published, your reaction astounded me. I still recall a number of sentences from

your article: 'A heap of insignificant facts, chaos painstakingly detailed.' The sting still pricks today. But I reaped what I sowed. Later, we decided to distance ourselves, paying no attention to our respective work. Yes, you dedicated your books to me, and I dedicated mine to you. As if we had chosen at the same time not to break up the friendship, fanning it alive from a distance, with memory and nostalgia for a profound relationship. Esteem replaced admiration and concord.

How could we have dilapidate such capital? A treasure of emotion and sentiment? Why? For vainglory and awards and brief joys given us with titles and positions? I can tell you at present neither qualification nor a powerful job is worth a friend's handshake. No reward, no award is comparable to the affectionate and knowing glance. We have had our clique of colleagues, acquaintances, followers, admirers. We stayed away from one another. When someone asked about one, the other would gladly reply with indifference and stuffiness: 'What he's doing is fine, but I'm following a different path, other fields of research.'

We have lost the joy of being together, of sharing our fears and feelings, noticing these in the other's eyes, recognizing oneself in the mirror of friendship. We were afraid of hurting the other. What terrible misunderstanding! What a calamitous loss! With the passing of time, I have come to realize that never will I know certitude, no document, no archival document contains the right answer. So instead of being jealous of what I called your intuition, I admired your spirit. Though I didn't always agree with you, I was impressed by your vision. I sat down to write more than once, but I would hold back from doing so. I imagined you laughing scornfully at a distance, disclosing one of my secrets: 'Dear me, you're becoming sentimental.'

As you know, age doesn't forgive. I would scrutinize your dedications and each one of your notes to me whenever I published a book. At official dinners and meetings to ally suspicion, our courtesy was impeccable. People believed we were still friends. We avoided playing at being indifferent. Then came the one time when Marianne and Clarisse began a spat, which acted as an unconscious extension of what was happening to us, they prolonged it to our separations, deepening wounds that would never heal.

This occurred a week after my book on Amerindians and New France came out, which, if your recall, was a success that spread beyond our circle of historians. I had sent you a copy of the book, and you wrote me an acknowledgement of receipt, without mentioning your wish to read it. I spoke about my feelings about Marianne. We were going through a tough

period in our marriage, which deteriorated so much that it brought us to an end. In public, we didn't say a thing, wearing the masks of normalcy which many mistook as stability and intimacy. I had no idea that you and Clarisse were crawling down a similar tunnel.

Supper at the Armands began quiet well. The guests produced the usual compliments in a perfect neutrality and indifference so becoming of our colleagues. Ensued discussion on the Prime minister's speech. Our wives sat at the table, facing one another, had never spoken, imitating the taciturnity that we had adopted ourselves. They greeted at cocktails and dinners, stared at one another, always on their guard. Back home Marianne would express generally negative comments about Clarisse's attire.

On that particular occasion, during our drive back home, irritated by the fuss around my book and in particular by my excessive worrying about what she called my work, she unleashed a volley of complaints about my repeated absence, and how I didn't look at her anymore and didn't acknowledge her in any way. She was furious. I don't remember who started it, but there was hostility and screaming, venomous words were pitched to and fro, oil poured onto the fire. Clarisse had murmured ironic compliments about the success of my book.

Marianne lashed out, 'René doesn't need me to produce his work. I have a life of my own. I wonder why you would want to congratulate me for his success?'

Clarisse accused her of being an arrogant snob. As far as she was concerned, she gladly partook in her husband's recognition.

From one end of the dining table to the other, the Armands tried to veer the conversation to lighter topics. Our wives, frustrated with their husbands against whom they vented their anger, now turned against one another. It was during that dinner, hearing Clarisse's invectives, that I realized how much you disliked me. We would no longer walk on the neutral path of friendship, which had turned into unspoken acrimony and antagonism that you kept locked up inside. We declared war, but it was our wives who were fighting in our place.

The next morning I begged Marianne to send you a letter, if not of apology, at least of reconciliation.

'It's you who should write the letter,' she bounced back.

I did. I hoped it could be a call for peace. Nothing. You were off to live in Europe for a year. When you came back I heard that Clarisse had left you. Curiously, Marianne left me as well, as though she had exchanged her secret

with your wife.

Throughout the years, we failed to spend a single hour together and talk. Once, maybe you remember, we were sitting in the university cafeteria. We were being civil, as colleagues should be, speaking about work, and, as though we had chosen to steer onto calmer seas, we began to complain about the university administration, politics, and leadership, cautiously shunning any mention of personal opinions which in those days stood poles apart. I was about to disclose my feelings of regret and cry out help to you. But it was either too early or too late. You have come now, and I'm sure this is a returning of sorts. I can't be misreading the situation. Your note is so heartwarming, so personal, as if you had fallen upon some book on friendship and intimacy. More importantly, you coming to the party. We hugged, snivelling like good buddies.

Let's get back. Think about those years that have flown by; better still, think about the present and about the time left. We have the same age. Rivalry is futile and between us totally absurd, for it has no *raison d'être*. I find myself daydreaming of those endless afternoons and evenings that could have been. You could have read my manuscripts, and I yours. I could have helped with the details; and you could have pointed out to unexplored syntheses. We complimented one another, one the extension to the other. Had our friendship been alive, it could have helped us in our research of history. It's a pity we were incapable of freeing ourselves of teenage impatience. We tripped and dropped into the confusion between vanity and the work at hand. Luckily, for you, less so for me, work was real. Pride and awards fade away.

What remains of the party? A shower of praise, a succession of sentences piling up. Thankfully there is glimmering and there are flashes, unanticipated and felicitous. I held out my hand and you drew me to you with your arm. I won't forget the intensity. I will let a few days pass before I phone you and invite you for a meal I will cook for you. We will drink beer for old time's sake, but I have to be careful nowadays. No need to mention the lost years. Let's try to live these days of friendship, those of our youth, those that await us. Let me shake your hand. Hugs to you. Impatient to meet up soon. In trust. Have I said, 'Thank you'?

Your friend,

René

I waited a few days before getting back to these letters one by one. This particular one seems to be authored by a man cribbed in senility. Looking for Adrian's friendship, stretching out my hand to him. I am standing on the edge of a abyssm. I let myself drop in.

From the moment we met, Adrian looked like a wolf. I had just arrived in Montreal, and he was my guide. Was I unconsciously following him as he made his way to his goal? Imitating his strategies. At the time I was unaware of my own goals and when he listened to me he would guffaw in my face. 'I don't believe you don't know what you want.'

Adrian wanted it all: a job, function, hierarchy, money, fame. The shortest road is often the best. Spending my time with archives was to him the highest form of ingeniousness, that is, the dedication of a fool. For him, there was one path to follow and that is the one to success. Climbing up the ladder, making a lot of money, and putting his name on everyone's lips. He was an ambitious man of the worse kind. Long before I became aware of this, he must have sensed reluctance and rejection on my part.

When it came to research, short cuts were for me fraudulent and intellectual trickery. The worse sort. The pursuit of success and the lure of financial grain can be found in different fields of work. Adrian believed that in the kind of research work he was doing there would be no competition, that no one would place hurdles on the path for which he alone had devised the point of departure and arrival. Well, I had the face of a foreigner, I could be the naive intruder who would spoil it all by creating havoc in his enterprise.

When he first started to publish, I questioned his calculations. What in my eyes defined the limits of intellectual investigation was for him a way to checkmate any other researcher or strategy. I do not believe he pursued analysis with a clear mind or reasonably. One acts and moves forward according to subjective disposition. Adrian was sly, brutal, evil. I had a major obstacle for him. So as to be free in his works, he had to rid himself of anyone who stood in his way. War was declared, a cruel and merciless battle. What was worse was that I offered him no alternative path or a comparable niche. I walked on his path, but my way was more just and honest, and more arduous and long. What? I the foreigner and the hard-working man, prevented him from attracting jobs and bringing him glory? There was no solution other than to destroy me.

Our struggle was concealed but systematic. Rumors, allusions, suspicious. Why was I so jealously concealing my origins? What was I scared of?

If I was not a prankster, then I should be revealing my true face. Was I a Muslim born in the Yemen? An Arab from Libya? He would never dare attack me openly. He first began making allusions to historians who emigrated from distant countries, who hid the background for obscure reasons, who worked in society become vulnerable for being open and welcoming to strangers. And then he confronted me directly, non-stop. He came up with inaccuracies, acting as if he were a famous scholar whose role was to point out mistakes in methodology and decry the lack of peer reviews. The field on which he would exercise his ruse was so narrow as to attract no scrutiny. Besides, who would believe a foreigner over the child of his country? The true heir of ancestral values whose epic he was telling or the parasite no one had invited? I admit I was naive and it took years before I caught a glimpse into his despicable tactics and his base stratagems. Moreover, I had neither the energy nor the velleity to track him down. Yet the murmurs began to resound about and behind superficial acts of kindness silence imposed itself. In this tiny field, people chose to quietly back the real child of their country who was a man of power, who would not dispense benefits and prebends. Luckily, I walked right by this fire without noticing a thing. With lowered head I locked myself in the darkness of archives.

Associate professor, head of the department, vice-dean, you were climbing the ladder. And then you were eyeing recognition: Royal Society, the Order of Quebec, and the Order of Canada. You asked for the help of anyone who would intercede in your favor. You were not shy about showering them with glowing colors and promoting them. Effective recommendations, invitations to symposiums and conferences in Canada and abroad. Photographs of you were published in magazines that wrote about your travels and business trips, soliciting your ideas on social problems, drawing from you solutions to regional politics. You were excellent at pussyfooting. You had refined the art of appearing to be a radical when in fact all you did was fighting against windmills. You were an iconoclast, your positions aggressive, however we could never identify who the enemy was. What a character! That is who you have grown to be. And what a character!

On this journey of yours, History was just one element and research a pretext. You forgot about me, except whenever I published a book. You did not even find the time to criticize it in a review. That would have been wasting your time. Besides, it would have meant you had to read the book. The darling of the media, you had mentioned in passing my book in an interview, making sure to quote an historian of this country who had already

worked on the subject, sensitively and passionately, implicitly accusing me of lacking both sensitive and passionate. You applauded my group of Benedictine monks, an image you relished tagging on me, an allusion to my secrets and to suspicion.

During some evenings, after having sourly quarreled with Marianne or having had to deal with Deborah's bitter insolence, who was suffering of insomnia, I cursed university life. I had chosen this career for love and respect of silence and research. I found myself face to face with so-called friends and colleagues, declaring a merciless war in the name of trademarks and for financial gain. In this arena, one struggled for a quick promotion, a better salary, to win a sabbatical vacation, or for advancement, trips, and conferences. This seemed so terribly pathetic and so far from my principles. In the heart of the night, I would ask myself if I had not made a mistake and if my determination was laughable.

Here we are speaking about my life and what some acknowledge as my contribution to the field. Today my colleagues celebrate me. You could not possibly miss the party. You had to sneak in to make sure that, compared to all the events dedicated to you, mine would consist of bits and pieces that could never overshadow your fame. This would make it easy for you to condescendingly congratulate me. It would come at no cost. On the contrary, it would prove to all how superior a scholar you were, and appear to be a generous and gracious man. I, the foolish sentimentalist at bay, mistook this as fidelity to our past friendship. Friendship?

By chance, I ran into your wife in a bookstore, after her scene during that particular dinner. She greeted me warmly, I stretched out my hand. I had nothing to say to her. I did not want to be at the receiving end of her bitterness. Marianne had told me already about your separation. You would not have had trouble finding another woman on whom you could drop gifts and who would become the maid to your arrogance. There is nothing left for you to have. Jobs and positions fatally lead to retirement. To your credit, no publication of yours passed by unnoticed in the sea of apathetic scholars. There will never be PhD students who will feel constraint to quote you either out of fear or connivance. Perhaps you are too old to take notice. Too old? Coming from one who is asking for your friendship? I am standing where you are standing. I wonder if this is a sign of advanced senility or lack of ambition? After all, it is just another instant in our life; we have to swallow a beer smelling of a friendship that could have been. This is neither cynicism nor faintheartedness. At best, a ray of lucidity. What more to

expect if not these rare moments when we spend time with ourselves. Fugitive spells in which we acquiesce to recognition and gratitude for what existence has offered us. Seconds for summoning a witness, because we are still too young to celebrate in solitude.

Larry Tremblay

*Translation by Donald Winkler*

*from The Soldier Eye*

**The right eye (excerpt)**

Dirty word  
nasty word  
sick word  
passed from mouth  
to stubborn mouth  
malefic word  
toxic  
spread abroad  
in exhalations  
of war  
of commotion  
of gloom  
gawking word  
rolling round  
in the sawdust  
fever word  
word sodden  
from sweat from fear  
fanged word  
wrathful word  
noxious  
fly droppings  
bogs  
where light putrefies  
ingested regurgitated  
swathed in rancour  
flesh hole

bile ball  
martyr's howl  
cleaver face  
cleaver thought  
words from charred lips  
from blasted tongues  
maddened debris  
intermixed with brick

with photos in shreds  
with splintered fittings  
word bemoaned  
clouded with salt  
thickened with night  
that the rats gnaw  
chilled blackened word  
no fingernails no head  
vermin word  
lynched word  
hanging from slogans  
rigid with hate  
whistling at dawn  
word poured  
onto wounds  
tattered word  
truncheon word  
hoicked out of skulls  
fish word  
emptied of eggs  
tank word  
word plunging  
from the tip of the tongue  
onto the blooded plain  
word chewed to bits  
by teeth of steel  
contraband word  
parcel of poison  
word veins  
thrown onto the snow  
concrete word  
become dark eternity  
word locked in  
by the cold  
dazed mangy

massacred word  
lime coated  
within earshot of rowdy fiestas  
word holed up  
in damaged mouths  
asphyxia  
wolfing down the wind of heaven  
word dismembered  
sobbing in the grass  
bleak landscape  
ripe for predators  
clotted word  
a gush of drool  
a vile symphony's  
dropped note  
a bullet riddled word  
marble hard eyes  
tearless

and then

poor words  
murmured  
through lungs  
like wave leavings  
warmed  
in the mouth  
then in daylight unspooled  
stretched out unkempt  
rounded words  
touching each other  
fern words  
that the breeze  
chimes

words learned  
by the heart  
stored away in softness  
scented for revels  
words on a pillow  
the morning discloses  
startled vases  
toppled by oblivion  
milk-rooted words  
on the verge  
of conception  
venous words  
choking the light  
kissing words  
knocking against doors  
relegated to insignificance  
kamikaze flies  
drowned in wine  
words strangled  
by emotion's  
gummy hands  
padlock words  
feigning  
when you get near  
to awaken  
words missing letters  
in the mouth  
of a newborn  
amnesic words  
swollen with tears  
sperm words  
held  
in wait  
for a green spiral head  
to uncoil

yet  
the roaring thirst  
for words

yet  
the razor  
that mouths  
subject them to

words fallen from the tree  
burned in basins  
words shut  
into their dead skin

yet  
the orchestra of knives  
of words

claw words  
that make concrete howl

and lash mouths  
flay mouths  
with a scoring of shears  
to uproot teeth  
dropped into common  
graves

inferno words  
a metal horizon  
pounded  
with leather fists

what must one cease to be  
to appease what's red?

where do the songs go silent  
that can rinse words clean?

Where do they hole up  
the grey lips of silence?

Grozny terror  
Gaza agony

from a garden of bombs  
rises the wilful smoke  
of glacial words

to purchase new words  
to replace  
those that failed

to kill  
sick words  
to kill the desire to kill  
to trample words  
along with their lips  
their clacking

what must be done for the snow  
to regain its sight?

must language  
to destroy  
words of prayer  
words of murder  
take its own life?

THESE WORDS:

Grozny

Sarajevo

Baghdad

Gaza

Jerusalem

Beirut

Alep

Kabul

viscous figures

figures enabling  
horror to sleep  
in the ledgers

crucified figures

remnant figures

cadaver figures

how many more times  
must throats be cut?

how many more times  
must women be raped?

a thousand?  
a hundred thousand?

how many more times  
must we empty common graves  
and count the mouths stopped-up  
like shattered clocks?

what must we cease to do  
to appease what's red?

where do the songs go silent  
that rinse words clean?

where do they hole up  
the grey lips of silence?

how many words  
must I forge  
with hatred  
for my writings  
to be sated?

I find no end point  
for the horror

where does the worst draw breath?

this fatigue  
these figures  
they come from flesh  
inexhaustible insects

must we have a thousand century silence  
for the word assuage to function?

do we need a plain of a hundred thousand moons  
for a single proud tree  
to rise up with its greenery?

is there a song more beautiful  
than that of a face  
gathered in by dawn?

why do we store  
our odious words  
in children's brains?

why do we not wipe clean  
our blooded boots  
when we enter  
children's souls?

I bend earthwards  
I press my sides  
to force out words

words there for as long  
as God's name  
in my weary mouth  
will light my tongue's wick

THESE WORDS:

tongue tip  
blooded plain  
iron teeth  
contraband  
packet of poison  
dark eternity  
rowdy fiestas  
asphyxiation  
bleak landscape  
a gush of drool  
dropped note  
vile symphony  
damaged mouths  
marble-hard eyes  
tearless

words hit the ground  
turn it to mud  
words enter his bowels  
rob him of poundage

I feel sentences  
swarming under my boots  
I wrench wide my mouth  
with a crowbar cry  
I throw up more fiercely

filthy word

storm word

acid saliva

homicidal syllables

spiked with cries

genocidal word

petrol word

blood diamond word

how many more times  
must we stitch up our mouths  
mass graves where our language  
decays?

what snows within our sentences?

I hear us  
in our fear  
we forge gods  
small as our eyes  
and we beg them  
to shut down our hearts

we beg them  
to give us pickets  
to plant them

in our neighbours' throats

we beg them  
to pour our intelligence  
into our weapons'  
metal paranoia

we beg them  
to amputate our children  
that we may pleasure ourselves  
in our massacres' ooze

our hard gods  
like our frozen fingers  
we shout out to them  
that they may break  
despised cities' backs

we badger them  
to force  
crushed glass  
into enemy mothers'  
wombs

we worship them  
that they may crush  
traitors' testicles

our gullet  
gods  
full to bursting  
with our requests  
we demand  
they spew out  
their purity  
onto the heads of jackals  
thieves in our fields  
gobblers of our fruits

jackals that have  
taken hostage  
our fathers' lands

we love our gods  
dumber than ourselves  
chiller than our breath  
more cutting than our vows  
blinder than our footsteps  
on the road of loathing

we love them  
dumber than ourselves  
with or without faces  
but always potent  
in the elimination  
of what is not us

we love them  
our sick and saintly gods  
clothed in our words

the word river  
where our lifeless livestock runs

the word stretcher  
where our kidnapped children bleed

the word death throes  
that no sheet shields

the word tumult  
that fumes the horizon

the word steep  
in our acid mouths  
unscantable  
unpardonable

why do we not cleanse  
our lips of their filth  
before kissing our children?

why do we pour  
our hateful saliva  
into that of our children?

our words drop  
like old fruit  
from our black mouths

poorly sealed packets

ideas hammered in

wax of shame

splintered neon

fractured phalanxes

odds and ends  
unable to say  
hello  
because powerless to unearth  
a good day

Robert Lalonde

*Translation by Jean-Paul Murray*

*from Iotékha'*

The doctor thinks it's nothing more than a nasty bronchitis. But what about death? And my wild restlessness?

You're waiting to see the X-ray, naturally. It's as though a lunatic inside you is wishing for disaster.

You're upset over not being reassured. The puff you take when you come out of the clinic tastes like salt and blood. But the light is soft in the foliage.

\* \* \*

A dark night, the wind howls in the windows, the stove grumbles. A voice keeps telling me: "We're lost, we're lost!" It's the old plaintive voice of winter nights long ago, when the mournful wind sang a song of death in chimneys. Solitude, isolation, shrouding snow, the clock's disconcerting tick-tock beating at the rhythm of fear, despair, the frost's quiet violence. Alone in your cabin, you listen to the wolves, and stingily feed the fire. You no longer hope or wait, you blow into your hands, trying to warm up, but it doesn't last. You're afraid and yell out, but without a voice.

Am I imagining all this? No. I'm remembering. There is no past. Everything happens now. "There is no it was, the past is," writes Faulkner. We were and are those threatened beings, those martyrs in the wolf's jaws, those shivering skeletons crouching before the scrawny fire. All our terrors are linked to the night of the massacre, the night of the long knives, the icy night, the great final night when our souls remember the wars, the plunder, the rapes, the slaughter, the blood, the mud, the cries of despair, the incomprehensible folly of the world. Each shiver goes back in time and rekindles the great terror. To be human is to be old, to have been, to have suffered, to have died in the darkest night.

I'm sitting at the table here, on this night that's eternal, or rather contemporaneous with every age, every hope, every defeat, every despair, and with the uncertain peace that follows massacres. Alone with my desire for dawn, my need for the sun, my thirst for light.

\* \* \*

GLORIA. The river and I roll along side by side. I press the cruise control button, aligning my speed as closely as possible with that of the current. Then I raise the volume of the radio, which is playing Vivaldi's Gloria in D major, organs, strings, trumpets and voices. And now, the music, the car, the river and I are cascading together in the sunshine. Allegro vivace, then andante, and then vivace again. The voices, the white foam, the long, smooth, bright stretches of calm water, the grassy shorelines, green and golden, the sun shimmering in the water, the pounding of my heart, the whistling of wheels: we speed along in perfect harmony.

The enchantment lasts a good twenty minutes. While savouring it, I keep telling myself I owe my joy, in equal measure, to the sun, Vivaldi, my car, to the magic of the electronic brain—a small mythical and plodding creature inside the darkness of my dashboard—to the recent heavy rain that has swollen the river, to the virtuosity of the singers and musicians, to the unfathomable happenstance of my still being alive and driving along the right road.

And, of course, a little to those whimsical organizers who cancelled the lecture I was scheduled to give without telling me. Had the event taken place and the audience been there, I'd have taken another road, a faster one, through factories, electrical towers and dried-up ditches.

\* \* \*

With Proust, I share the certainty that everything that really exists only exists through reflection. Images brought to life by rebounding light. This isn't a system, nor a philosophy. It's a resurrection through unexpected brightness of the original happiness, the fundamental sorrow, the founding joy or sadness.

This morning, for example, the bright daylight takes me back to those winter afternoons when I was twelve years old, to the breathless joy of skating across the lake—the world's horizon ceaselessly receding, the blinding light, the great sky of ice. As I was experiencing this mad joy, it seemed to be the memory of a sparkling day from some other life before life. It's hard to describe simply what takes part in a sort of radiant short circuit of the memory, life returning into life—the yellow powder that morphs into sun-

flowers thanks to Vincent's wet paintbrush. I don't know. It's as though a window were open wide onto the lake, the ice, the sky from long ago.

We go down the stairs, still numb from sleep, haunted by the last image from the latest dream, and suddenly, because of that funny patch of sunlight on the wall, we're happy, delighted and new, confident without knowing why. It's a gift, a new opportunity for us to see for the first time. As though we were recovering our sight, and our eyes were opening like those of the apostles on Easter morning.

If there is a God, for me, he's in that light, which revives my legitimate, natural, inalienable right to happiness, a happiness I remember without ever having known it.

The same magic applies to sorrow, shame, fear. For example: the page I wrote last night, about the Dawn of Time's famous rebirth. There's also a prescription for the radical impediment to living. How can I say it? I seek and find, in the *Larousse* dictionary, this strange expression and its definition: "*acquisitive prescription*, creating a property right through continuous possession." That's exactly what it's about. We possess, on a continuous basis, a sense of sadness and a sense of joy. Each sudden horror—last night, it was the newscast reporting that war had started in the Middle East—immediately brings back the terror of the first darkness, of our lives bleeding to death in the starless night of a battlefield, or the smoking ruins of a cabin stormed by the savage violence of faceless enemies. And each sunray brings back the beginning of the world in an explosion of cosmic embers.

Suddenly, I again see the terrifying, slow and beautiful scene in *Lord of the Rings* where they cross the Dead Marsh. Those admirable quiet faces, lying under water, dead people delivered, appeased, their big eyes open, eyes that saw the massacre, and which remember, even if they're lifeless.

We remember joy, as we do death, torture, terror. For me, if there is a Devil, he's in the hallucinatory gloom of our memory of living inside the darkness, amid the most complete and deadly solitude.

And then the light appeared, appears, will appear. Thanks to a patch of sunlight on a cracked wall, life begins again, then dies without ever stopping.

Fear, confidence: we're endlessly torn between those two extremities, in appearance contradictory, irreconcilable, but close relatives deep down, united, perhaps even twins, written in our genes like the colour of our eyes and the rhythm of our hearts.

\* \* \*

First cigarette of the day—there'll only be six today—on the porch, under a light-grey sky crisscrossed by darting titmice. Tobacco makes you dizzy. You deeply regret not making do with air. Shouldn't you get high on oxygen, from now on, and regard the wind, the breeze as a drug?

And maybe you smoke to give yourself a reason to quit, at any moment, so you can break ranks with the crazy rhythm that bonds you to beings, creatures and things. You smoke to be distinct and free while the other inside you only wants to join, merge, and stop being separate and bored.

A mystery.

\* \* \*

Some mornings, I hesitate. I don't know whether I'm losing myself or saving myself when I grab a pen and follow words like I chase a butterfly through a field, then through bushes, suddenly getting lost in the deep forest, out of breath, arms streaked with bleeding scratches. The usefulness of writing is only perceptible while writing. Beyond the gesture of tracing words, there's no excuse for this senseless pursuit, for that torn net tossed over things, which lets the treasure slip through its holes, though you saw it shine earlier in its mesh. You were picking it up, holding it, and then suddenly the sky is all you see through the net. The empty blue sky taunting you: "You're the same, unchanged, an empty-handed fisherman." And then reality continues to stare at you with stupid arrogance.

But I hang on, insist, continue my quest, my wandering, my game drive. Doesn't the Koran say: "He who has found the mark of a divine grace in some occupation should pursue it"? This implacable sentence is enough, neither to explain nor even justify the tiresome obsession of writing, but to calm the irritation, to appease the kind of lethargy I sometimes get over ceaselessly making ink flow, like my blood, over paper.

"I stroke madness with the hand not holding the pen," clamours my *Little Eagle with a White Head*, my dear Aubert, who's obsessed with "sleigh bells and hope." And the madness subsides, indeed, while the pen walks, runs, retraces its steps, crosses out, catches a meaning that immediately dissolves like smoke in the wind, spots another, immediately dashing off to surround it, crossing a thicket, then a ravine, reaching a bright clearing, and then diving in the forest again, thinking it spotted a glimmer through the branches. And so goes the ink-stained soul, pulsating, probing, uncertain, stubborn.

I lift my head and see a fidgety titmouse, plodding as well, restless, unrelenting. And then I tell myself the two of us are doing the same thing, energetically pecking away with beak or tip of the pen, working to extract the kernel from the seed, the nourishing core. And then why bother trying to find out why we write as we breathe, since we really do have to breathe?

\* \* \*

The guests have gone. Once again, they expressed the confusion of reality, articulated the impossible, the appalling, the irreparable. By mulling over the disaster so much, we end up finding it insurmountable. And then you'd smoke an entire forest of giant tobacco trees, bound by sorrow till your heart ruptured.

Why don't you get some sleep, hibernate for an hour, near the smoking stove, without worrying?

\* \* \*

DREAMCATCHERS. The plane I'm scheduled to take is late. Travellers grumble, raise their voices, then slump on benches to endure the undeserved martyrdom of waiting. I seem to be the only one reading, the only one not afraid to be wasting his precious time. The other travellers are helpless, sulking, discouraged. A crimson nightfall sinks endlessly through huge windows, crisscrossed by large quiet planes taking off amid a kind of supernatural indifference.

Suddenly, I raise my head and see a small boy in a wheelchair slaloming at top speed between rows of benches. The tiny body is scrawny, the huge head sits on skinny shoulders: he looks like a malicious elf from a Nordic fairy tale. He moves forward, backwards, charges, skillfully avoiding posts, ashtrays, suitcases, legs and feet. He's concentrated, extraordinarily attentive, swift and limber. His machine obeys him perfectly, he's a tiny courier god, supernaturally agile. Flapping on his frail chest are a dream catcher's feathers and small circle of woven nylon strings, like the one I saw earlier at a counter dubbed the "Local Kiosk," which made me smile.

Each time he goes by, brushing me at top speed, he lets out the tiny groan of a panting and finely tuned machine, grimacing the triumphant smile of a trickster.

\* \* \*

My midday cigarette. Dizzily, I observe a maple leaf falling, alone, dead, blood red, quiet, its existence ending beautifully, as it flies anonymously and flamboyantly...

You pick it up, slip it into your pocket, place it against your heart, which beats so fearfully inside its cage.

The biologist and writer Jean-Didier Vincent scribbles: "Among the living, the singular does not exist. A molecule is not alive. To attain life, it must recognize other forms, and their union must give birth to new forms with unexpected properties. The stone, for its part, remains a stone, whether it be alone or lost in a pile by the roadside."

Indeed, I could have remained a stone, alone atop an insignificant pile by the roadside.

\* \* \*

CORRESPONDENCE. Helen Keller was deaf and blind. Yet she wrote at length about forms, sounds and colours. The world around her was filled with noise, soft or harsh, under her fingers, with shades that were silky or rough, caressing or grating. She was unrelenting in her passion to list and classify what she called her "tactual emotions": joy over the smooth, the warm, the tender; sadness over the cold and coarse; stupefaction over the viscous; dread over the scratchy. Helen Keller's tactual emotions were prodigiously numerous, varied, nuanced. Her blind writer's pen was both the paintbrush of a great colourist and a virtuoso's violin.

Here's how Helen Keller depicts, with the help of words, her "feeling" of the ridiculous, the absurd, the emotion triggered by the irony of fate: "The bulge of a watermelon and the puffed-up rotundities of squashes that sprout, bud, and ripen in that strange garden planted somewhere behind my finger-tips are the ludicrous in my tactual memory and imagination."

Before me is an astonishing photo of a deaf and blind young girl—Ludovine Lachance—surrounded by nuns wearing cornets and doctors in white lab coats and suits. Head leaning forward—she looks like a little saint worshipping—the child is fearfully reaching out and feeling a stuffed fish mounted on a board. The concentrated fervour of the little feeler is both a pleasure and pity to behold. But beyond the anecdote, meant to be edifying and exemplary—what staggers me is the photographer's eye—that of the

nuns and caregivers surrounding Ludovine—wide open on the sight of the blind girl who’s resigned, confident, trying to learn about the fish with the tips of her fingers, about its bulging eyes, hard scales, rough fins.



*Figure 3*

One day, Diderot sits beside a blind man at an inn. The blind man’s hand is extended and a man is drawing a face in his palm. Even before the drawing is finished, the blind man cries out that he perfectly recognizes the friend he lost sight of long ago. Once he gets back home, Diderot exclaims: “Why can’t the blind be entitled to their own painting, using their skin as a canvas?”

Lao Tse: “The five colours blind the eye./The five tones deafen the ear./The five flavours dull the taste.”

So let us try, from the corner of our eye, with the tips of our fingers, in the pit of our ears, the wet of our tongues, the hairs in our two nostrils, to perceive, as Baudelaire writes: “perfumes cool as the flesh of children, sweet as oboes, green as meadows.”

\* \* \*

At the hospital, I sit down, slip into a sky-blue gown, hold my poor breath for a second and it’s over right away. Here I am outside again, amid the blue

and ochre blinding light, where I take a puff that sends me to paradise.

On the front page of the paper I read earlier in the waiting room, a bus has fallen into a ravine: forty-three people dead. Forty-three people punished for no reason, whose eyes will never again be dazzled by the October light.

You'll get the results of your X-ray tomorrow.

\* \* \*

Behind our house, there was a path that cut through the vegetable garden and led to the lake. It started as a hole in the cedar hedge, followed by thirty feet of flattened grass and packed earth running along the Durocher's garden, finally turning into Pit Lachance's slate sidewalk, cement ramp and dock—Pit's dock—where our rowboat was moored.

I still feel ashamed of my efforts to be discreet as a sunflower all along that path where we were interlopers. Halfway down to the lake, Dad would stop to light a cigarette with his Zippo lighter. The fine smoke alerted the neighbours to our presence, like an Apache signal fire. A fishing pole over our shoulder, or else a gun in the crook of our arm, we'd catch sight of Miss or Mrs. Durocher's silhouette in a twilight window. Pulling the curtain back, they'd lower an inquisitive gaze on those strange hikers, rigged out like woodsmen, standing still in the middle of the path, smoking like poachers.

We weren't poachers, of course. Dad would never have allowed us to murder out of season. But our unsettling appearance of garden intruders shrouded in the smoke of Sweet Caporals meant we were trespassers, strangers, undesirables perhaps. Our narrow escape from the house, from our daily routine, took place with the full knowledge of the Durochers, who might suspect—and that's what I was ashamed of, as Dad and I were almost done smoking—the sad moods and gloomy thoughts both of us were trying to escape. Would they understand that I was born a Tom Thumb and my father an Ogre? That my destiny was to scatter stones in the gardens of others? I thought our neighbours would then realize I was a fugitive. Gnawing at me was a desire to discover the wide world, to let go of my father's big hand. I was like our dog sleeping near the stove, carried off by the dream of a wild chase, running at full speed after a rabbit, squealing and beating the floor with his tail. I saw myself in our dreaming dog. His fondest desires were like mine—for the body of a cousin, the shoulder of a girl friend, and caresses that had to be chased like game. In front of Dad, who was smoking

and observing me, I was ashamed of evoking the dog's dream. But I couldn't help it. I'd tell myself: "The child can turn himself into a dove or wolf, while the poor dog must remain a dog all his life," and tears would well up in my eyes. I dreamed. I dreamed of stars, grass, clouds, my cousin Mireille's fiery gaze, of the hour locked inside a clock, of the finch in its cage, of a river the current carried away. I ran towards everything, set out on immobile journeys, from which I'd return changed, powerful, invisible. The batting of an eyelid, a spasm of my heart, would make me go off, muttering my satisfied runaway's lament. Sometimes, I'd listen to the whispers of our dead, who knew everything. A voice inside me would say: "Man knows his brain is mortal and that his heart has neither beginning nor end."

Dad, who'd seen I'd run off who knows where, would shake my shoulder.

"You won't bring it to paradise!"

"What won't I bring to paradise?"

He'd draw on his Sweet Caporal, shrouding himself in blue smoke.

"Your silly innocence!"

He couldn't have put it better, uttering in a flat voice the great truth that had been mine, ours, since the closing of paradise: an overwhelming desire to know who we were tormented us, the need to know what exactly we were capable of.

Something like the smell of fire wafted through the air, in the silence that followed those words. A buzzing sound tormented my ears. At the age when we still don't know anything, we guess everything. Like elves, we suddenly grow wings. All our hopes are equally valid. We can't tell the difference between promises and warnings or rumours. We don't yet exist in time, we have appointments at the four corners of the world. Later, we'll choose—or think we'll choose. Strangers to ourselves, we'll dive into the lion's mouth, carrying as baggage unsatisfied curiosities, a few lovely landscapes seen in a flash, and two or three indelible faces. And then the echo of a few voices, heard too quickly, which no doubt tried to tell us: "I know, listen to me!"

\* \* \*

Still no results from the X-ray. Perhaps you're the victim of a mystification you invented? (You're smoking as you write this, and the puff is dizzying as a deep drag of cannabis.) A madness of death, fear, panic. But where does this morbid terror come from? A puffed up opinion of your own importance? The nervous disorder of a panic-stricken fifty-year-old, whose youth

has vanished, whose days and books are numbered?

You have moments of cloudless joy between two attacks of intense jitters. The trap opens, then closes, and you escape on all fours through the grass, crawling before lying in the sunshine, now free and able to breathe. And it happens again: you pant, a rope is around your neck, blood on your fur, and the broad white sky is witness to your agony in the moss. You observe yourself, forget yourself, and look at yourself again, certain of that mortal wound you can't find on your body, from which your blood will flow.

You have so much to do, and don't have time to check yourself out. Soon as you stop, you go down, sink, surrender, fall apart, vanish "a little at a time," as Voltaire used to say. Maybe you don't have those results because you don't want to know about them. You're well aware that knowing wouldn't change a thing.



## Contributors

**Pleuke Boyce** was born and grew up in the Netherlands and now lives on Vancouver Island. She received the James S. Holmes Award from the Translation Center at Columbia University for her translations of work by Dutch poet Gerrit Achterberg: *But this Land has no End - Selected Poems*. Her translations into Dutch include seven books by Alice Munro.

A poet, novelist, essayist and translator, **Antonio D'Alfonso** has published more than forty titles and has made three feature films. He is the founder of Guernica Editions which he managed for thirty-three years before passing it on to new owners in 2010. He has won the Trillium Award and other prizes. He lives in Montreal.

**Naïm Kattan** is a Canadian novelist, essayist and critic of Iraqi Jewish origin. He has said that he was born three times: first in Baghdad, then in Paris and a third birth in Montréal. Kattan wrote a literary column in *Le Devoir*, and for close to 25 years he headed the writing and publishing division of the Canada Council for the Arts Writing and Publication program. Kattan was also an Associate professor in the Department of Literary Studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

A star of film, stage and television, as well as a playwright and translator, **Robert Lalonde** is one of Quebec's leading novelists. Born in Oka, Quebec, in 1947, he studied at the Séminaire Sainte-Thérèse and Montreal's Conservatoire national d'art dramatique. The author of over 20 books, his first novel, *La belle épouvante*, won the 1981 Robert Cliche Prize, while his *Le Petit aigle à tête blanche* won the 1994 Governor General's Award for French Fiction, as well as the 1995 Prix France-Québec. His translation of Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces* was a finalist for the 1999 John Glassco Prize.

A writer, certified translator, researcher and communications specialist, **Jean-Paul Murray** has translated nineteen books. From 1995 to 1998, he was managing editor of *Cité libre*, a magazine founded by Pierre Elliott Trudeau. He was the magazine's English translating coordinator from 1998 to 2000. Among his *Cité libre* translations are works by Allan Cairns, Jacques Hébert, Mordecai Richler, F.R. Scott and Pierre Elliott Trudeau. In 2015, he was French-language translator for the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada. An experience from which he is still recovering.

**H.C. ten Berge** was born in 1938 in Alkmaar, the Netherlands. One of Holland's most important poets, he is the author of a large body of work that includes not only poetry but also novels, novellas, essays and translations. Apart from translating from modern languages, he collected and translated poetry and myths of the Aztecs, Inuit, Eastern Siberian Peoples and First Nations of the Pacific Northwest. He has received many awards for his work, including the most important and prestigious oeuvre prize in the Netherlands, the P.C. Hooft Award.

**Larry Tremblay** has published more than 30 books as a playwright, novelist, poet and essayist. His acclaimed theatrical works have been produced around the world. In 2006, he was awarded the Canada Council Victor-Martyn-Lynch-Staunton Prize for his contribution to theatre. The prestigious press Gallimard Paris published *Piercing*, a collection of three of his short stories. *L'impureté (The Impurity)*, his last novel, came out in 2016. Until 2009 Larry Tremblay taught acting and dramatic writing at l'École supérieure de théâtre de l'Université du Québec à Montréal.

**Donald Winkler** is a Montreal-based literary translator and documentary filmmaker. In the realm of poetry, he has made films on Irving Layton, P.K. Page, F.R. Scott, among others. And, among others, he has translated Roland Giguère and Pierre Nepveu. He is a three-time winner of the Governor General's Award for French to English translation.



**OREAD** • AN INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION  
VOLUME 14 NUMBER 1 SPRING 2021

**\$10.95**

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