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LEFTOVER TURKEY

by

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Department of CREATIVE WRITING

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ABSTRACT

If the turkey in the title of this thesis is the author, then what is left of him - for the time being, at least - is this work: the meat closest to the bone, bits of literary flesh which this somewhat carnivorous society failed to strip away. I offer it now for consumption and become a new animal.

This thesis is divided into three units: poetry, translation and short story. The first section comprises a selection of earlier poems and the beginnings of a book tentatively titled Somewhere East. From random impressions in the early work, a more solid poetic analysis develops around the nation of Quebec. The central theme here is one of struggle.

Unit two is a selection from four books by the French poet Guillevic, rendered here in English translation. From early work in Terraqué (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1942) and Exécutoire (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1948) to more recent poems in Carnac (Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1961) and Avec (Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1966), Guillevic's view

remains simple and sympathetic, his poems the voice of one allied with the natural but oppressed by the reality of his social condition.

The third unit contains three short fictions in prose which experiment with the fantasy which may be our own particular reality. These are lies about other "turkeys", about the tensions, silences and violence which drive them towards rebellion before they have nothing left at all.

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## POETRY

SOMEWHERE EAST

Somewhere east of Ste. Thérèse,  
The bus warms like an animal  
Chased across plains  
Where only ice grows.  
Eyes surround, glare  
Like the memory  
Of a muzzle flash  
And the breath  
Of every passenger  
Heaves slowly,  
Waves trying to scale  
Something  
When there is no beach.  
One by one,  
Pages of politics  
Turn in my hands.  
(Limousines roll  
Through the streets  
Of Sarajevo).

Closing on the border,  
None can say who will cross

And when there is no crossing,  
There is the best frontier  
Or none at all.  
(A new chancellor  
Is proclaimed).

Three soldiers  
From the Van Doos,  
Two nuns,  
Acadians still moving,  
They have reasons:  
The nuns to shop  
In Montréal;  
The gunmen to work  
In the back yards  
Of ministers;  
The Acadians  
To push on.  
(Something moves  
Across the Yalu).

The language makes me fear  
I will be discovered.

Behind their eyes  
Is the knowledge  
Of this road,  
That town  
(Not Cairo, not Saigon,  
Not yet)  
And behind the smile  
Of that young boy  
Is the voice,  
The word fired  
From the tip  
Of one finger:  
"Anglais."

Somewhere off this road,  
The Laurentians grow stronger.  
Somewhere beyond the rain,  
Railways and junctions  
That history books shall learn.  
Somewhere west of Ste. Thérèse,  
Another Reichstag burns in my hands.

RIEL

When ice melted,  
And leaves scattered  
And earth broke open,

Sun and wind and sapling  
Stood trial for high treason.

They whispered:  
Every coffin can be a scabbard.

LAKESHORE

On a day like this,  
The lake is a restless  
Spoonful of ocean.  
Waiting for the sky,  
It rolls over itself  
To test this shoreline  
As it must be testing others;  
And when it decides to move,  
Waves of foam and wet noise  
Will evidence a madness,  
The shorelines themselves  
Reasons. Stones will roll  
Dead to the sand and the wind  
Will wrestle with beach grass.  
The sky will clear its throat.

Another time, you might know  
That shivering here is better  
Than your animal pacing.  
See, the trees of the forest  
Also tremble, say:  
This is a day for the worms and us.

The lake, you could learn from it,  
How it approaches now a little closer  
But never scratches  
The smooth face of the sand  
And how it will draw back  
To allow the beach its whiteness too,  
The whiteness of broken shells  
And bones, not yours.  
Perhaps, if you could meet it half-way,  
Where land lies nowhere but below,  
You would understand.

But now, the sky makes up in black.  
The wind digs in beyond the trees  
And this becomes a battlefield,  
Where gulls are as silent as sandflies  
And the last day-stain is sponged  
From the air too soon. One by one  
The swells rumble, cobra-curled,  
From the centre and crash. The sky,  
Shotgunned, opens itself at last.  
Yes, there is violence here,  
But this rain, at least, is familiar



With clouds, this storm will only  
Rearrange. When it is done,  
The wakes of the birds will pass  
Over the same sandbars  
And water-bugs will build targets  
Once again for the fish.  
It should be the same with us.

The rain, now, has travelled to the forest.  
In the distance, crickets no longer scream  
And soil runs over rocks and weeds.  
The branches of the elms applaud.  
I can return now and listen  
Once more to your fears:  
That now those rocks will rise  
Their heads above the calm;  
That now the line where the sky  
Is sewn to the sea will unravel;  
That now your heat will be seized.  
It is warm here, yes, and the lake  
Is cold. But if it did not move,  
It would burn like the dead  
When they decompose. Listen:

For if you forget you eyes,

Wind and water and stone

May sound like fire.

The roof,

Like the panic of a thousand feet.

OLD MONTREAL

Old men with dogs inhabit this park,  
Walking, one leashed to the other,  
Until it is time to stop.  
They have not grown old, these men,  
But shrunk into age.  
They will remember for you  
(If they can, if you ask)  
Fight wars, drink wine,  
Go hungry for you.  
They will exhume their wives,  
Recall toothless children  
Whom they led, like dogs  
Through this park.  
They will walk backwards  
Into the dead end.

North of here,  
Wolves are shot from aeroplanes  
Because they are wolves.  
Between snow and sun  
There is only cold  
And sounds that move too slowly

For animals to hear.

In the city, here, in streets,  
In cellars, the children of old men  
Are growing. They remember.  
They have stopped suckling  
And their mouths are full of blood.  
They know: The wolves run south;  
The city fills with wounded animals.

CITADELLE

Quebec

Above the instep  
Of the cliff  
Black swabs  
Absorb another century  
And the grocer Legrand  
Watches one-eyed  
A wind from the west  
Push clouds east.

A dull sunrise.  
The sky descends  
Like a dying hand  
Toward the cobblestones.

Legrand, the grocer,  
Watches.  
Clouds reflect  
Across his half-eye.

Buildings and memories here  
Are stone  
And the difference  
Between heaven and cement  
Is the difference  
Between greys.

An eyelid falls slowly.  
Legrand imagines  
Beyond the walls  
That clouds are still  
Nuages,  
That the sky does not  
Wear boots.

ABOVE QUEBEC

Two centuries of stone walls  
Have kept the edges of the wound  
Cauterized.

Inside,  
Someone rebuilds a church  
And a woman down the road  
Has been dying since December.

HARBOR

A ship slips past the gunwatch.  
Steam whistles groan.  
The Earth sinks  
Below a plimsol line of sun.

For the steel crocodile,  
The pier is a bird  
Daydreaming at night.

The handhold of the sky  
Stretches  
And looks like smoke.

Caught between the moving edge  
And land,  
Water panics  
And washes up debris:  
Us.



BATTLEFIELD

Quebec

Beneath you,  
The roots of the tree are searching  
For buried dead.

The earth is soft as carrion.  
Through eyes and ribs  
Tentacles twist  
Into colder ground.

From branches,  
A slow confetti falls.

1837

Up here, the wind has learned  
To turn on its toes,  
For we are heading west now  
And freezing, slowly,  
Like bits of political thought.  
December: the season hangs  
In crystals from our beards,  
Winter forests from which we breathe  
Explosions without heat.  
The things we stole, boots  
And muskets and food,  
Are as heavy now as the memory  
Of St. Denis.  
Listen to our marching:  
We move in time with animals,  
Not armies. We are a company  
Of wolves, waiting for the deer  
To attack. A few more miles  
And the barricades will rise again,  
This time a few miles north  
And west of Montréal,  
At St. Eustasche.

Wetherall, Colborne or Gore,  
Which one approaches beyond the wood,  
Which butcher leads his army of dogs?  
Through an open church window,  
A spotlight sun pretends to warm  
While arguments splash from bottles  
In the street. Paquin,  
The sellout priest, is under arrest  
And villagers are packing up.  
Around the fire, Viger remembers  
St. Charles for us,  
How we fought in the forest  
Like the weasel and the bear.  
But today we are not animals  
And shall stand. The sun descends  
Like music settling  
On orchestra chairs.  
We are three hundred men.

Morning, and something crackles  
Like bacon frying. It has begun.  
Across the river, across the hard snow,  
We attack Globenski's volunteers,  
Running like stampeded horses

Into the crossfire, scattering  
Like ants when the first man falls.  
Colborne, the governor himself,  
Has moved in behind, his army  
More than two miles long.  
Thousands of sun-tipped bayonets  
Laugh as we fall back to the church.  
We are three hundred no more.

I remember the crash of canons  
That shattered our fortress,  
Splintered our hopes,  
And how the village shrank in flames  
And the smoke, like a fog from hell,  
That made our eyes bleed.  
I remember Chenier's window-leap,  
His final dance on a red bayonet.  
I remember smelling the farms burn  
All the way back to Montréal.  
And I smell it even now, as I wait  
For you, for others, in this  
Another century.

ILLNESSES

When plague broke out before,  
We ignored it  
And it passed  
Like a gull over water.

But the sun climbed  
Over the mountains  
And kept on moving.

When the blitzkrieg heat  
Rumbled across our sand,  
We swam for days  
In a school of sweat-water fish.

Then, on the first breeze,  
You hitched a ride  
And I was a dolphin  
Heading inland.

DISAPEARENCE

Beyond the window,  
A bulldozer sat like a toad  
On rubble from which no dust rose.

It left its tongue outstretched  
And waited.

It answers no questions.

RAIN

The elm passes the wind

To the maple.

Leaves drop

Like colored sweat.

The sky chokes.

Rain.

ASPIRATIONS

Her mouth has become  
The line of a draughtsman  
And bends only  
When her prayers get out of hand.  
The ears of the crucifix listen.

At confession,  
Her head droops like melting candy  
Toward the absence of her sins.  
There are no shadows in that corner.

And when she runs,  
She hoists her skirts above her knees  
And leaps puddles wider than those  
That force you and me  
To stop and build bridges.



SHELTER

A cold wind  
Turns the sky blue.

Waves get no chance  
To leave the sea  
But freeze trying.

Now the wind will learn  
To turn corners  
And I am already colder  
Than a wrong number at night.

NEWSCAST

Between bodies and headlines,  
Between stupor and death,  
Is the space that allows me

To pilot my toilet  
Just over the trees  
Or flip my deodorant  
On automatic-fire  
Or alert the squadrons  
With a doorbell.

Because I read the papers  
While puffing villages  
In my pipe,  
It doesn't mean I am immune  
To execution.

WINTERS

All the water-birds  
Fly from the lake.

One more snowfall  
And it will be my time.

You forget:  
Your edges also freeze.

LESSON

It's colder now  
Than when I started writing.

If my feet rest  
On the frost-carpet  
I cannot feel it  
And if my face  
Is any more now  
Than two eyes,  
Black coals,  
I cannot tell.

The walls alone  
Give me time  
And they are  
The last things left to burn.

Against it all  
I am able to list  
All the ways of saying  
I am dying.

GUN METAL

This steel is blue,  
Cold and waiting  
For the heat of one finger.

My notebooks are nerves.  
I wish wounds.

The thought is cocked  
And resting on my knee.

REVOLUTIONARY FRIENDS

Yes: You are correct.

Cobra, with your eyes in front  
Reflecting nuclear light,  
Blinding,  
Blinded,  
And your spectacles in back,  
Your hindsight  
Greater than  
Your fore.

Magician, with your words  
Tied together  
Like the handkerchiefs of a clown  
And your right-hand photograph  
Distracting  
From your left-hand dagger.

Priest, with your poster-saints  
And music of chants

And the crackling of wind  
On banners sounding  
So much like  
So much gunfire.

And I would borrow your buttons  
And paint your signs  
And feed your magazines,  
Magic, holy snake -

But you are correct  
And isn't that enough?

STRANGULATION

In the smoke-space between two sleeps  
When night and day square off  
Like ends of an argument:

In a station full of hats  
And news  
And the smell of steel on steel:

In a neck-deep ocean  
Of churning salt  
And eyes:

You see it  
And sleep again, almost.  
You touch it  
And unavoidably escape.  
You speak it  
And duck under.

While beneath the floorboards  
It is growing hands  
And searching for the stairs.



WOMAN IN BED

In retreat, the mattress is clever.

I lie awake to prove I am more so.

The springs are constant echo

Of the constant sound I don't want to make.

The sheets reveal where I am leaking.

The pillow is a contrivance

Designed to raise my lowest part.

The blankets are hills

Containing hills

Where wars occur -

Apparently with impunity.

CREDENCE

She has trained her memory  
To fetch imaginary absolutes  
And drop them at my feet.

She believes she is a sermon  
On the madness that she gave.

Soon,  
She will carve my skull  
And I will pose,  
Smiling.

GRANDFATHER

My grandfather was The Depression:  
Streaked from neck to base  
With memory loss  
Of wife-beatings  
And carpet stains,  
He reeled against years  
Until they hooked him  
Like a fish  
And poured his drink on swabs  
And rolled him into  
One final stupor  
That forced my grandmother,  
For reasons of health,  
To have one beer  
With every meal.

PICNIC

The present now  
Is past  
Or tries to be.

We crowd into minutes  
That should be centuries.  
Dead tables point  
At the muzzle overhead.

We listen to a drumroll  
Of heartbeats  
And I am frightened  
By the violence  
Of my yawns.

WE ARE ALL VICTIMS

Alone in this field,  
My language is suddenly stolen  
By thieves who live on bookshelves  
And behind imposing rostrums.

My breathing confesses  
To the cylinders and pistons  
That operate within  
And I call it to a halt.

Even in my final thrashing  
My leather becomes those damp ropes  
That moan on the galleons  
That television created.

The solution lies a moment from now  
When my body will disguise itself  
As a lump of animal excrement  
And decompose.

STANDARDS

If I say I am looking  
For a fish to make love to  
It is because you are scaly  
But not sufficiently.

DIARY

Sky dry as sunburn  
Threatens to peel.

The grass perspires  
And the dew is salt-white.

Tides ebb constantly.  
Grey fish strangle far inland.

These notes, I file them  
While time remains.

Mark for reference  
During the passage  
Of another future.

NIGHT

The space between my fingers and darkness  
Cannot shrink:  
I have that much control,  
That little choice.

I breathe black,  
Swallow sounds  
Concealed by walls,  
Metallic vomiting  
And voices of shrapnel.

I move only according to myself.  
Now, through air that cannot be shovelled,  
To a blacklit place  
Where dogs and hunters  
Are treed together.



WHAT YOU MAKE IT

A very educated man  
Wore his glasses in the night  
And saw the city naked.  
He bought the morning paper  
And read of who had died.  
He saw eyes bounce off a darkened screen  
And watched the evening news.

Beyond the walls,  
Mandrakes grow between mossy stones  
And the grass that bowed  
Beneath the rabbit's foot  
Springs up again.

A very educated man  
Lives in an iron lung.  
He thinks Stravinsky is an Egyptian  
And says The Rite of Spring  
Sounds like a song  
The slaves would sing.

Behind the walls,  
He gasps and drools.  
He takes a breath  
And whispers  
Warnings to the world.

HACKLES

The watchman gropes the tower's height  
And rubs the pantleg of the wind.  
He closes his eyes  
Half-way.

Still,  
He hears the tall grass gossip  
And tastes the rain that falls  
A continent upwind.

THE STUDIO

In here, sounds are cold reptiles  
Slipping through my hair,  
A whisper of flames  
Burning without fuel.

Beneath the static  
Of the tree  
Leaves I record perfectly

Cars in other streets.

The wind is monotone.  
Water stirs  
Where the moon bends  
And silence is only  
A heavier drone:  
Foghorn over foghorn.

In time,  
My eyes transform the sky

Into accoustical tile.

Before the jail-break,

I will become

The hiss of planets passing.

STATUE

I am at that point  
Where I hear our national anthem  
Locked inside the amplifiers  
Of a psychedelic band.

I sit in a corner  
Like congealed dirt  
That clings to the crook  
Between toes.

I form letters  
From detached fingernails  
And destroy them with my breathing.

I dislodge floorboards  
And dig up white bones  
With bits of broken trees.

The anthem plays over and over.  
I can only raise my eyes  
And struggle to stand up.

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

(for a man chopped in half when he fell  
into "the hog" at a plywood mill).

After twenty-four years in the mill  
He decides to improvise.

After twenty-four years in the mill  
This is understandable.

Even symphonies need some interpretation.

ADVERSARIES

The instant before you speak  
I picture herds of white-eyed oxen  
Thrashing in rivers of their own blood  
And choking as they try  
To mouth your name.



OX-CARTS IN THE MORNING

The wanderer kneels in the holy sand,  
Prays,  
Pays his premium  
And walks away.

He does not know  
The sand is in his shoe forever.

AFTER EFFECTS

The moment we are finished  
I would cleanse myself.

But the bath is a room  
Too provocative for morning  
And the hair from your cold legs  
Clings to the porcelain walls  
And makes me retch.

IN CAPTIVITY

The symmetry of my room  
Is contrived disorder.

I employ effeminate couturiers  
To sculpt the folds  
In my unmade bed.

Surveyors visit me twice a week  
To measure the distance  
Between socks on the floor.

I know a man who sells me  
Used pencils  
With machine-pressed tooth marks.

At night I occupy myself  
By bending icy book jackets  
And muttering accusations.

From TERRAQUE

by

Guillevic

WINTER

I will arrive in the evening

In a warm room

And you

You will be there

Burning and soft.

MONSTERS

There are some very kind monsters  
Who sit by you, eyes closed with tenderness  
And upon your wrist  
Place their shaggy paws.

Some evening -  
When all is purple in the universe  
And the rocks resume their mad trajectories,  
  
They will awaken.

If some day you see a rock smile at you,

Will you say so?

But to die

Some evening

Could be a great weariness

And a confession.



CARNAC

When the black giant  
Who sleeps among the fossils of the ocean floor  
Gets up and looks.

The stars in the hollow of the sky become cold  
And go warm themselves side by side.

The dead eyes of a hundred thousand dead  
Fall into the rivers  
And float.

FLAYED OX

This is meat where blood flowed,  
Meat where the miraculous  
Incomprehensible heat of the body  
Trembled.

There is still something of a gleam  
In the depths of the eye.  
You could still caress this flank,  
You could still place your head there  
And hum to ward off fear.

THINGS

The cupboard was made of oak  
And was not open.

Maybe corpses would have fallen from it.  
Maybe bread would have fallen from it.

Many corpses.  
Much bread.

Walls without trumpets -

What shouts

You hurl into the room.

- What silence

And what horror.

He often walked  
In rain and wind

And when he returned  
He looked at me  
In order to find my throat.

• The bird he beseeched  
Never consented

To come to his hand  
To be his witness.

To live is to learn  
To place your hand  
On a woman's belly.

And to know how to hold  
In your half-open palm  
A pebble that lay  
On soil paths.

from The Rocks

They have no need of laughter  
Or drunkenness.

They do not burn  
Sulfur in the dark.

For they have never  
Been afraid of death.

Of fear  
They have made a guest.

And their madness  
Is clairvoyant.



From EXECUTOIRE

by

Guillevic

Noon is the stranger  
That feeds in vain  
On the expanse of fields  
And the rage of insects.

When the homeland is in cellars  
With the slime of slugs.

When he had looked closely at all the monsters  
And seen that they were all made of the same stock

He was able to sit down in a bright room  
And see space.

Yet when it was clear  
That the city was in flames  
In the crash of bombs,

He dared speak familiarly  
For the first time  
To the things that he touched  
On the table and the walls.

Speaking to the doll  
Whose eyes recalled  
Those he could not find

And whose taut arms  
Had been broken  
By him, another evening.

SONG

At my father's butcher shop  
There are turtle doves.

There is no other meat.  
There are turtle doves.

There are turtle doves  
Who have no more to bleed.

SONG

With hemp one makes  
Cloths and ropes.

With hemp one makes  
The lash of whips.

With hands tied  
One endures the whip.

from The Charnel Houses

We go, as best we can,  
To separate them.

To put each of them  
In his own hole.

Because together,  
They make too much silence  
Against the noise.



from The Charnel Houses

If it were not impossible,  
Absolutely,

You would say it was a woman  
Gratified by love  
And who is going to sleep.

from The Charnel Houses

Yet if they immediately became  
Skeletons,

As neat and hard  
As real skeletons

And not this mass  
One with the mud.

from The Charnel Houses

Where is the wound  
That answers.

Where is the wound  
In living bodies.

Where is the wound -  
So we can see it.

So we can heal it.

from The Charnel Houses

Which of us would lie down  
Among them.

One hour, one hour or two,  
Just to pay homage.

From CARNAC

by

Guillevic

At least you know, you, ocean,  
That it is useless  
To dream your end.

Since your overture  
On the rocks of Por en Dro  
Toward the open sea and the horizon,

I have taken you backwards  
To the salty marshes

Where I don't know if I should cry  
At having no more of you  
Than these piles of white salt.

What do you say of this blue  
That you become in the atlas?

Have you sometimes dreamt  
Of looking like that?



Will we never play  
If only for an hour,  
If only for a few minutes,  
Solemn ocean,

Without your appearing  
To be busy elsewhere?

Sometimes it seems to me  
That between us there is the confused memory  
Of shared crimes.

Here we are thrown face to face  
In order to understand.

When you appear to sleep,  
Conquered by the sun,  
Your fatigue or your thoughts,

Then the seagull  
Shouts harshly for you.

Your father:

Silence.

Your duty:

Movement.

Your denial:

Fog.

Your dreams.

All the landscapes  
That needed to be seen.

And the landscapes  
Where you never were.

And that accused you  
Of not being there.

Without body,

But dense.

Without belly,

But soft.

Without ears,

But speaking loudly.

Without skin,

But trembling.

An entire arithmetic

Is dead in your waves.

If it is true  
That life began in you

Is that a reason to treat us  
Like accomplices?



From AVEC

by

Guillevic

LEAD

Someone who returned  
From sculpting silence  
On the outskirts of the night  
Told me: "I know you,  
  
You look like what I have made."

AT LAST

Day gives itself to day,  
Space to distance.

An astonished sun  
Contemplates its power.

RECIPE

Take a roof of old tiles

Shortly after noon.

Place quite near

A lime tree already tall,

Stirred by the wind.

Put above them

A blue sky washed by white clouds.

Leave them.

Watch them.

A BOX

It's a copper box,  
Open, deep and round.

Taken in hand,  
Looked at for a long time.

There's a bottom to block your view.  
Under your gaze it remains the same.

And that disturbs you.

If there wasn't a bottom,  
It's fear then,  
That rises in this other space  
Where the hollow leads,  
Where time falls.

SEPULCHRES

We are gone looking for stones  
To cover the corpses  
Isolated in the earth.

As if it were nothing  
For those who are fully alive.

And as if being present  
When the bodies decay  
In this earth

Were reparation.

ENQUIRY NO. 9

When you see the sky

Watching our days

Haven't you thought

It would have better things to do?

If I had to speak of you  
I would imagine cemeteries.



Learn the wall,  
Caress the wall,  
Look for it.

DEAD TITMOUSE

Does someone still speak of you  
Somewhere among your family?

Does someone speak your name?

CHERRY TREE

Here you have become  
As it was dreamed,

Only this whiteness  
Frightening the horizon,

Only the fiancée  
Prepared for the marriage.

Who will take you?  
Who must come?

COPPER

The longings of the earth  
Are there in my reflections.

My very silence  
Is only a form of her vigil.

It is almost calm:

The weather must live

Beyond the clouds.

## SHORT STORIES

THE CAFE  
(A Short Story)

There's a half-finger still pink when he sees the café. Everything else is frozen white. The scarf that had covered his mouth is now stiff and twisted around his neck like a squashed eel. The snow hasn't stopped and it's windy. He still tries to keep the snow from squeezing inside his overflowing boots. He can't hear his boots crunch for the wind. But he sees the café.

It's a small building with a vertical wooden sign that says: Café. There are no gas pumps out front. There isn't even a road. But there are lights inside and smoke curling from the chimney. He keeps walking, lifting his legs high. He's gone far enough that he can turn and not see the trees. He flexes his hands and the glove leather is like an animal hide left in the sun. But cold. He twists his face and feels nothing. He smells the smoke and stamps his feet and opens the door.

A bell rings and the warmth is an animal, breathing. He pounds his feet against the wood floor, shakes his head. There are five people inside: a man behind the counter, two truckdrivers



at a table to the left, a girl sitting at the corner and a man in the corner to the right. He pulls off the gloves and unzips his coat. He walks to the counter and sits two seats from the girl. She's reading a Life magazine that is missing its cover. The truckdrivers are talking about hockey, New York and Boston. The man in the corner is drinking coffee. The man behind the counter walks toward the new customer.

"What'll it be?" He's a big man, balding, with a dirty apron.

"What do you serve?"

"Coffee."

"I mean to eat."

"That's it. Coffee. We haven't got anything to eat."

"What do you mean? You must have something."

"Nope. We do sometimes. But not now."

"Nothing to eat? How can you call this a café?"

"We got coffee. That's what café means. Coffee in French."

"I know, but in English, café means restaurant, where they serve food."

"In English, the word for restaurant is restaurant."

That's French, too."

"Yeah, I know."

"So do you want coffee or not?"

"Yeah, give me some coffee."

The man behind the counter wipes his hands on his apron and walks to the coffee urn. The girl reads the Life magazine. The truckdrivers talk. The man in the corner drinks coffee. The scarf is starting to melt. He puts it on the counter where a puddle forms. The coffee arrives and he takes a sip.

"How far is the road from here?" he asks the man behind the counter.

"Not far."

"How far?"

"Down a ways. Keep walking and you'll hit it."

He takes another drink from the coffee. It's not very good. He blows his hot breath on his hands.

"Cold out, isn't it." The girl doesn't look up from the Life magazine when she speaks.

"Yes," he says. "Yes, it is."

"Yeah, it usually is."

"Do you know how far it is to the road?" he asks.

"Not very far." She's a pretty girl, but a little unkempt. There's a piece of tree leaf in her hair.

"Could I walk it?"

"Oh, sure. If you wanted."

He takes another drink from the coffee. He feels warmer now. The truckdrivers have switched to football, Los Angeles and Minnesota. The girl turns a page. The man behind the counter stands behind the counter. The one in the corner drinks coffee.

"Do you live around here?"

"Yes," says the girl.

"Like it?"

"No."

"This is a strange café."

"Uh-huh." She's reading the Life magazine editorial.

"They don't serve food."

"No."

"That's strange, in my opinion."

"Uh-huh."

"Do you agree with that editorial?"

"Probably."

"Life is pretty right wing."

"You mean the magazine?"

"That's right." He drinks from his coffee.  
The man behind the counter washes dishes. The  
truckdrivers argue about baseball. The man in the  
corner drinks. "I didn't mean that life, day to  
day living, is right wing."

"No, I didn't think you did."

"Life isn't political."

"You mean day to day living?"

"That's right."

"I thought that's what you meant."

"It's just living. It's not a subjective kind  
of thing."

"Uh-huh."

"Do you agree?"

"Probably."

"It's still snowing out."

"Yeah."

"Have you read that magazine before?"

"Yeah."

"Like it?"

"No."

"This is lousy coffee."

"Yeah."

"Do you want to screw?"

"Uh-uh."

"Have you noticed something?"

"Probably."

"It's still snowing out."

"Uh-huh."

"And everyone in the café is in their shirt-sleeves."

"Yeah."

"And there are no coats on the coat rack."

"Uh-huh."

"Yeah. Could I buy you a coffee."

"I guess."

"Two more coffees, please." The man behind the counter fills two of the clean cups with coffee. The truckdrivers argue about lacrosse. The man in the corner drinks coffee. The girl turns a page.

THE EIGHTH LEVEL

(A Short Story)

"Hello, Arthur, what a pleasant surprise."

At the time of the assassination, Arthur was standing at the back of the lecture hall, lighting his pipe and looking nonchalantly disgusted. "And furthermore . . ." said the speaker before being slammed against the wall and crumpled to the floor. Arthur dropped his pipe in the scream that followed.

Bernard was in the library, on the eighth level, wearing a toga and reading history.

"You look terrible, Arthur. Sit down and tell me what has happened."

Two plainclothes policemen in the audience rushed immediately to the front, leaned over the body for a moment, then rushed back behind the crowd. One ran to the front again, spoke to a man from the audience and watched the man run to the back. Arthur

retrieved his pipe from the floor and turned to the exit. A policeman stood, gun drawn. Arthur stayed where he was.

Bernard had special privileges: he could send out for meals and was allowed to stay in the library overnight. The keeper gave him these privileges when it became clear to both of them that frequent breaks for such things would inevitably cost Bernard years, possibly centuries, in terms of his reading. Bernard on this day ate pizza because it was a Tuesday or a Friday. Otherwise he would have eaten Chinese food or fried chicken.

"A little more slowly, Arthur. I am not used to listening to people talk."

More police and several ambulance attendants arrived. Photographers and detectives converged around the body. Arthur lined up at the door to be searched before leaving. "Raise your arms," said a police officer. Arthur was frisked and his two pipes examined. Outside, his picture was taken by police and press photographers. "Did you see it?"



asked a reporter. "No, I was lighting my pipe," Arthur replied and walked on.

"Shocking, Arthur, simply shocking. But I am pleased, just the same, that you turned to me in this time of need. It used to be like that, didn't it, when we were good friends and companions? Before we decided to go our own ways."

The national collection, The History of the World, is the pride of the town. Conceived by a library director some time ago, the idea met with tumultuous public enthusiasm and popular financial support. Historians, scholars, librarians, researchers, stenographers, recorders, binders, all were hired and set to work on the first volume. When, after considerable time, it was completed, intellectuals and simple tourists came from around the globe to stand in awe of the book and the massive organization that had produced it. The name of the town found its way immediately onto the pages of academic journals and international encyclopedias. But that was some time ago. Bernard, he enjoyed his privacy.

Once outside the building, Arthur walked away from the parking lot where he had earlier left his car. He set out on foot for the city, following the sideroads and secluded paths.

In the beginning, Bernard could cover a century in a matter of hours, read an entire age in a few months. But as, in his books, the universe slowly moved into history, as knowledge was recorded and sources became more reliable, he was fortunate to read in a day the events of a single week. He learned to read faster. He learned to live without extended rest periods. He concentrated all of his energy into his eyes for reading and one finger for turning pages. Completion of each volume was marked with a scratch on the edge of his reading table, there on the eighth level of the library.

"But of course you could not have been responsible, Arthur. Shooting a man down in cold blood is not your style. That is one decision you would not have made. There, you see. Decisions again. You remember that is why I came to the library in the first place. I was

very logical then. It was reasonable for me to set out, with the weight of all my life's decisions bearing down on me, to educate myself. That way, at least, I would become capable of making educated decisions. Whether to step into the street and be struck down by a car or to stand on the sidewalk in the path of a runaway truck. Such decisions are important."

Arthur did not go home that night. He began to live far from street lamps and the moon. He ate in dimly lit restaurants and found no opportunity to bathe or shave. He stole through dark parks to snatch old newspapers from litter pails.

In time, and with practice, Bernard achieved a point in reading speed and efficiency such that a very minor effort was required to digest vast amounts of material. He took to commenting to the keeper on specific points concerning Java Man or the Hittites. He would make occasional aphoristic remarks, supporting them with the findings of various cultures. As his need to exert himself and concentrate became less,

Bernard began to amuse himself with his hands as he read. He would send out for materials so that he could carve ships while reading of the Phoenecians or construct a perfect scale model of the Giza pyramid complex while studying the development of Egyptian civilization. Notches soon stretched several times around the huge reading table and Bernard began to mark his chair.

Arthur saw his notoriety grow with every edition of the newspaper. One: he had been at the meeting. Two: he had been standing at the back of the hall. Three: he had disappeared. There was also speculation about photographs being matched, known subversives being questioned, the threat of martial law. Arthur ate from garbage cans, emerged only in blackest night, in darkest alleys. He became wary of parked cars and dogs.

"No, I'm sorry, Arthur, I don't. I gave up smoking years ago. It isn't allowed in the library. A strange place. When I decided to educate myself, I naturally came here, to this history, the most

detailed chronicle of mankind. And there is never anywhere to start but at the beginning, is there? All things considered, I think I have made remarkable progress. I have reached the Roman period. Do you like my toga? I made it myself."

When the keeper died, Bernard began debating mentally while reading. He composed scholarly papers, complete with footnotes, aloud and without stopping his eyes. With a book in one hand, he carved frescoes on the table with the other. He developed his own style.

Lampblack on his face, Arthur slid along the sidewalk, stomach to the cement. He gripped the lowest part of the fire escape and pulled himself up. He began to climb.

Bernard made himself a mirror by polishing the door frame. He sat behind the table and read to himself.

"Hello, Arthur, what a pleasant surprise."

Bernard sat behind the table, tracing the lines of his frescoe with the fingers of one hand. It was a surrealistic portrayal of The Fall.

"This is indeed a terrible predicament you have found yourself in, Arthur. But such predicaments are not unusual. Take my own, for instance. I have made such tremendous progress, but, do you know, I have always been dreadfully bored here. You see, there comes a point when you realise that every fool is the same. One's decisions are always as brilliant and as insane as the next fellow's. You notice, in this reading, the emergence of cycles, faint identical waves, the gentle rolling of a ship's deck under your feet. Like the Roman period. I have read it all before, felt those same ripples. It's just another wave, coming from nowhere, causing nothing. There comes a time when you must stand and be counted with the rest of the fools or die of ennui. Nothing can be changed. Besides, those particular fools upstairs are producing three volumes a day and I can only read two. I am afraid I will never finish the collection, Arthur. There is not enough time. The barbarians are

at the gates."

Bernard left the library that night. In the following weeks, there were many assassinations throughout the country. A certain turmoil reigned for months. It was only gradually, after the death of the assassin, that order was restored.

Arthur, in the meantime, was unaware of this. Bernard had told him he would be safe on the eighth level and he stayed, alone there, his only distraction in occasional readings from the national collection.

THE GLASS CONFESSIONS

(A Short Story)



I didn't answer, not then. Things had gone badly. The attempt had proved to be nothing more. I was upset.

"Why?" Pablo repeated, touching his forehead tentatively.

"Oh, shut up. This isn't what was supposed to happen."

"So I gathered."

It was a bad gun, old and rusty. A souvenir my uncle had lifted from an Italian officer in North Africa. Such weaponry. No wonder the Italians had made such a poor showing. Yes, yes, the pistol was also too small to do the job properly, I know that now. Once more I searched the slide and grip for some indication of make, model and calibre. Nothing. If I had known, I could have bought fresh ammunition. But now. . .

"Why?" Pablo insisted. "Is it too much to ask?"

"I don't know why. Because I had never done it before. Because it would be an experience. Because I would learn something. Now be quiet and let me think."

The question, actually, was a good one and bothers me even now. But there was no time to think on it then.

"Aren't you going to finish the job?" Pablo's voice was a mixture of fear and accusation.

"The gun's jammed," I said. Breech too rusty, ammunition too old, I don't know the problem."

"You could beat me with it." His voice had frozen. The words, cold and hard, dropped like ice-cubes from his mouth.

"No. That's no good. And it's too late now. I've blown it." I looked up to his face. "How's your head?"

"Feels kind of strange. Stings a bit right here." He pointed to the tiny hole in the centre of his forehead, just above the eyes. But for a barely visible ring of already crusted blood, the wound looked like a tattoo or religious marking. Pablo wrinkled his brow and the hole changed shape for a moment. "What now?" he asked.

"I guest it's up to you. Do you plan to turn me in?"

After a long moment's wait, he replied: "No, not yet. I think we should thrash the whole thing out.

It was a pretty stupid thing to do, you know."

I shrugged.

"Let's go for a beer and talk about it," he said. I nodded and we left.

It was night and the neon signs of shops and businesses signalled angrily at one another. Icicles grew down from the eaves though all else was paralysed by cold. A city silence, the loudest silence, crowded around us.

"I wonder about these signs," I said, not really wondering. "They're so ugly."

Pablo spoke knowingly. "They're not meant to attract people. For one thing, they flash at night when the shops are closed. Actually, they're designed to frighten us away. We are the people the shop owners don't want to meet."

We walked on in silence and I was soon pushing open the heavy door to the beer parlor. My glasses fogged as we entered and I would have sat anywhere, but Pablo spied Arthur, Bernard and Carol across the floor and we moved towards their table.

Carol had an accent as evenly rugged as log cabin

corners. She knew how to witch water and was very flat-chested. I think she was German, but with Jewish hair.

"Hello," she said precisely. "Please sit down."

At one time, Arthur and Bernard had both been communists but Bernard had recently proclaimed his homosexuality. One night, at this same table, he had told me: "You set me on fire."

"Hey, Pablo, what's the matter, somebody spit on your forehead?" Arthur was smiling, slightly drunk.

"No, this idiot shot me."

Our three companions leaned over and looked closely at the wound. "So he did," said Carol. "So he did."

"Hmm, yes, yes, hmm," said Bernard.

"Why'd you do that," Arthur asked soberly, but still smiling.

I explained briefly but wondered to myself at the same time. In the familiar surroundings of the pub, the episode seemed absurd. Had I lost my mind? If so, was it a temporary or permanent loss? There were many questions.

"Oh well, no harm done, apparently." Carol spoke as if answering some of my doubts. She ordered more beer.

"Do you know what I learned the other day," Bernard said, not at all interrogatively. "The Prime Minister and all the members of the federal cabinet are gay. I knew most of them were but figured there had to be a token straight in there somewhere. But there isn't. I found that out from a guy who has actually been screwed by the Prime Minister."

"I know lots of people who have been screwed by the Prime Minister," Arthur replied and we began a long discussion of unemployment.

More beer later, Carol asked again for details of the shooting. "I told you before," I said. "Don't you believe me?"

"I suppose I do," she said. "But that is not the way to learn. That is not the way to find knowledge."

Money began to run low and we emptied our pockets. A button, several keys, a pen, two knives, a comb, a notebook, some worry beads, a condom and a few bits

of lint soon lay scattered around our shrinking beers. No money. Arthur suggested that Carol witch some beer for us and we all laughed, all but Pablo who was cautiously wiping his forehead.

"I'm leaking," he said. A steady pink and grey discharge was oozing from the wound and trickling down his face. We leaned over and examined the hole.

"I wonder why it's starting just now," said Bernard.

"Maybe the beer loosened things up," Arthur suggested.

"We must find something to plug the cavity," Carol said and began searching her purse.

Pencil points, wadded napkins, hunks of chicken, terrycloth and other articles were considered. Finally, I arrived at the solution.

"Another bullet. It would fit perfectly."

Everyone agreed and I took the gun from my pocket. After some difficulty, I released the magazine from the butt and squeezed out one round. I carefully inserted it into Pablo's head, lead point first.

"Perfect," said Bernard.

Indeed, now Pablo had a rather decorative brass circle in the centre of his forehead. Anyone noticing it might easily assume it to be a new trinket being offered by a local hippie curio shop. I was pleased.

"Does it really look alright?" Pablo asked.

"Magnifique," Arthur insisted. "And no leakage."

"It does look rather quaint," Carol agreed.

"I should take a look at it," Pablo said.

"I'll be back in a minute."

As he walked toward the washroom, I had new faith in my sanity. If I had done something stupid in the first place, this bit of brilliance had offset it. I watched Pablo's hand reach for the washroom door handle. But the door swung suddenly toward him, missed his hand and struck his head. A drunken logger emerged from the doorway just as the bullet exploded and Pablo crumpled to the floor. The logger scratched his head.

Later, as we walked home, I remarked to Carol that from where we looked the trees seemed higher than the mountains.

"Yes," she said. "And perhaps one day you will know what the birds think of that."