

The Madonna of Port Lligat

OR

*A SURVIVAL MANUAL FOR
THE WAR OF THE WORLDS*

Robert M. Smith

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No Singularities

The universe had ceased to expand, having reached its outer limit, and had begun to contract. Just like a person from the Northern hemisphere crossing into the Southern hemisphere past the Equator, we were all headed in reverse time towards a South pole without singularities which would consist in an implosion, perhaps as momentous as the big bang.

I for one went from dying in the Emergency of a hospital, with tubes attached to my arms and hooked up to a heart monitor, which beeped alarmingly for all the nurses in the ward, to being an old millionaire gigolo. My girlfriend had inherited her father's fortune in the golf business, and we rapidly spun backwards in time to the days when we were raising babies and changing diapers. Lots and lots of diapers.

In those days, around 1994, I believe, we went on a lot of family outings to the park, because we couldn't afford to travel elsewhere.

Moving back, I remember the first night I met Bonnie, and she came into the room with Dwane Read, and the first thought that went through my mind was. Who's the pretty girl with Dwane? I'm going to cut his grass.

Prior to that, as I regress towards birth, I am sitting on my balcony, while working for the Ministry of Education, and single, and wondering what will happen next in my life – never expecting to have raised kids and moved out of Montreal. I live in a high-rise in 1989, among the roofs of other high-rises downtown, and I am dreadfully lonely.

I rush back to a million bars and night clubs and strip joints, a lonely bachelor high on alcohol and desperation, hanging around with street people whom I am bankrolling, going to mass, writing religious poetry.

And I move back to college days, when I always have my hand up in class, and I'm hanging around with smart alecks from the middle class, and I am spending seven hours a night in reverse at the library, reading Martin Luther

and Immanuel Kant, looking up the Chant du Maldoror in the stacks in my reverse spare time.

Then I am in seminary school, thirteen years old, waiting to be born again, which I am in 1948. In those days, there is no television; the bread man comes by in a horse-drawn wagon, from door to door; there are no supermarkets, and in Ottawa, you still see tanks grinding down the streets in a preview of World War II. My parents are listening to Pius XII on the radio and reciting the rosary after supper along with the radio.

And time is moving backwards, headed towards the big implosion.

It takes my mother fifty-six hours of reverse labour to give birth to me, three weeks late. Then her father dies on the day I am supposed to be born. And later on, he is a young man, working for the government in the Gold Rush in the Yukon, which is far, far away and back in time.

I then remember the Inquisition, the crucifixion of Christ, the early cavemen, in that order, the dinosaurs a hundred million years from now. Because by now I am in eternity, looking at a brief history of time.

And then nothing but stardust spinning around.

Poof.

December 16, 2008

Five

Five is for 5:00 o'clock in the morning – that's when my baby leaves for work for work on the South Shore, where she works she works on a golf course; it's the time when the metro starts, and you see immigrant workers going off to factories with their lunch box their tool box, and the security guards in uniform are half-asleep, dreaming of their girlfriends –

Five is for the fifth step out of the twelve steps, when you confess when you read your inventory to the sponsor to the priest to the shrink; five is for honesty, and it's a relief to dump your inventory.

Five is for the fifth dimension and Ouspensky, it's the dimension of cosmic consciousness, of God-awareness, of seeing the earth as a pinpoint in a galaxy of one hundred thousand stars among a hundred million galaxies in space where there is no up or down or sideways, only a constant expansion towards the outer limits of darkness of night, hungry for more expansion.

Five is for the Pentagon, an evil geometric figure where generals and secretaries and officials and bureaucrats plan the next war – you ain't seen nothin' yet – and they give out defense contracts to companies who design manufacture sell weapons to kill to maim and it is not like on television no sir.

Five is for five-pointed stars that witches wear Celtic witches who were burned at the stake by the Church by the thousands by the five thousands by the millions because they practiced illegal medicine and had to be rubbed out –

Five is for the five fingers of each hand which allows me to write to draw to punch to play piano to play trumpet to write graffiti on walls which is the only recourse left for some young artists –

Five is the number of points of the sheriff's badge in the Western movies the cowboy extravaganzas shoot-m-ups where the cops think they live –

Five is the number of real friends you might have in a lifetime friends who'll

visit you in a hospital where you're dying, dying of a heart attack of cancer.

Five –

June 30, 2005

New World Order

you go through the turnstile
you get processed into the metro
angels ascend and descend on Jacob's ladder
you see something human at the foot
of the escalator, dirty and panhandling
you see ads on the station walls
girls in bikinis having just the time of their lives
on a vacation in Cuba
while Cubans just outside the hotels
starve and survive the American boycott

what does this have to do
with the war in Bosnia
with the war in the Persian Gulf
with the battle of Armageddon

can gangsters make enough profit
selling Kentucky Fried Chicken
in former Iron Curtain countries?

the subway cars rush into the station
a huge metal caterpillar
zooming in like the twenty-first century

George Orwell's cameras are there for good measure
in case some sixteen year old
scribbles graffiti on subway walls

* * *

bombed out cities

Salman Rushdie's on the run
so am I
I am running away from Ronald Reagan
and John Paul II and Margaret Thatcher
hollow eyes muzak eyes
starving children
fierce jazz burning eyes out
America out of control
America country of anarchy
in 1969, I threw a brick through the window
of the American Consulate on Pine Avenue in Montreal.
I only wish I had thrown a Molotov cocktail

May 4, 1995

Brentley Frazer: Visionary, Prophet, Poet

The Webster's Dictionary offers the following definitions:

- a) Visionary: 'a person who sees visions : seer'
- b) Prophet: 'a divinely inspired revealer, interpreter or spokesman as 1) an individual believed in ancient Israel to be possessed of clairvoyance and 2) one gifted with more than ordinary spiritual and moral insight: seer'
- c) Poet: 'a writer having great imaginative and expressive gifts and possessing a special sensitivity to language.'

The mission of Brentley Frazer as visionary, prophet and poet is to awaken the reader from the long hypnotic sleep induced by the educational system, the government's vehicles of propaganda and the media. You might say it is a call to arms.

We are all 'instituted to learn to speak,' as Brentley says in his new anthology *Memories like Angels at a Ball Tripping over their Gowns*. We are programmed by parents and teachers alike to believe lies, half-truths and conventions. Brentley was sent to this planet to undo this brainwashing. He comes from a planet where truth is truth, not academic gobbledygook, administrative forms or newspaper cover-ups. He politely speaks of politicians and their 'semantic sins,' ruling a 'sick society' where 'everyone has become a sitcom character.'

What is democracy worth in a world where television defines our way of conversing and thinking, in which armies slaughter peasants overseas for the benefit of the oil industry and in which genetic engineers tell us 'we need radios in people's blood?' Democracy at one time meant some kind of freedom from monarchy and its abuses. But today's form of government and social arrangements are based on the assumption that 'the protocols are just

guidelines to enslave the blind man with 12 billion eyes.’ Mankind is enslaved. By whom? The ‘God of Greed.’ Brentley’s denunciation of Mammon is timely, because he believes we can’t go on like this. The clock is ticking, and time is running out.

But who is Brentley Frazer? What are this prophet’s credentials? Like they said about Jesus, where has this man learned his letters? He comes to us from Australia, a land that was once a prison colony. He attended university for a couple of years and didn’t listen, preferring to write verse during classes. And then he began to read and read some more. Having become extremely literate, he has published numerous authors on the cutting edge in his online magazine, *Retort*, out of Melbourne. And when you speak to him, he sounds gentle and sensitive, but with cutting wit.

His poetry has been published worldwide in online and print magazines. It is based on understatement and yet shocking, because it is so incendiary and radically uncompromising. He is merciless to the emperors, politicians and welfare officers who run this prison. He sees through their prescriptions: ‘build a building, lock men in there and those outside will believe in liberty.’

For Brentley, Australia and the world at large are still a prison colony, in which the prisoners are convinced they are free.

But read Brentley for yourselves. Look him up in Wikipedia. Do a google for one of the greatest poets of our generation.

Discover genius.

Lunch with Bill

Today, I am having lunch, as usual, with my old college friend, Bill. We have known each other for thirty years, and he has always been a faithful friend. He has been my friend when the going was rough, and when I was prosperous. He had lunch with me, like this, one day after I had just gotten out of the hospital. He also had lunch with me many times when I was a corporate translator working in law firms and government. I bought teddy bears for his son Patrick when his son was a baby. Now that I have children and I am on welfare, Bill is still my friend, except he often pays for lunch.

Bill has done well for himself. We started spending time together in 1978, when he and I were both unemployed. Then he got a lucky break; he landed a job in personnel at Canadair. A couple of years later, I became a translator and worked at Statscan for a while. Then I worked in New Brunswick, and back in Montreal, I held a couple of jobs briefly. Bill is still working for Canadair, which has been bought by Bombardier. He is in the upper echelons of management, although he almost lost his job a couple of years ago. I also know his sisters, Cindy and Louise.

Now I have a problem; Bombardier operates a huge plant in Northern Ireland which manufactures weapons. Conventional weapons, mind you, not chemical or nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, these weapons are sold to governments, possibly governments at war. That means that villages get bombed with weapons manufactured in Northern Ireland by Bombardier's subsidiary. It means soldiers get their legs blown off by some of these weapons. It also means babies and women burn to death as planes strafe their houses. I don't like that. It hurts. It hurts people far away, but people who could have been my mother and my sister and my father-in-law. Maybe these people have brown skin; maybe they are Muslim and live in Bosnia. Or Iraq. We see the newsreels about Bosnia, but they don't show films about Angola, Afghanistan, Indonesia, East Timor, Algeria, Turkey, and the dozens of other places where there is currently violence. And all these countries at war use weapons. Some of these weapons may indeed be manufactured by Bombardier in Northern Ireland.

Meanwhile, I am having lunch with my friend Bill today. Should I talk to him

about it? Should I rock the boat? I have worked for corporate scoundrels too. Statistics Canada is hardly an honourable outfit, spying on people, divulging the differences in the income they report in the census and their income tax reports submitted to Revenue Canada. Yes, there is a little known office which links the computers of Revenue Canada and the census. And I used to work for Statscan.

Meanwhile, I can't get off welfare. I just translated a document for the American Department of Defense. The document concerned high speed trains. It involved defense conversion, which means that since the cold war is over, defense contractors are considering converting their weapons plants to peace-time purposes.

Maybe that would be an option for Bombardier. Maybe it could convert its weapons plant in Northern Ireland to building subways, for people to travel in on the way to work. After all, Bombardier controls 23 percent of the market for high - speed trains in the USA.

Now, I also have blood on my hands. I have worked for the American army, the biggest villains on earth. They bombed Hiroshima, and sent soldiers to fight in Vietnam, Panama, Somalia, and Haiti just to mention a few of their latest excursions. You've got to hand it to them, they get to see the world.

Maybe I won't talk to Bill about my politics. I'll just discuss the Atlanta golf tournament, the Masters. And he'll go back to his office, and I'll go home to my apartment.

Do you remember what Bob Dylan used to say about arms dealers?

April 12, 1996

The Enemy and Us

EVOLUTIONARY STUDIES 101

Robert M. Smith

January 11, 20003

Scientific Studies University

As far as archaeological digs reveal, in the American continent and the former Eurasian land mass, our species divided into two distinct branches, around seventeen or eighteen thousand years ago.

The presence of ruins of skyscrapers, superhighways, destroyers, submarines, airplanes, and the remnants of satellites in outer space seem to indicate that one branch, which we will call the gorillas, specialized in high technology, but was incapable of overcoming its aggressive instincts. These gorillas were bent on ruling the world, in order to amass greater comfort and illicit pleasures for themselves. They wandered from ancient Rome, through Europe, and into the continent of America, and hence tried to conquer the rest of the known world. Their leaders indicate a high level of serotonin and adrenalin in the brain, and this may explain why they rose to prominence. The female of this gorilla species dressed in extravagant clothing, and soon lost all interest in nurturing offspring. However, their historical records reveal the application of primitive taboos against childhood molestation at times, against promiscuity at other times, and generally against the use of psychedelic drugs.

The other branch of this species became gentle and artistic, but could never prevail because of its irrationality and superstition. We have found crystal balls, which were supposed to (falsely, we might say) predict the future. There were card games called the Tarot, which were also used for divination. This seems to indicate that the artistic branch that rose out of this species was not playing with a full deck, so to speak.

Over the millennia, both branches of the species broke apart into two separate species, not at all resembling each other, but always fighting each other. The

gorillas tried nuclear weapons several times and fought numerous wars and almost wiped each other out. Meanwhile, the artists went underground, and withdrew entirely from this competition. They moved to exotic places like the Polynesian islands and colonized the small islands of the Atlantic Ocean.

Meanwhile, the gorillas developed higher and more sophisticated technology, but became increasingly brutal. By the end of the Antean Empire, they returned to ancient practices like cannibalism and human sacrifice.

On the other hand, the artistic species grew more gentle, caring and increasingly flaky as well. Not only did they practice astrology and necromancy and bibliomancy, they developed new techniques of fortune telling.

Now, by the year 15003, both species even looked different. The artists developed a larger brain mass, and long elongated fingers capable of doing arts and crafts. But the gorillas grew physically larger, partly from eating growth hormones and other people. Their brains shrunk and atrophied from lack of thinking, until we see by the year 20000 the current brute of the species, which sometimes walks on all fours, and other times flies around in helicopters to spot its prey.

What is truly amazing is that both species survived side by side, without destroying each other. It is true that the gorilla's territory resembles a junkyard, with bits and pieces of advanced technology lying around, whereas the artists cultivated elaborate gardens and beautified their environment, which they seemed to respect.

There has been no communication between both species in many thousands of years. However, what is happening now, in the year 20003, is that the artistic branch of the species has sent emissaries and ambassadors to the gorillas to sue for reconciliation. We at Scientific Studies University feel threatened by these creatures, and furthermore, given the lack of good food in our part of the world, would consider devouring such emissaries and making them part of our diet. And, all things remaining equal, if there are other artists out there, we might have a feast...

Empire Shall be no More

I just sat down and wept
The work of the centuries had been destroyed
And all I had left was a few shards of evidence.

The sound of trampling herds on the prairie;
The darkness before the rising sun;
A child's toys, broken and scattered;
Photographs of a wedding, soiled and ruined over the years;
A burned down library, such as in Alexandria;
The twisted remains of an elevated highway,
After the California earthquakes.

I was indeed the last man,
And I didn't have the wit
To interpret the civilizations past,
Nor the insight to predict
What could come after the night.
I was manipulated by television commercials,
I responded to silly fashions;
I rode the subway, and was intimidated
By stares of strange people,
Who either envied my status
Or felt contempt for my demeanor.
I feared the police, as well as crime.
The headlines of the newspapers jumped out
And grabbed my attention, grabbing me by the throat.
One politician cried, "Go this way, all!"
The other denounced him as a fascist.
And I was left bewildered by history.

I was the last man, I hoped at one time
We could win a nuclear war
And overcome evil once and for all.
Worlds in outer space could be conquered,

If only science was granted the budgets
To explore, to fathom, to sound deep space.
Yes, television and movies were my fare.

I was a passionate citizen,
Yet afraid to get involved:
You might say I was a spectator
Of cosmic events, wars, famines, social breakdown,
I responded well.

And yet my response was never heard publicly.
I hoped the next guy would do something about it.
For who can feed the world's masses?
Who can stop illiteracy and epidemics?
They will! THEY WILL! The leaders we elected...

And faithfully I lined up every four years or so,
And deposited my secret slip of paper
In the all-too-innocent ballot box,
Confident my voice would be heard,
Loud and clear, cried upon the rooftops.

October 2, 1989

Amos 'n Andy

Pendant les années 50, il y avait une émission à la télévision américaine intitulée Amos 'n Andy. C'était une émission extrêmement comique au sujet de pauvres Noirs dans un ghetto américain, bien que les comédiens soient des Caucasiens maquillés. Mais puisqu'il s'agissait de pauvreté, ma mère trouvait l'émission trop «vulgaire» et je n'avais pas le droit de regarder cette émission. Donc, ce que je faisais, et j'avais environ huit ou dix ans, c'est que j'allais chez mon oncle et ma tante pour regarder Amos 'n Andy les soirs de l'émission.

Or, environ vingt-cinq ans plus tard, c'est la réunion de famille à Noël chez mon oncle Wilfrid, le curé, et tout le monde est là. La conversation avance, chacun prend un verre, et moi, voici que je déclare, comme on laisse tomber une bombe, que pendant les années 50, je n'avais pas le droit de regarder l'émission Amos 'n Andy à la télévision quand j'étais jeune, sous prétexte que ma mère «trouvait ça vulgaire».

Tout à coup, il fallait éteindre la traînée de poudre, il fallait mettre fin à la Révolution, et tous les membres de ma famille se sont mis d'accord implicitement pour me dire que A) j'inventais des choses, B) je me faisais des idées, C) et enfin, mon oncle chez qui j'allais regarder l'émission pendant les années 50, voici que lui aussi me dit que je me trompe, que l'émission Amos 'n Andy avait été une émission juste à la radio, juste aux États-Unis, et qu'elle n'avait plus passé aux ondes depuis les années 40, bien avant ma naissance.

Très bien. Tant de zèle. Tant d'énergie pour nier. Franchement, j'en étais confus. Pendant quelques minutes, je jure que je n'étais plus sûr de mon coup, et je doutais moi-même si j'avais raison. Tout cela pour dire que j'ai immédiatement téléphoné à une amie américaine qui avait mon âge, et je lui ai demandé si l'émission Amos 'n Andy avait bel et bien existé à la télévision. Et elle m'a répondu que si, c'était la meilleure émission à la télévision. J'étais rassuré.

Quant à moi, il faut que je mette de l'eau dans mon vin.

Le 13 novembre 1998

Laundry Detergent

Her name is Alissa, and she is a Croatian national from Calgary, who is doing research on the natives on the reservation for the Université de Montréal. What is her real name? Does she speak another language than English? Why is she living here, in Montreal? Is her son an alien from another galaxy? How did he get here? Who is this woman anyway?

How should I approach her? Tonight, I identified with everything she said; I agreed with all her positions about her hierarchical colleagues, about parents in the school, about intellectuals in academics. I certainly don't put all my cards on the table with her. I don't know her; she might be a spy for the government. She doesn't know or trust me either, because we have only known each other at arm's length for two or three years.

She obviously manipulates people to her own advantage: that is what everybody does. I needed to tell her about the cop I met who gave me a hard time because I wrote a book mentioning the FLQ, but I couldn't find an appropriate opening in the conversation. She might have been paranoid if I had mentioned a cop; I am not supposed to hang around with such people, and yet I meet them all the time.

Who is this cop? He sure seems interested in my involvement with the terrorist group from the sixties. I lied to him: I told him I still didn't know who killed Sergeant Dumas. He and his buddies interrogated me at the restaurant; well, they quizzed me and drilled me with questions. And I realized I can't trust anglophones any more than francophones. I am not accepted by anglos any more than by francophones. To anglos I am a French Canadian terrorist; to French-speaking people, I look like an immigrant, because I have dark skin and when they hear my last name is supposed to be Smith, right away they assume I am a foreigner. And I am certainly not an immigrant or a native, so where do I belong?

The answer is: on Earth. Among human beings. I don't need to belong to a group. I remember that in Galatians, it says that party-spirit is a work of the flesh. You can't be partisan. You have to freelance. Be a free agent, a free

radical. Agent OO7, the freelance poet / translator, floating through cyberspace on a wet winter night in NDG, Montreal, Canada, somewhere in the supposedly Free World, which bombs the living piss out of former communist republics and sells arms to Indonesia and then sends peacekeepers there. Luckily, I am not spying on the arms trade.

Alissa is not who she pretends to be, and her son is an alien. Her real name is Deizel, I heard it in my dream, by accidentally dialing the wrong number on the phone. And she works for the government. But which government? And just how much does she know about me? She has read my books, but they tell you nothing about whom I am. If you only know me through my books, you will think I am an innocent victim, that things happen to me, they fall from the sky as though I had no agenda of my own. Actually, I am responsible for a major part of what happens to me, I create that destiny by being open to it or looking for it or looking for trouble. But I am a free agent, I am not programmed by a racial or political or linguistic mandate. I am not entirely predictable.

For instance, the man at the corner store asked me what was my religion. I could have answered him, but the question told me he wanted to stick a label on me and argue about religion. I answered him that I don't answer such questions, I am sorry. I have no time to waste being pigeonholed and wearing labels for people. I can't live in a box.

And yet, I look around me, and this apartment is a box. Alissa has got me pegged. She is feeding off my information. She is taking mental notes. And just when she thinks she has me where she wants me, I say something she doesn't understand. I am a free radical. Just like in laundry detergent.

December 18, 2000

Don't Push the River, it Flows by Itself

Do you think your will power propels time?
All your thoughts are just resistance to God's grace.
There are a thousand and one distractions
Don't resist your environment

There's nothing you can do to save yourself;
It is neither by an effort of the will,
Nor by the strength of prayer
That God acts in the starry night.

Go ahead, gnash your teeth
And extinguish the sun or the moon.
Reach up and pluck the stars out of the heavens.
If you can't, then don't worry about a thing.

It is neither by a willful application
Nor by a systematic method of thinking
That we decide when to be born.
When the time is right, the baby will appear.

January 1, 1998

Bigger Than Life

At our darkest hour, you may wonder
Why such mediocrity rises to power?
Why bloodthirsty beasts claim fame?

What dread pact did they sign
With light or darkness,
Signed in blood and the blood of their followers
To control and squeeze adulation
Out of the ecstatic masses?

What cosmic purpose is served
By the wild beast gutting a deer?
What sun shines over the bear
Goring a rabbit or a squirrel?
My hair stands on end,
When I hear the cries of victims,
In the forest, in prisons, silently
And deafly howling for revenge?

What diabolical echo chamber
Makes the false prophets' voices resonate
In the cathedral of the media;
What die was cast
To orchestrate their ascension
To world dominion?

The Caesars of our times
Are justified by an army
Of propagandists, pamphleteers
And spin doctors,
And ironically, the people
Seem to get the leaders they deserve.

The crowds at the bullfight
Cry out for music and for blood,
While the scapegoats of the devil
Get slain, a sacrifice to Moloch.
But fascist society needs idols
To keep us under the iron heel,
Under the drunken spell
Of a god unknown.

The skies are leaden,
And will not suffer invocation.

April 15, 2002

L'effet Doppler-Fizeau

«Monsieur Smith!»

Je lisais dans la salle d'attente depuis une demi-heure, lorsque mon thérapeute, le docteur Marceau, m'appela. Elle tenait sous le bras gauche mon dossier dans une chemise épaisse en carton jaunâtre. Je me levai pour aller la rejoindre. Des gens assis autour de moi me jetèrent un coup d'oeil blasé.

Tout le décor de la clinique ressemblait à celui d'une prison, peint en vert khaki et en gris. Les chaises de métal n'avaient aucun style, et la salle d'attente non plus.

La docteure, vêtue d'une blouse blanche et portant un stéthoscope autour du cou, me fit un demi-sourire. «Ça va?» Et je la suivis dans un long corridor de style gouvernemental, jusqu'à son bureau, au bout d'un labyrinthe. En entrant dans la petite salle, elle alluma. Une civière parut dans le coin, ainsi qu'un petit pupitre et un comptoir couvert d'appareils médicaux bizarres. Elle s'assit en face de moi.

En regardant par la fenêtre, où l'automne dessinait des teintes sombres dans les nuages déjà gris, je me mis à raconter au thérapeute ce qui s'était passé depuis notre dernière rencontre, un mois auparavant.

«D'abord, samedi, il s'est passé quelque chose de drôle. Je suis allé à une réunion qui commençait à trois heures. Je pensais qu'elle était censée commencer à trois heures trente, ce qui fait que je suis arrivé en retard.

Laisse-moi expliquer pourquoi ça m'a intrigué. Le format de la réunion, c'est une étude du Livre. Pendant la première moitié de la réunion, le groupe écoute un enregistrement de deux types qui lisent le Livre et font des commentaires sur tel et tel passage. Ensuite, au bout d'une demi-heure, il y a une pause-café et une discussion en groupe, où chaque membre fait son propre commentaire sur ce qu'on a lu. Moi, je suis arrivé à la pause. D'habitude, je ne suis jamais en retard, mais enfin...»

La docteure Marceau m'écoutait, attentivement. De temps à autre, elle s'essuyait les lèvres avec les doigts.

«Alors, je me suis assis, et la discussion a commencé. L'un disait qu'il était d'accord avec ce qu'on avait dit dans l'enregistrement, c'est-à-dire que si l'on cuit un gâteau, il faut mettre le four à telle ou telle température et faire cuire le mélange pendant deux heures. Si l'on dévie de la recette, l'on rechute, et puis c'est un gâchis. L'autre, à côté, prend la parole et dit qu'il aimerait bien suivre la recette, mais il y a des gens qui sont des "tarantules".

Ces gens le distraient de son programme. Enfin, un troisième prend la parole et dit qu'il n'a jamais pu suivre le règlement, qu'il est un original incurable. Il flambe toujours son gâteau, et il rechute constamment. Et, enfin, une dame indienne prit la parole et affirma qu'elle était correcte depuis 14 ans, parce qu'elle cuisait toujours son gâteau suivant la recette.»

La docteure Marceau avait l'air vraiment intriguée. «Qu'est-ce que c'est, cette affaire de gâteau et de recette?»

Je lui répondis: «Moi-même, je ne comprenais pas d'abord, parce que je n'ai jamais lu ce passage-là dans le Livre. Mais j'ai saisi, par la suite, qu'on parlait de suivre le programme à la lettre ou non. J'imagine que c'est une analogie, une espèce de parabole utilisée dans la littérature pour convaincre les gens à se conformer à la règle.

-- Je vois.

Mais ce qui était intéressant pour moi, c'était le mystère. J'avais des indices, des pistes, et j'essayais de déchiffrer le sens de cette énigme. Quel passage du Livre avait-on bien pu lire? Et cela m'a fait penser d'abord à l'effet Doppler-Fizeau. Tu connais?»

La docteure, qui était âgée d'une quarantaine d'années, malgré ses cheveux tout blonds, me fit un petit sourire. «Pas vraiment. Explique-moi ça.

Eh bien, en astronomie, c'est un principe qu'on a découvert. Une étoile qui s'éloigne de nous est rouge ou bleue. Une étoile qui se rapproche de nous est de la

couleur contraire. J'oublie si c'est bleu ou rouge; l'un ou l'autre, en tous cas. Et les scientifiques se sont aperçus que les étoiles nous fuient à des vitesses vertigineuses. Ce qu'on a conclu, c'est que l'univers s'étend constamment. Mais à partir de ce raisonnement, on a découvert le big bang. Si l'univers s'étend, cette expansion a eu un point de départ, une explosion cosmique qu'on a appelée le big bang. C'était le début du temps, il y a des milliards et des milliards d'années.»

La docteure me demanda abruptement: «Et qu'est-ce que ça a à faire avec ta réunion? En passant, pourquoi me racontes-tu ça en thérapie?» Elle avait l'air sérieuse, fronçant les sourcils légèrement.

«Voici, c'est une question d'induction. Au cours de la discussion dans la réunion, je ne savais pas de quoi l'on parlait, et il fallait assembler les pièces du casse-tête et reconstituer le passage qu'on avait lu avant mon arrivée. De même, les savants se sont retrouvés devant un univers déjà créé, de telle ou telle façon, et ils ont essayé de deviner quelle en était l'origine. On a eu des mythes de création, comme le mythe de Gilgamesh, le mythe du paradis terrestre, et d'autres explications pré-scientifiques. C'est comme un détective qui arrive au lieu d'un crime et essaie de deviner ce qui s'est produit avant son entrée...

Monsieur Smith, vous parlez beaucoup. Tout cela tourne autour de quelque chose. Je crains que le temps passe, et vous ne m'avez pas encore parlé de vous.»

Je me mis à transpirer des mains. Un léger serrement à la gorge. Néanmoins, je m'ouvris au thérapeute. Je la connaissais depuis six ans et je pouvais lui faire confiance.

Je lui débitai, rapidement : «J'ai rencontré une femme, une femme nommé Soledad. Je l'ai rencontrée chez une autre dame appelée Suzanne. Soledad est venue chez moi et nous avons bavardé pendant quelques jours d'affilée. Nous avons pris un verre ensemble et...

Tu as bu beaucoup?

Oui, et je me suis rendu compte qu'elle est complètement folle. Elle parlait sans cesse, sans arrêter. Elle parlait de justice, de vengeance, du diable, des anarchistes en Espagne. Je ne savais pas du tout de quoi il s'agissait. Il n'y avait ni queue ni

tête à son histoire. Et mon amie Suzanne m'a fait savoir, avant-hier le fond de l'histoire.

Et c'est quoi?»

Je m'arrêtai net. Je pris mon souffle. Je poursuivis: «Suzanne m'a dit que, il y a quinze ans, Soledad est rentrée chez elle un jour, et elle a trouvé son mari et ses enfants morts sur le plancher de la cuisine. Le mari avait tiré les enfants et puis il s'était suicidé. Elle, Soledad, est devenue complètement folle sur-le-champ.

Immédiatement, elle s'est enfuie en Espagne, où elle a habité avec des anarchistes pendant dix ans. Mais elle n'est jamais revenue à elle-même. Elle radote toujours et tout ce qu'elle dit, c'est une indice au sujet de ce malheur qui lui est arrivé.

-- Toi, quand tu as appris ça, comment est-ce que tu t'es senti? Quel sentiment ça t'a inspiré?

-- Ça m'a rappelé d'avoir été kidnappé lorsque j'avais quatre ou cinq ans. Tu te souviens, on en avait parlé en thérapie l'an dernier. Après avoir été kidnappé, jeune, je m'étais mis à m'enfuir de la maison. Puis, une fois adulte, je partais en voyage en auto-stop, pour m'enfuir. Et Soledad, son histoire a fait que je me suis rappelé tout ce complexe. Ça m'avait pris des années de thérapie pour comprendre et démêler cette sale histoire.

-- Mais maintenant, ça ne te fait plus peur? Sauf de m'en parler, comme tu viens de le faire?

-- Exactement.

-- Eh bien, souviens-toi de ce que je t'ai dit la dernière fois. Ce que tu connais, ce que tu comprends, ça ne peut presque plus te faire mal. Il y a un proverbe anglais qui dit que le démon que je connais est mieux que le démon que je ne connais pas. Bientôt, tu n'auras plus peur de discuter avec moi de ces histoires de jeunesse. Te sens-tu soulagé, maintenant?

Oui.» Je lui souris. Un grand sourire, esquissé, que je remplaçai par un air sérieux

et professionnel.

«Veux-tu terminer la séance sur cette note-là? Quand veux-tu me revoir?» Elle se leva, prenant avec elle mon dossier. Pendant toute l'entrevue, elle avait pris des notes sur des feuilles mobiles. Elle m'accompagna à la porte de la clinique.

Pour lui dire bonjour, je lui fis une blague. Je lui dis: «Si j'ai bien compris, c'est comme dans la pièce de Ionesco, *La cantatrice chauve*. Votre vrai nom, c'est Sherlock Holmes?»

Elle sourit un petit sourire éphémère. «Non, c'est Sigmund Freud.»

Je fis la grimace en descendant au rez-de-chaussée en ascenseur. «Les salauds!» marmonnai-je.

le 16 septembre 1996

Handle with Care

I am an attaché case.
I walk through board meetings
and sit on the floor in the lobby
of the Stock Exchange
do you know how many occult
documents I can contain?
how many military plans
and maps of the moon?
I can blow up the world
or cause a recession.
I am an attaché case.

July 1, 1993

The Hatchet Man

One summer a few years ago, I was engaged to marry a lady called Linda, and she was anxious, because I didn't have a full-time job. So I looked in the French newspaper *La Presse* and found an advertisement for a full-time translation job at a law firm. It seemed perfect. They were located at Square Victoria, which is the office tower of the Montreal Stock Exchange. I mailed them my resume, and then brought in samples of my translations. When I met the boss, everything looked kosher.

That fall, Linda and I got married. I didn't tell her about my past. Let's just say I harbored a few skeletons in a hidden place. She was under the impression that I was a yuppie businessman. I was under the impression that she was normal also, but getting to know her meant a whole other story. She was financially insecure, and I met her needs.

They kept us waiting to write the translation exam for the job. Out of forty applicants, six of us had been selected to write the exam, and one couldn't make it to Montreal on time. So the exam was postponed, over and over again. Finally, in October, I got summoned to write the exam. A few days prior, I asked the boss, Marcel, over the phone what kind of document would be used in the exam. He answered, "Oh, I guess a prospectus..." I got off the phone, and thought, "Great! What is a prospectus?" (I inquired with a colleague of mine who worked for a translation agency, and he explained it is a legal document published whenever a company issues shares on the stock market.) So I went about collecting bilingual versions of prospectuses from various law firms. I even went to the Securities Commission. Then I studied the prospectuses.

Afterwards, I phoned Marcel, and asked him if I was allowed to bring dictionaries to the translation exam. (It is customary to allow translators to bring their own documentation to any translation exam.) So he answered, "Sure. You can bring any document you like to the exam." Finally, about a week later, the exam was taking place, and I brought in all my bilingual prospectuses to the translation exam.

The first exam question was to translate a red herring, which is a standard preamble found in any prospectus. So I simply pulled out one of my bilingual prospectuses, and copied the red herring from English to French. And the second exam question was a regular, general text about the postal union.

So, a couple of days later, I received a phone call from a senior partner who ran the translation office, and he told me I was hired. He summoned me to an interview, and I went to his office, wearing my suit, of course. And the first thing he told me was, "We have hired you because of your great knowledge about securities." To which I replied that I knew nothing about securities. He did a double take, but he hired me anyway. He asked me what salary range I expected. And it was a deal. I started work in December. My new wife was thrilled.

Now, the first morning that I was starting work, I had to walk down from my apartment on Hutchison and Sherbrooke, down City Councillors Street, then Beaver Hall Hill, to the Stock Exchange. Well, something happened on the way to work: I started having an LSD flashback as I was walking down the street!! Everything turned into a cartoon, and the sidewalks were melting, the buildings were wobbly, and I was high as a kite. I arrived at work, and the first thing Marcel said to me was, "You're nervous, eh? You have a secret, eh? There is something you are hiding from me, eh?" And he was waving his index in my face. I was terrified, and tried to cover up my anxiety. I was stoned out of my mind, although I hadn't done acid in twenty years.

The first couple of days on the job were fairly easy. Then one day, the boss came into my office and pointed at my feet, as I sat on my swivel chair. He yelled at me, "Your legs are twitching! You have side effects, eh? You have a mental health problem, eh? You see a psychiatrist, don't you?" And I began cringing. I felt this guy was out to get me.

About a week later, I had been working, and Linda was enchanted. One day, Marcel walked into my office, and asked, "Have you ever had any homosexual experiences?" And the next day, he asked me, "Have you been making love to your wife lately?" I was starting to resent this guy. He was making me feel extremely uncomfortable. Furthermore, there was no union to protect me. And we had to do overtime on a volunteer basis, because we were considered

executives. We were not paid for overtime, either in money or in vacation time. And there was lots of work.

I didn't know what my boss was up to. Eventually, I found out that the translator who had been his assistant before me had lasted only four months, and the one before her had lasted six months, and the translator before that was only there for a year. Obviously, there was a problem here, but I couldn't figure it out. One time, Marcel was talking to another translator on the phone and I heard him say that he had failed his certification exam with the translators' association.

After I had been working there for several weeks, translating both from English to French and vice versa, I received a call from one of the senior partners. She asked me to translate a document from French to English. I said, "Sure. Send it to me by messenger." When the document arrived, Marcel was there and said, "I'll do this translation myself." I replied, "No, Marcel, the client asked me to do it." But he insisted, so I let him translate the document into English. When the translation was sent to the client, she phoned me and complained, "Mr. Smith, this translation is terrible!! Did you do it yourself?" I answered that no, Marcel had done it. So she snapped at me, "Well, I want you to revise your boss's work!!" My heart sank. I knew that was the end of my job.

The document was sent back to me, I revised Marcel's translation, and I had to cover it with red ink. Then my boss asked to see my corrections, and I showed him the document. He leaned against the doorframe, and moaned, "I have a lot to learn about translating towards English!" Clearly, he was in despair. And from then on, I was waiting to get the axe.

Incidentally, one day I noticed that there were no black people or minorities working at the law firm. Out of 265 employees, there was one black secretary, and the young man who watered the plants was black. I asked a colleague, privately, if the law firm had a racist hiring policy. He replied that no, they weren't racist, but they felt that their clients would object to dealing with black lawyers. He was the third translator in the team. So the following morning, I looked up the Black Community Council in the phone book, and told them about my employer. The man I spoke to told me he commended me for my

concern, but that there was nothing much I could do about it. Those allegations were hard to prove in court. He told me not to quit my job or protest, because all law firms were the same.

But from that point on, after I discredited my boss for his translation towards English, he wanted me out of there, and kept setting me up. For instance, one time his boss had the wrong version of a prospectus sent to the printers, so Marcel kindly suggested I go and tell his boss about the mistake. Of course, the senior partner, the same person who had hired me, was furious, because it was a mistake that cost us \$ 10,000, but I was the butt of his anger. He blew up at me, and not at Marcel.

I never told anybody about my past while on this job. I kept my skeletons well stuffed in the closet. However, one afternoon, I was in a line-up at the bank with a colleague during lunch break, and I broke my anonymity. I spilled the beans. I told him bluntly, "I used to take LSD, I've been a communist and I have spent time in psych wards."

The next day, the whole office knew about it. And Marcel summoned me into his office, and he berated me about my so-called "heroin addiction." It took a lot of explaining to get him to believe that I have never used heroin. And I never have. But the whole office heard about this bit of gossip. At all times, I had to be vigilant about what I said to other people at the office. Sometimes, I felt like acting like myself, but I had to put up a constant façade to keep my secrets to myself.

Meanwhile, I would come home to my new wife under so much pressure, that she would exclaim, "Here comes my husband, with circumflexes coming out of his ears!" And nor did she know about my shady past. We didn't have an honest relationship. We were playing the role of husband and wife. Some of my friends who knew me well were placing bets on how long this marriage would last.

And there was overtime. Lots and lots of overtime. I was able to put in the effort, but I was starting to get tired. Frankly, I was stressed out! One week, I worked Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and then on Thursday, there was an urgent project, so I worked from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 p.m., and then I took a taxi

home, slept for two hours and took a taxi back to work. Then I worked two more hours, took another taxi back home, washed and had breakfast, and was back at work at 9:00 in the morning. On Friday, I worked until 9:30 at night, and then worked all weekend. On Monday, I worked a normal day. On Tuesday morning, Marcel told me, "You know that takeover bid you have been working on since last week? Well, it has been cancelled."

I was fed up. I told him so. So he yelled at me, "When you applied to work here, you said you were willing to work. It was a lot of baloney!" So I blew up at him. I had had enough. I blew up at him, I told him what I thought of him to his face, and stormed up and down the halls at the law firm, yelling insanely. Meanwhile, my boss kept needling me, asking me why I was yelling in English. The next day, I lay low. I felt like a cockroach.

Well, within a month, the lawyer who had hired me summoned me to his office, and told me bluntly, "Your services are no longer required at this law firm. Leave the premises immediately." And the first thing I did was that I went downstairs from the thirty-sixth floor to a restaurant on the ground floor, and had a beer. I had been broken. Marcel got me. And I realized later on why he got me. He was incompetent as a translator, and was afraid that his assistants would take over his job. So he would set people up.

And I was back on the streets. I lasted seven months on that job. I was crushed.

It is not always easy for street people, the mentally ill or drug addicts to reintegrate into society, because most so-called normal people discriminate against us and are afraid. "When you go among them, be as cunning as a serpent and meek as a dove." In other words, when in the Establishment, you have to keep your mouth shut and have eyes all around your head.

A Nice Place to Visit

During the recession of the nineties, it was nearly impossible to land a job, let alone a good job. Very seldom was there work advertised in the newspapers, and whenever a position was advertised, there were hundreds, if not thousands of applicants competing with you. A lot of people gave up on job-hunting and resigned themselves to receiving welfare cheques.

Nevertheless, around ten years ago, there was a job advertised in the French newspaper, *La Presse*, in Montreal, a job at the United Nations, possibly in New York. It consisted in editing the transcripts of French sessions and producing minutes of these meetings. The requirements were merely a university degree and three years' experience as a translator or in a related field. So I applied for the job.

First, I had to send a fax to the United Nations Secretariat in New York City asking them to mail me the application form to participate in a written competition. This I did, and a couple of days later, I received the application form in the mail. I filled it out duly and went to the post office to mail it special delivery to New York. The UN had to receive the application by mail no later than April 15, 1996. Then there would be a written exam, an interview, a final screening, and then -- a job!

I did not hold down a job for six years. My last position had been in the Ministry of Education of the Québec government. After that, I floundered, freelancing as a translator. Sometimes I had contracts for a few months in a row, and other times, there was no work for anybody for six months on end. The translation business was slow in the nineties. Also, I had hopped from full-time job to full-time job in the eighties, which means I have a sketchy job resume.

So one week, I went to the post office and mailed off the application form. Afterwards, I wanted to visit my friend Gene in Douglas Psychiatric Hospital, in Verdun. He had been in the funny farm for a year and a half, and I had made a commitment to visit him once a week. So I grabbed a taxi and asked the driver to take me to Douglas Hospital. I told him I was visiting my friend Gene in the mental hospital.

We took the Décarie Expressway, then the exit for La Vérendrye Boulevard, to Verdun, and finally, La Salle Boulevard down to the College. It was a fifteen minute ride.

I started talking to the driver about my job application. "I just mailed off an application form for a job at the United Nations."

- "Oh, is that so?"

- "Yes, the position is called French Verbatim Reporter. It consists of writing the minutes for the French meetings. I really hope I get it, because it pays really well."

- "And how much does it pay?"

- "Well, first, it pays \$ 43,000 U.S. tax-free, because when you work for the UN, you don't pay taxes. Then there's a \$ 14,840 allowance to live in New York City, if that's where I am stationed, and finally, \$ 12,000 per child to pay for their schooling."

- "That's very good."

- "Is that a photo of your daughter on the dashboard?"

- "Yes, she's twelve years old. I also have a boy twenty-seven."

- "So he's grown up."

- "Do you have any kids?"

I answered, "Yes, two daughters; the eldest is three and a half, and the baby is twenty months old."

- "Yes, that's a young family."

- "I am starting late. I am forty-seven years old, and they're only kids."

- "What are your chances of getting this job?" The driver was polite.

"Well, I don't know how many people are applying. There are a lot of people out of work."

The driver replied, "Yes, with all the companies closing down, there are a lot of people competing."

- "Well, I think I might have a chance. I have all the requirements for the position. They are asking for a university degree and three years' experience as a translator. I have been doing translation since 1978."

- "You don't say."

We were approaching the Douglas, driving down La Salle Boulevard along the St. Lawrence River. The driver asked me if I wanted to turn into the main grounds. I had told him I was visiting my friend, who was in Newman Pavilion. I told the driver to take me just past the main buildings along La Salle Boulevard, just to the next buildings.

He asked me, "Do you want me to stop here?"

Then he said something unexpected: "Is this where you live?"

I protested, "No, no. I am just visiting. " I paid the driver and got out of the car.

I entered the pavilion and looked for Gene.

April 5, 1996

Civilization and its Discontent

yes the highlight of every month
is paying the electricity bill on time.
and it is imperative to change the baby's diaper
or else the baby will have a rash.

Greek chorus:
she has clipped my wings and put me into a birdcage

(meanwhile, I dream of sitting
at a bar in a jazz club
guzzling down gin and tonics
at the speed of light
but I recall I would be lonely.)

she has clipped my wings;
I am no longer crazy.

I am on the market for a metaphor,
a mystical experience
or a slice of madness divine.
they don't sell
these at the supermarket.
at least the birds are fed
by the hand of Providence.
this makes for very, very
conservative politics.

I would rather be Jesse James,
rob trains by horseback
and give free meals to the poor,
I would rather be Robin Hood.

I have to go now: before the next train robbery,
my wife wants me to put the laundry away.

August 10, 1997

Jihad

I've never been very good at being civilized
I don't want to be a brick on a wall
I don't want to go to heaven

I want to write my poems in the sky
I celebrate little girls skipping rope
I want to be in the wind blowing across the Siberian tundra
I want to be a mountain lion in the Sierras
I want to live in the hoot of the owl

Give me a breeze, rather than a hurricane
Give me a breast rather than a tank
Give me a nurse or a secretary over a chief executive officer
There are no generals in my universe

Oh boy, here is civilization – a red light, a green light
A Kentucky fried chicken store on the corner
Drunken old winos lying on the sidewalk
A policeman kicking the shit out of rioters
A board of directors discussing armaments

Freedom! Freedom!
I want to leave this civilization,
But there is nowhere to go
They have paved the forests
And invented a medication
For every form of demon possession

Let me die, with a tube up my nose and a nurse by my side

October 18, 2008

Ecclesiastes 2, for Yuppies Only

- 1) I figured, "Let's have a real good time, so dig some thrills," and man, did that ever turn out to be a royal waste of time!
- 2) I dug laughter and said, "Wow, what a crazy trip!" and I said about the good times, "What's the bloody point?"
- 3) I figured in my head that I had become an alcoholic, while getting hip; and I decided to flip out, so I could be clued into what all the crowd's been digging all this time.
- 4) I made it big; I copped a cool pad; I planted vines in my garden;
- 5) I bought real estate with gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them;
- 6) Hey, I even copped a swimming pool, with an aqueduct system to water my marijuana plants:
- 7) I hired butlers and nannies, and their kids were born in my pad; plus I copped some household pets;
- 8) I acquired stocks in silver and gold, and debentures, and first preferred shares in great corporations; I bought myself a huge compact disc collection, plus I tripped out on all kinds of live concerts and jazz clubs.
- 9) So I was numero uno, and I had more coin than anybody else and also I remained super hip.
- 10) And whatsoever I hankered for, I got, and I tripped out on all kinds of fun trips, and I lived in the fast lane, and yes, I was a happy dude, and these were my dues for doing my gig.
- 11) Then I peeped out onto my cool empire, and on all the gigs I had performed, and dig, man, it was all a waste of time and a major hassle, and

there was no profit under the sun.

June 10, 1992

The Night Whispers Amen

He had entered her garden of delights
Wishing her well deep
In her wishing well
The goddess was there,
So were Allah, Brahman and Jesus
The colours were vivid
Deep greens turning into dark browns
Perfect body meshing
With hands curving, one flesh
I kissed your divinity
The night whispers Amen

June 16, 2002

Kids are a Wonderful Thing

Kids are a wonderful thing to have:

- A) if you come home late one night, and you open the front door, and not a creature is stirring, not even a mouse, and you sense the house is full of little girls' dreams;
- B) if you distract your daughter's attention long enough from her game, and you call to her and ask her for a hug, and she gives you that vague smile, and you feel her flat little chest warm against yours;
- C) if you have cooked supper for them, and the youngest one won't stop playing with the oldest one, and you remind them to concentrate on their meal, and they both give you such a mischievous smile; and

Kids are a wonderful thing:

- A) when one of them has had an accident, and you have taken her to the Children's Hospital, and she has been operated on, and you are there for her when she wakes up from the anesthetic, and you touch her back, as she lies in bed and wonders where she is, in the night;
- B) when you rush by car to get them to their art lessons on time, and then to their ballet lesson, and you get uptight, because they are fooling around in the back seat of the car, and it is all worthwhile;
- C) and also, when you read them those wonderful children's books, at night, just before they fall asleep, and you tuck them in bed;
- D) when you go for a walk with one or two of your daughters, for instance, off to the corner to catch the school bus, and they are so wild, full of games and imagination and creativity, yes!

And kids are wonderful:

- A) when you are feeling depressed, and the eldest daughter knows that if she makes a face at you, you will cheer up, and she wants her daddy to be happy;
- B) when they do a drawing, and you pretty well have to compliment them as though they were Salvador Dali or something, and yet you are proud, because you remember when they could barely walk;
- C) also when you no longer have to change their diapers, when they brush their own teeth, when they are in school, and no longer in daycare, and by god! they are growing up;
- D) and when the school sends you the school photographs, and the report cards, and you feel this warm feeling all over, because you are proud;
- E) and finally, they finish school, and they walk down the aisle, to marry some guy who is never good enough for your daughter, and I just know how proud I will be of being their daddy...

March 1, 2000

LSD Flashback

apartment buildings with grimy balconies
crooked streetlight hanging over the pavement
a bare tree in winter:
this unnamable joy,
despite the unfathomable grey skies.

March 5, 1996

Material World

you look in the mirror,
and your face has turned purple;
one eye is a diamond
and the other is a fish.
the diamond is spinning
round and round uncontrollably
you stare and ask who.

May 21, 1997

No Comment from the Politicians

you step into the living room,
and it has turned one-dimensional,
the man in the green armchair
is flattened out
against a background
of beige curtains,
like a cubist paintingfish are running down
the sides of the armchair

True Believer

the old man sitting in front of you
is your father, and this is his world.
the fancy living-room chair beside him
Is lifting its leg
like a dog beside a hydrant.
there are circles of colour appearing
on and off on the beige walls.
the old man is getting incensed.
you are laughing in his face,
which has become Irish green,
while his head melts into his shoulders.
he looks like a cross
between an ogre and Jean Drapeau

The Tender Trap

I thought I was a follower
of the star of Bethlehem
through Arabian desert sands
under ten thousand silent stars
and marching right behind
the three astrologers from the East
(the folly of infinity
swelling up in my breast).

this is where my search led me:

- i) doing contracts
on a state of the art
computer, while my wife
gives the children a bath;
- ii) changing diapers
- iii) dealing with Caesar.

I thought I was pretty hip
and would never get caught

August 21, 1997

Wilhelm Reich Rides this Bus

faces of people getting aboard the bus
no threat from any of them
psychic carcass bare
my insides feel like jello:
I am singing in my heart.

March 5, 1996

Joy to the World

sitting in my accountant's office
this morning
I had a good laugh:
we shared a bit of nonsense
to cheer up
during the apocalypse.

March 5, 1996

Zen in Mid-Winter

my brain feels like a tower of white light
as I sing this morning,
an inaudible song behind my eyes;
I remember silly tunes
about yellow bikinis
and tan shoes and pink shoe laces
I am mentally kissing the world.

March 5, 1996

Sisterhood

today mommy daddy & I went to a big building with the new baby. we took an elevator and walked down a long hall. mommy said this is where the new baby was born. I am not sure I understand. anyhow, when we got to the end of the hall, a lady dressed in white took the baby from mommy and went away with it behind a closed door. I knew what they were up to, so I cried. and I cried and I cried. I knew they were going to return the new baby to the lady dressed in white. we had my baby sister at home for two days, & now it was time to bring her back. so I cried my heart out, until another lady dressed in white brought me something cold to drink. then they brought my little sister back. I guess they couldn't stand my crying. the lady in white said something to mommy & daddy about the follow-up visit whatever that is. so we went back down the hall to the elevator with my new sister & went back home. I think from now on mommy and daddy will keep the baby at home.

August 3, 1994

Fall Go Boom

tonight, I was alone in the house with daddy. I climbed on the record stack, where I always go. suddenly, I fell and hit a sharp corner of a box with my forehead, just above my eye. there was blood everywhere, all over my face & sweater. daddy leapt up & grabbed me, clutched me in his arms, until he was also covered with blood. Then he held me & ran down the stairs & down the street. daddy was breathing hard as he ran, with me in his arms. by then I wasn't crying anymore. we got to a corner and daddy yelled "TAXI!" a man that daddy knew opened the door of his car & daddy held me in his arms as we climbed into the front seat. daddy yelled twice to go to the nearest hospital, whatever that is. the man turned the key in the switch & we drove fast down the highway, under a bridge & up a ramp, around a corner, down the street and daddy told the man he couldn't pay him, he had no money. the driver said that was all right. so daddy picked me up & we went through a door that opened by itself to a nice lady sitting behind a desk. daddy was covered in blood, so she asked him about our postal code, our phone number, my medicare card & so forth. then we waited & waited & waited some more. finally another nice lady said to come along, & we went through another door. there were nice ladies and men dressed in green. then we waited in a small room with weird contraptions on the wall. I wanted to touch all the metal toys on the wall but daddy wouldn't let me. he said not to touch. daddy lay me down on a bed & I bled all over the bed. then daddy picked me up a long while later & took me down the hall, where the nice ladies in green were chatting about supper. daddy said, "Would anyone mind wiping the blood off her face?" and a nice lady smiled at me & we went back down the hall, into the small room, while she washed my wound. and we waited some more. finally a lady who looked important came in, they lay me down on the bed & said they were going to glue the wound shut. at first I smiled, but then they restrained me, so I cried. in a moment, it was over & they gave me some ice cream. as we went back out the door mommy was there. she gave me a big hug and we drove back home. daddy kept telling mommy about the way his higher power had provided a taxi when he had no money. that evening, before I got put to bed, daddy went out to pay the taxi man and came back ten minutes later. he told mommy the taxi man didn't want to get paid, & daddy said he thanked god. my head had a bobo & it hurt. now, whenever I meet a grown-up, I can point at my forehead and say,

“BOBO! BOBO!”

August 3, 1994

Through the Eyes of my Daughter

birds
eating rice
on the front steps of the church
in the rain

August 5, 1995

Real Adventure

This morning, as usual, I got my daughter Isabelle dressed, fed her breakfast and took her to the corner where the school bus picks her up. Meanwhile, my conjointe Bonnie took care of the other daughter, Cordelia. Today was Isabelle's violin lesson at school. It's funny watching her carrying around a violin, because the violin case is bigger than she is.

I remember, a few years ago, the first time I went for a walk down Coolbrook Avenue with Isabelle. She had just learned how to walk, and I was so proud! In fact, I was so proud that I expected senior ladies to hold the door for me and Isabelle. Yes, having kids makes you very self-assertive.

I also remember one day, a couple of years later, I entered the daycare where Isabelle was and found her standing in the corner! She saw me coming in and burst out in tears because she was so ashamed, poor thing. Around that time, one evening, she asked me, "Where am I going tomorrow?" I answered, "To daycare." She asked me, again, "Why do I have to go to daycare?" I replied, "Because the government says so." Then she blurted out, "Maybe I can kill the government with a sword." I asked her, "Why do you want to kill the government with a sword?" She answered, lying on her bed, "Because Maggie makes me stand in the corner."

I get a real sense of adventure, raising kids. Now, I have had all kinds of adventures, from hitch-hiking through Western Europe when I was eighteen years old by myself, to taking psychedelic drugs which risked endangering the delicate balance of my brain chemistry; from preaching on street corners with a bullhorn that carried six hundred yards, to attending demonstrations which burst into riots, with the police chasing us around on motorcycles and beating us with billy clubs in the night. However, raising a family is a wholesome adventure.

I remember hearing a fundamentalist say that bank tellers can spot a counterfeit dollar bill as soon as they touch it, because they are used to handling the real money all the time. He claimed that when it came to spiritual teachings, the real coin was reading the Bible. I would say, on the other hand,

that the standard is rather family life. It can be very stressful at times, but on the whole, it grounds you and makes you happy. If you meet your responsibilities, that is. Any other lifestyle seems so empty in comparison, and believe me, I have experimented with a few.

Of course, I can't imagine how you can really be a bohemian if you are raising a family. I may be wrong about this. I know some parents who smoke pot, who abandon their families, but that doesn't make much sense to me. Kids need a structure around them. This does not mean the furniture in the living room has to match the curtains. It does not mean the kids have to wear designer clothes and go skiing when they are five years old. What it does mean is being there for the kids, and not leaving their education up to a nanny or constant babysitters. It means making an effort to get along with your mate, the other parent hopefully.

There are very simple, easy chores to do when you are raising kids, but they are indispensable. For instance, changing diapers. Waking up in the middle of the night if the baby cries. Feeding the child sensible food. To do so, you have to stay healthy yourself, in mind and body.

When I first met my conjointe, the mother of our kids, I was going to church even on weekdays. Now I realize what really counts is being a certain type of person: caring, responsible, tenderhearted, logical, tolerant, and especially, patient. God will take care of revealing himself/herself to the children if you provide them with a loving foundation. How can people trust in God if their parents were abusive? The image we have of the divine is rooted in the example of our parents. I mainly try, without always succeeding, to be nice to my kids.

Sometimes, the children will drive you frantic. They will literally run circles around you, whooping and screaming. No, children are not born civilized. There is no package deal. Over many years, you have to teach them. Sometimes that means you lose your temper. Well, you have to forgive yourself. Nobody is perfect. We are only human.

And the rewards are great. When my daughters climb on my knee and give me a hug, it makes it all worthwhile.

March 17, 1998

The Metro

I like to ride on the metro. daddy keeps me in the stroller while he carries me down the steps, all the way down to the gate where a man takes the tickets. then daddy pushes me through the funny gate he calls a turnstile, & down the metal moving staircase to the place where musicians play. some people drop a coin in the hat. others don't. one time, daddy stopped with me & listened to the musicians. I wish he would do that more often. then he picks up the stroller again & we walk down more stairs to a long tunnel. after a very long time, the metro comes rushing into the station, like a giant roaring metal caterpillar, the doors open, the people step in & daddy pushes me in the stroller into the car. so once we are aboard, I look around for nice ladies to smile at. usually I find one or two nice ladies. I smile at them & they smile at me. sometimes there are even kids aboard the metro. the older ones ignore me, but I can make friends with the little ones. then, the doors open and we step out onto a long platform. we take another train, & another. mommy and daddy are proud of me, they beam with pride as the older ladies smile at me. but, as time goes by, I attract less and less attention. I used to be the magic baby, but now I have a little sister, & she gets all the smiles.

August 3, 1994

One Morning, a Kiss

I asked my three-year old daughter
to kiss daddy,
so she gave me a funny, crooked smile,
slinked along the wall
and pecked me on the cheek.
the one hundred and forty-four thousand
sing praises in heaven.

March 5, 1997

The World on your Shoulders

you poor broken tulip, you smile,
your eyes are children's eyes:
who knows what you see?
you see what others don't

you struggle against impossible medicine
bearing the scars of work
in your hands the scars of persecution

and they shall stand before the throne
and God shall wipe away
all tears from their eyes:

tears from walking around in Johnny shirts;
tears from when they threaten
to wrench your kids away from you;
tears by the graveside
they make me laugh when they say
god will never give you
more than you can handle

you know the reverse side of the coin'
where life is so evil
it's maddening, where laughter
is not a consolation and the Medusa
has snakes in her hair

I am not your white night,
I can't make your laundry
as clean as a white tornado,
you've seen me die
a thousand times as we make love

I never promised you

a Mercedes Benz
and springtime

October 6, 1995

Faustus

Bonnie wants to know the secret language of the stars
Bonnie wants to converse with the gods
She wants to create fire and water
And decipher the mysteries of volcanoes and ancient religions

For you see, Bonnie was present at the battle of Waterloo
She crowned Charlemagne emperor of Europe
She was one of the plotters who assassinated Julius Caesar
She served Socrates hemlock to drink

Meanwhile, Bonnie has two splendid children
She lives in the suburb of her choice
She has her health, enough money to get by
And she has a man wrapped around her little pinkie

Bonnie's not satisfied with the ordinary
She wants to correspond with Francis Bacon
She is the first Renaissance woman
She wants to be nothing less than

Nothing less than
She wants to be nothing less than
A lousy intellectual

October 17, 1995

Photo Album

Let me show you some pictures from my photo album.

First, here is one of the bridge game. Here is my mother, sitting at a bridge table with three other socialites. They are wearing perms and long strings of jewels, and rouge that makes them look like evil clowns. Each of the four women is sitting on a different side of the bridge table. Where am I in the picture? I am the little boy about four years old, wearing a little bow tie and a clean, pressed white shirt, short, short hair and a pair of shorts. Whereas the four high-society women are mobile, I am sitting still. I don't dare move a muscle. Occasionally, when the so-called ladies take a break for tea, one of them pays attention to me, pats me on the head and comments on what a nice boy I am. The bridge game.

Here is another one of Vicky Pink. She is our neighbour, when I am about four. She is promiscuous, meaning that she loves getting attention from the boys. Sometimes, she is in her underwear, and the naughty boys are putting pieces of coal in her panties. I think all of this is silly. She is protesting wildly, and I am wondering why she enjoys getting that kind of attention.

Here is a shot of my father. I am about a year and a half old. Dad just came home from work, so I yell out in French, 'Papa!' But he yells at me, still in French, 'Shut up, Robert, the pope is on the radio!' And I break down and cry, because my dad is so uptight about the old man on the radio. The radio is green and ugly.

One more picture that is even more disturbing. There I am, knocking at our front door, looking like something the cat brought in, and my mother sees me and freaks out. There is a cop standing behind me. He just found me at the Experimental Farm. We live in Ottawa, and the farm is not far away. When he found me, I had just been kidnapped by a teenager from outside our neighbourhood. And I remember the cop telling my mother that I must never, ever be told about this.

Another photo, one of shame. I am fifteen years old, and I am riding in the

back seat of a police car. A colleague from high school sees me. I have just gotten arrested for stealing. Shoplifting 45 RPM records, actually, at a record store in Ottawa. I have to go to Youth Court. My parents are out of town, and the cops release me in the custody of my sister, who is older.

One more of me riding in the back seat of a police car. However, this is around 1970. I am twenty-one years old, and not so innocent. I see my face in the rearview mirror, and I have big, wide, psychotic-looking eyes. I have been hitchhiking around Ontario, wandering aimlessly from town to town, eating out of garbage cans, dressed in rags. I have lost a lot of weight. The cops will charge me with vagrancy. More shame. I seem to look for it.

However, these cops won't rescue me from the kidnapper, they will proceed to beat me up and publicly ridicule me. My only crime is that I was sleeping in the basement of an apartment building. And I got caught. By this time, I have a bachelor's degree in literature, magna cum laude. My only options are to run away like this.

Here I am again, in Colorado Springs, Colorado. I am living in a trailer behind the house of some Mexicans. I pay five dollars a week rent, which I earn as a part-time busboy in a restaurant. The trailer is about fifteen feet long. It is snowing or something. I see an airplane fly over, and there are pieces of paper falling from the sky, or I think I see that, and all the pieces of paper contain coded messages. I am trying to decipher the coded messages.

There are three American military bases in this town. I am what the government calls an "illegal alien," but I don't mean any harm.

Here is an interesting photo. I am riding on the bus, and my first daughter was just born. I am in love with all the people on the bus, who are totally oblivious to me, but I am ecstatic. Bonnie my girlfriend just gave birth to a girl. I am in love. I can't believe I am a father. This realization will take some time to sink in. You discover that yes, you are a parent. The kids discover you. You find yourself in relationships that are intimate and real, when you share your home with a family.

One last, recent photo. My youngest daughter Cordelia just had her graduation

dance. She has just finished primary school. It is 11:00 o'clock at night, and I just went to the school to pick her up. The graduation dance just finished, and all the parents are picking up their kids after the dance. I am walking home with Cordelia, and she looks pretty, in her green dress. It is June, so she has taken her shoes off to walk easier. I am showing her the stars in the sky. Some are really bright. She is fresh and alive, bright also and very good-looking, and I am proud of her.

Now it is time to close the book. Whom do I see in the mirror? Today, I see an old face, with wrinkles and bags under the eyes, and a double chin. Who was I? Soon, this book will be thrown in the garbage. Photo album.

June 24, 2006

A Thirst for Coincidence

I lie in bed with my wife, and we are both admitting to each other that there is something we crave, and it is not alcohol, not sex, not drugs, not art, and it can't be bought with money. You can't find it in concert halls or churches or museums. What is it?

I have two children, a wife who loves me, and I come home to them every day -- and yet I am lonely because I can't find that something, that elixir you can't buy at the drug store. So I go out for a walk, along the suburban street. It is fall, and it feels like Halloween, because there are yellow leaves crackling under my footsteps along the sidewalk. I walk past the local church. I remember the last time I went there: the priest said the Jews killed Christ, and I never went back. I walk past the bank, and the restaurant where the rich ladies from Hampstead go for pie. There are a couple of them talking outside a Jaguar parked on the curb. I guess they have what they want, and it strikes me as very ordinary. Nice clothes, financial security, power over other people. Big deal. I walk into the hip coffee shop and they are playing Billie Holliday over the PA system, and teenage students are so busy socializing and discussing boyfriends and the latest theories.

Finally, I figure I will walk back home. And I am thirsty for coincidence. I walk into the magazine store, looking for a distraction. They are playing Let It Be, by the Beatles, the song about Mother Mary over the PA system. Yeah, that's why I came in here. How about that? How does that grab you? Mother Mary. I walk home in the dark.

I come home and play the record for my daughter Isabelle, who is seven: Let It Be, and she smiles, because she wants to know what I think is hip. Her sister Cordelia is reading a book with her mother in the bedroom.

I guess our God is not a mighty fortress: Martin Luther was wrong. Maybe God is a little girl, or a butterfly, or an autumn leaf gently, gently falling off a tree, and being carried by the wind, until it crosses your path, and you pick it up and put it in your lapel. I guess that's what God is.

And I hope some day to quench that craving.

October 12, 1999

Matin brumeux

C'est brumeux ce matin dans les parcs, sur la montagne, dans les rues. Quand je me suis réveillé, on voyait à peine à dix pieds devant soi. Même maintenant, à neuf heures du matin, je ne vois pas l'horizon de ma fenêtre du sixième étage. Pas un oiseau en vue. Tout est enveloppé d'une ouate ambiguë.

Je suis allé à des funérailles la semaine dernière. Une amie de trente-cinq ans est décédée accidentellement. Son fils de quatre ans l'a trouvée morte sur le plancher de leur logement. Évidemment, la mère de mon amie était désolée et pleurait sur l'épaule de tout le monde.

Je ne sais pas où elle est, mon amie. Plusieurs personnes disaient, par exemple, que la défunte n'aura plus de migraines, plus de dépression. Je ne sais pas.

Je suis passé près de la mort moi-même quelques fois. Il y a quelques années, j'ai fait un infarctus et j'ai subi une angioplastie. Je sais que je n'avais pas peur. Eh bien, je faisais semblant de ne pas avoir peur. Par bravade, je gageais avec mes amis que je survivrais à l'angioplastie. On m'a dit qu'une personne sur mille n'en sort pas en vie. Mon prof Irène Spilka est décédée sur la table d'opération, en plein milieu d'une angioplastie.

Quand j'ai fait la crise cardiaque, je blaguais avec mes amis qui étaient venus me visiter à l'hôpital. Je sentais que la Mort se trouvait à deux pieds de moi, tout devant moi, et je lui riaais en pleine face. Peut-être qu'intérieurement, j'étais un peu nerveux, mais je gardais mon sang-froid.

Y a-t-il quelque chose après la mort? Certains disent que c'est la fin de tout. D'autres prétendent que c'est un sommeil. Mais un sommeil peut-il être troublé? A-t-on des cauchemars? La Bible dit qu'il y a la résurrection des morts. Ces croyances sont basées sur la religion égyptienne de l'antiquité. Il y a aussi le Livre tibétain des morts, qui parle de réincarnation.

Je pense que nous sommes extrêmement petits dans l'univers. Avez-vous déjà voyagé en avion? Les êtres humains sur le plancher des vaches sont pas mal petits lorsque nous sommes à trente mille pieds d'altitude.

Est-ce que nous sommes assez importants dans l'ordre des choses pour que nous vivions éternellement?

Cependant, si on songe à la complexité d'une vie humaine, si on pense à tous les moments divers de la vie, les événements qu'on vit, les idées qu'on peut entretenir, la croissance spirituelle, il semble y avoir une orientation, un sens dans lequel tout ce mouvement se dirige.

Je me sens évoluer, à ma petite façon. Je me suis débarrassé de certaines mauvaises habitudes. Par exemple, j'ai cessé de fumer et de boire. Par conséquent, je grandis spirituellement. Mais vers quel point culminant est-ce que je me dirige? Où tout cela aboutira-t-il?

D'autres, comme les existentialistes, prétendent que la vie est absurde. La mort ne serait qu'un autre moment insignifiant de la vie. Un autre point dans une série de points aussi creux les uns que les autres.

Mais si je considère la complexité de tout ce qui nous entoure, dans la nature, comme dans la civilisation, je ne peux pas croire qu'il n'y a aucun sens à la vie.

Ce matin, je pense à tout cela, et je pense à mon amie Julia, qui est décédée il y a dix jours. Certes, c'est très bouleversant d'assister à des funérailles. Mais le soleil se lèvera quand la brume sera dissipée. Le soleil se lèvera bientôt.

Le 13 mars, 2006

The Ascent from the Pit

I am lying here in bed. There are two nurses sitting at the foot of my bed, watching me, watching I don't jump out of the window again. I can hear them talking about the Revolution, while the Picasso picture on the wall is changing shapes, convoluting, twisting, in a million zillion metamorphoses, and I am not talking. No, they won't get me to talk. The police would try to get me to talk, to talk about my hippie friends, to talk about revolutionary secrets, to talk about myself. I won't talk. I am just, well, lying here in bed.

By the way, I am in excruciating pain, because I am high. I am extremely sensitive to noise, and there is construction going on outside my window. I hear Vivian walking up and down the hall, laughing and laughing, and it irritates me. Sometimes she peeks into my room, and recoils with disgust.

I am just lying here, and the only time they were not watching me, I jumped out of bed and tried to escape from the ward. I ran around like a wildcat, but they tackled me by the door. Since then, I have collapsed.

A couple of days ago, a French male nurse came and sat by my bedside, and said to me, "I would give a week's salary to hear you say one word to me." And I just stared at him and I wouldn't talk. I knew that I knew too much.

The government wants to kill me because I am a communist. I was wandering homeless along Highway 401, and I got arrested in Oshawa, Ontario for sleeping in some basement. The cops beat me up for the fun of it, and then I was committed to a ward for the criminally insane, in Whitby Psychiatric. Four days later, they transferred me here. They handcuffed me to a policeman and drove me to Montreal. I sat in the back of the police car, and we drove down Highway 401, until we arrived in Verdun, and I saw once again the gray hospital of despair.

I know the government's plan: they have put a wheelchair in my room, and they plan to shoot me when no one is looking, sit me in the wheelchair and stuff my head with a tape recorder, so I can rule the world from that wheelchair. They want me to be the Antichrist. I will be dead, and no one will

suspect it, because a tape recorder will be talking through my mouth, and I will be running the planet from the wheelchair. I am responsible for World War III.

My mother came to visit me, and asked me if I recognized her. I didn't move a muscle. She didn't stick around. I hope the Nazis don't kill her or torture her to death.

Every day, they pretend to give me injections of massive doses of largactyl. What they are injecting into my hip is really microfilms containing my future life. They are planning to re-groove me, reorganize my life. They want me to betray the Revolution and join the Establishment.

I don't want to hear about it. I don't want anything to do with money. Money is dirty. I am a street person and always will be. I have rebelled against my parents, against the Church, against the government, and everybody who is slightly fascist. This is the end of dialectic. They are marching you into concentration camps. This is the end of dialectic.

* * *

It seems like I have been in Burgess Pavilion of the Douglas for several weeks, several months, who knows? Time stops when they wheel you in here in a stretcher. The only routine is medication, breakfast, medication, lunch, and supper. They turn off the lights at night.

There is a nurse called Malcolm, a black guy, who is playing tiddlywinks with me. I think that is what he is doing, anyway. We are sitting at a table in the dayroom. I am wearing my Johnny shirt, and he is wearing his street clothes. He is flicking a quarter across the table at me. When it reaches my side of the table, I flick it back to him. Then he flicks it back to me. This is difficult. It has been going on all afternoon.

Suddenly, a minute ago, I caught on to something. Malcolm is trying to teach me about communication. Enlightenment. Eureka.

They are rebuilding my mind.

Last night, a patient took me out to a concert downtown at the Forum. It was classical music, the kind my mother used to play on CBC Radio. We were walking on Ste-Catherine Street, and there were flashing lights, cars honking, noise, pedestrians. It occurred to me, "There is movement."

I have been playing sports in the Douglas. This time, no one came to visit me. My father came with my sister, and I told her this was the ward for snobs.

There is Mr. Hart who likes me. He is the President of the Patients' Council, and he likes me too much. He tried to kiss me a couple of days ago. He used to be a lawyer, and he can play Rachmaninoff on the piano. He must be seventy-five years old. He is a pompous old fart. He has his entourage of patients, Brian and John. I find John scary, because he is so deformed.

The other day, I saw the scariest thing in the world. I was in the tunnels underground that connect all the pavilions, and two male nurses went past me walking a boy about twelve years old who had a head the size of a watermelon. The boy was being walked on a leash, like a dog. He could barely walk. I am not sure he was entirely human.

* * *

I got discharged from the Douglas that time in November 1970. There were soldiers on the streets of Montreal, and I bumped into a few of my comrades from the FLQ, and they said to me, "Ils t'ont pas manqué, hein?" I told them I had spent the past few months in the Douglas. This was in the parking lot behind City Hall.

I began to work again some time later, working in factories, first in Ville St-Pierre, then in Lachine, and finally in St-Léonard. For a couple of years after that, I worked in restaurants and hotels. I was learning to discipline myself, accomplishing bigger and bigger things, trying more and more complex tasks. First, I had to learn to wash every day and keep my hair short. I learned to show up at work on time.

One day in 1978, I saw a movie called Charley, based on the novel Flowers for Algernon, and it was about a mentally handicapped person who takes a drug

that gradually turns him into a genius. And I decided I would raise my IQ. First, I bought math books and redid my grade school, high school and college math. I hired a prof to give me math tutorials in advanced mathematics on Saturday mornings. I began weightlifting, and developing my mind. I almost had to learn how to read all over again. I took drawing courses at Concordia, and a translation course with Professor Albert Jordan.

By this time, my whole ideology was changing. I identified with the mentally ill, but wanted to become successful. My father had been a translator for many years, and after he retired, he began farming out freelance contracts to me, and getting me interested in translation. I had always resisted him, but this time, I guess the timing was right, and I began translating.

Finally, in September 1980, I went back to university full-time and did graduate studies in translation. At first, I found it difficult to concentrate on my studies, but once I stopped smoking marijuana, I got better marks. In December that year, a friend of my dad's told me there was a competition for 75 positions in the federal government, and I applied. In early May, they mailed me a letter saying I had passed the translation exam from English to French as well as the interview. They were sending me out to Winnipeg. I had to report to my new boss, Raymond Arcand, on May 15th, 1981. So I worked in Winnipeg for three months and then got transferred to Ottawa, to the offices of Statistics Canada. I worked there for 19 months, and then I got another job in Fredericton, where I was translating hansard for the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick. I stayed there for only a year, because I was very homesick in Fredericton.

In the past twenty years, I also had setbacks. I had many more adventures and many more hospitalizations. I started drinking, and then stopped twenty years later. I had all kinds of problems, but by God's grace somehow, I overcame them. However, my life has not been a simple uphill trek from hell to heaven. I have rather been traveling through life like an ant wandering through the grass, up one blade of grass and down the same blade of grass, up another blade of grass. There have been many tangents and many digressions. But I have been building up my mind, and becoming more and more myself. Today I can focus on a computer screen for twelve hours in a day if I have to, and I can earn \$ 800 a day translating a prospectus for a law firm. I know, because I do that for

a living. I have also written and published literature; I was interviewed on radio and television, and my poetry is on the Internet. I was published several times in China and Australia.

I now have a wife and two children. We have had tremendous difficulties, but at this time, everyone is fine. I am still on medication, and have to see a shrink once a month or so, but I have been in my right mind for years now.

People have helped me along the way. I am not one of those people who boast that no one helped them get where they are today. I don't bake my own bread and I don't repair my own shoes. There is a whole community of people out there who are constantly helping me out, and for this I am grateful. Over the years, I have studied spirituality and have developed positive beliefs that get me through the night. For instance, at this time, I say the rosary every day but I won't go near a church. I depend a lot on the miraculous.

I don't want to go back to where I was thirty years ago, or to where I was when I was drinking just a couple of years ago. I see people panhandling on the streets of Montreal who are still living on the streets. If you see them, don't write them off. They have potential, as long as they are alive.

We are the psychiatrized people. We suffer problems and afflictions and persecution that you are not aware of at all. We are fully human. We are not public enemy number one. Most of us are harmless. Every now and then some member of our community commits a murder, and the media are quick to point out that the person had "a cocktail of neuroses." The media always used to point out the fact that people were black or white. Well, today the mind is the new frontier. We are conquering outer space, and we have built atom bombs. We the mentally ill still don't get respected; we are still second-class citizens. And no, genius is not close to madness. It is just that some of us are more original and have stepped out of everyday reality to explore our minds.

Don't tie us up in straightjackets. Don't give us electric shock treatment. Don't give us lobotomies. We are your brothers and sisters. We have the credentials to prove it. Here, hold my hand.

Opium, the Religion of the Masses

The group therapy meeting comes to order. There are Jehovah's Witnesses and born-again Christians among the patients, proselytizing and arguing with one another. Out of the blue, one of the psychiatrists pronounces an oracle: "It's okay to believe in God, as long as you're rowing towards shore." Not bad for a one-liner – it distinguishes the realm of cult and religious madness from the religion of common sense.

I was exposed early in life to the first brand of religion. I remember my mother telling me as a child that I had to wear underwear because Christ's disciples wore underwear. I remember my father taking me to confession once a week, so I could kneel on a purple velvet cushion and confess to my father's confessor, a seventy-five year old monsignor, who was the chaplain of a nunnery. On Saturdays, dear old dad would take me to do the Stations of the Cross at the local church. There are fourteen stations commemorating the crucifixion of Christ, and my dad would stand, with arms outstretched, in front of the twelfth station, weeping and wailing with sincere passion in front of the image of Christ crucified. I was twelve years old, and I didn't understand. For that matter, a year before he died (my father, not Christ), when he was seventy-nine years old, we had a heated argument about the Jews on Christmas Eve. There was my father, pounding the table, yelling, "THE JEWS KILLED CHRIST! THE JEWS KILLED CHRIST!!" And I would answer him, "But look, Dad, Jesus was Jewish, Mother Mary was Jewish, Joseph was Jewish, St. Peter and all the early Christians were Jewish..." To no avail, my father had been raised in the thirties by the monks.

Obviously, having been raised in the Catholic Church, I pronounced myself an atheist when I was 16 or 17 years old. I read Karl Marx, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Sartre and Camus and denied God's existence. My father was not amused. I would discuss Camus with him, and my father would pound the table and scream, "BUT LIFE IS NOT ABSURD!! LIFE IS NOT ABSURD!!" Of course, this was not very convincing. It seemed that the god of my parents hated everything from sperm to anglophones and back again. Of course, when I got involved in radical politics, around 1969, I wanted to put all priests and nuns into concentration camps. Then I cracked up. Too much acid, too many

violent demonstrations, too many oppressive encounters with the police.

A few years later, I was living in Colorado, and I would see graffiti on walls saying things like, "Isaiah 53," and I would wonder what that meant. There would be graffiti in public washrooms saying, "Jesus Revolution." I was intrigued. The Jesus I had been brought up to believe in was the Jesus of the Right-wingers and Conservatives. Labour unions and their strikes were denounced in the name of Jesus. What was this Jesus revolution?

I was soon to find out. In the seventies, in California, and all across the States, there were Jesus freaks, born-again Christians, fundamentalist sects. I saw street preachers standing on the streets preaching the Gospel at people. I was drafted by a few of these Jesus freaks, and soon enough I too was a street preacher.

First, I was love bombed by a cute girl in San Francisco. No, I didn't sleep with her. She was attacking me emotionally, yelling, "God loves you! God loves you!" Mind you, I would have slept with her if I could have. I answered her feebly, "But then why does He want blood atonement for sin?" The girl replied, "I don't know, but that's just the way it is..." I added, overwhelmed, "Then why is there so much suffering in this world?" And she replied, "I don't know, that's just the way it is..." So I respected her honesty. She didn't claim to have all the answers. I took off with her and her comrades, and spent almost a year living with these so-called Christians.

They used to speak in tongues, uttering gibberish with their mouths. I tried to do this, but the flow wouldn't come. I was told I had to "be baptized in the Holy Spirit." So I prayed for that experience. That evening, there was a religious service which I attended, held in the gymnasium of Berkeley University campus. The pastor said in front of the congregation, "All those who want to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, come forward." So I went up, along with others. I watched, as other hippies, or men wearing shoulder-length hair, went through contorsions, as though they were being electrified. I felt nothing, except a tingle in my knees. A brother I knew, called Stanley, called me over, "Bob, come over here." And he and another fellow laid their hands on my shoulders and started speaking in tongues and commanding God to baptize me in the Holy Spirit.. Stanley just told me, "Lift up your hands, bro, and worship

Jesus. Let the utterance come." So I lifted my hands to the sky and started worshipping Jesus. Suddenly, tears started gushing from my eyes and words in a foreign language started coming out of my mouth. Let me mention right here that up until that point, I had felt unloved all my life. I had always been an emotional tough guy. So right at that moment, I started feeling joy, feeling loved. And I looked up in the air, and I could see a light, say a hundred feet above me, a light that looked like the sun, except that it was a white light and it was shining down, looking at my heart. I knew this was another consciousness out there that loved me intensely. All this happened suddenly and spontaneously, and lasted about half an hour. There I was, with arms outstretched upwards, worshipping this light and in return, it was pouring love and joy into my heart. I felt loved by this light. I started laughing and jumping up and down and dancing and whooping for joy. Meanwhile, I was gushing with tears of joy. After about half an hour, I started coming down. The experience was more intense than LSD25 or orgasms or any other stimulus. And it left me transformed.

However, had I left the group right then and there, I would have learned something. But the born-again Christians got a hold of me and brainwashed me into their cult. First, they took the Bible literally. If the Bible taught that Jesus walked on real water, then they believed it really happened. It wasn't a story meant to teach a moral. It was a real miracle. If the Bible taught that Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes, then he multiplied the loaves and fishes.

This was fine, until I happened to read the four different accounts of the Resurrection in the four different Gospels. In one account, there are two angels and an earthquake and the stone is moved miraculously. In another account, there is only one angel. In another account, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalen, and she can't recognize him. So obviously, there were discrepancies in the texts. I spoke to a Catholic priest about it, and he explained to me that the early Jewish Christians who wrote these Gospels were pre-scientific and didn't have a sense of journalistic fact. The important thing to remember was that Jesus rose from the dead, and the enthusiasm of the early Church in conveying this fact.

A few years later, I happened to read a book about the pre-Socratic philosophers of ancient Greece. I read that Pythagoras, the father of modern

Western music, who lived in the fifth century B.C., was also supposedly born of a virgin, walked on water and rose from the dead. Also, it occurred to me that Dionysus, in Greece, Horus, in Egypt, and Christ, in Palestine, were all supposed to be the Son of God, gave their bodies to be eaten by their disciples, died and went to the underworld and then came back to life. It now seemed that there was another dimension to these stories. Were they part of the collective unconscious, were they myths which corresponded to the cycle of the seasons, and why did they reoccur in various parts of the ancient world? What was significant was that these myths started in antiquity.

Once again, I asked another Catholic priest, who was then the chaplain of Parthenais Prison in Montreal, why the Church taught there was only one true Church. He answered, "The Church does not teach that. All religions are relative, complementary outlooks on one absolute truth, which is God."

Now it seems to me that myth, religion, science and magic are different interpretations of human existence created by people to make sense of life on this planet. These views are often appropriated by administrators who don't have the spirituality of the founders and use their teachings to perpetuate social order and organization. Within churches and denominations and sects you will find individuals scattered here and there who are real saints. However, more often than not, most true believers have to shut out most of their human experience in order to preserve their faith. This process is called brainwashing. Heretics or witches were burned at the stake because they didn't agree with some myth originating in pre-scientific times. Jews and Muslims were slaughtered, their property was confiscated and they were persecuted in the name of Christ's love. In recent times, Western soldiers led by the USA invaded Iraq for false pretenses, when Western politicians knew there was oil there for their Western citizens. And there is a constant barrage of propaganda in the media to condemn Muslims.

And yet, strangely enough, I believe in a divinity still. Perhaps I could quote here a favourite poem by e.e. cummings :

O sweet spontaneous
Earth how often have
the

doting

fingers of
prurient philosophers pinched
and
poked

thee
,has the naughty thumb
of science prodded
thy

beauty .how
often have religions taken
thee upon their scraggy knees
squeezing and

buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive
gods
(but
true

to the incomparable
couch of death thy
rhythmic
lover

thou answerest

them only with

spring)

Catching Babies in Mid-Air

Is there a divinity that shapes our ends, Horatio, rough' hew them as we may? I remember one incident that sort of answers that question: about seven years ago, I was lying in bed, and I prayed to God, "Please give me a sign that the whole world could see, not just a sign for me alone, but something that would be obvious for everyone." And then my mind drifted off, for about five minutes.

I got up to go to the bathroom, and then casually wandered into the kitchen, where my wife Bonnie was washing the dishes. As I entered the room, she was at my left, by the sink. The newborn baby, Cordelia, who was three months old, had been sitting in a bucket seat on top of the kitchen table, where we often placed her. Well, just as I walked into the kitchen, lo and behold, the baby had stood up in her bucket seat and fallen over backwards. At the precise moment when I laid eyes on her, she was falling off the kitchen table and was about to land on her head on the floor. I leaped out and caught her in mid-air, just when her head was about a foot off the floor! I screamed out, "JESUS CHRIST, BONNIE!!" And Bonnie, who is an atheist up to this day, exclaimed, "Wow, there is a god!" And the baby's life was spared miraculously, because if I had come into the kitchen a minute or two later, Cordelia would have landed head first on the kitchen floor, with inevitable damage. She could have broken her neck or had a concussion. In any case, the baby was safe.

I find that the timing of things is where I find God. It is a sign that Someone Out There is looking after me. Just like when I caught Cordelia in mid-air, it shows that a Higher Power is running the natural world in accordance with a plan.

The question is whether or not "there is a divinity that shapes our ends, Horatio, rough' hew them as we may." When this incident happened, I wasn't dreaming or stoned. This is a stroke of good luck that seem to indicate something about the nature of things. Is it just that – luck?

October 2, 2001

The Smile in your Eyes

the storm clouds are dissipating and rolling
away, leaving space for beams of light
and tenderness in my life,
after the pellets of madness and disease
after the lightning of anger
after all the wrath of hell broke loose
and now,
I want to thank heaven for release
for the mercy of recovery
I want to lift my arms to the rainbow
and express my gratitude by giving
so I give you my life, my energy
and a million zillion moments of prayer
spread out like the green grass
singing with crickets
at the sight, once again, of the sunlight:
the fields rush out to the horizon
and I know that beyond,
lies infinity and, cupped in your hand,
the generous stars ablaze.

November 27, 1994

Also Sprach Zarathustra

It is cold and it is dark, as I watch the city lights flickering across the horizon, from my lonely apartment on the sixth floor. My wife and children are absent for a moment, and I am calling out for someone to hear me. I do not trust the establishment of religion, and yet the Church speaks of a power greater than us who hears us, who sees us, who knows our hearts. I know nothing about hermeneutics, but I have heard chambermaids and waitresses testify that they believe in a divinity that shapes our ends, Horatio; and I want to keep my faith that simple.

Are we just monkeys in the darkness of outer space, fascinated by the first sunset we have ever seen? Were we created on other planets? Why are we so maladjusted to physical existence in this world? Why are we so necessarily self-centered, focusing on everything from the point of view of self? Why can't we see past generations and learn from their misconceptions and errors? Why are we so limited, so small in the grand scheme of things?

I have read Nietzsche, and I don't want to go out there on a limb, challenging the universe to a duel. I don't believe the meaning of life is to produce a superman. The passions, pride and ego have been our downfall. I simply believe that the bigger they are, the harder they fall. I want the honour that comes not from men, but the honour that comes from God, although I am not sure what his middle name is.

I am very tiny and very large and very complicated. I just survived a heart attack, and I wonder why I am given back my life, like Lazarus, the man that came back from the dead. Do I have a mission, a purpose, a job to fulfill? Am I supposed to just raise children, make money like a hog in the trough, write poems, do translations of prospectuses? Who am I that I should live, when most men my age who undergo that kind of heart attack do not survive?

Do I have some kind of insight? Who is it that wanted me alive here and now? Three weeks ago, I had tubes coming out of my nostrils, tubes coming out of my arms, and electrodes planted in my chest; now I speak to people of what it is like to die, about the way your lungs burn with a fervent heat as you are

having the heart attack, I tell people I was laughing at death the night before my heart operation, when the odds included paralysis, death or another heart attack.

I do not have the answers, and I am not flying to India to find them. I am not cracking open a book, not even the Bible.

I hear Christians cackling in my ears on the phone, talking creepily of the so-called fortresses of Satan in our hearts, and how I am supposed to turn my atheist wife over to the power of Jesus. No thanks. Just the tone of voice of these fundamentalists turns me off to their message.

Beware of fundamentalism, whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim. At a time when God is dead, these nincompoops raise the specter of terrorism, and summon children off to battle the enemy of secular humanism. But give me secular humanism any day, because if you think it is bad, try religious bigotry. I see bombs going off, rifles being shot, planes being flown into buildings – in the name of God.

And the pagan world, our world, the democracies, the so-called civilized world is merely cynical about perpetuating war, and opening up new markets for oil and weapons. Economics determine if given populations will live or die. And if primitive civilizations stand in the way of progress, we will shoot their buffalo, give them tuberculosis, feed them alcohol, molest their children, turn them into monsters.

Yup, thus spake Zarathustra. The reign of the antichrist is a fearful thing. Even if he calls himself a true believer.

March 2, 2002

