

Turcot
a memoir

by Manuel Johnson

(Ce qui suit est un œuvre de fiction. Les personnages, donc, sont inventés. Les idées, par contre, sont les miennes. Si j'ai fait le choix de soumettre un œuvre de fiction en guise de « mémoire » c'est qu'il me paraît évident que ce processus de « consultation publique » est aussi fictif que la nouvelle que j'ai écrit. C'est à dire, dans les deux cas on se base sur certains éléments de la réalité et tout en utilisant ces éléments on monte une histoire inventée. Les thèmes de la histoire inventée du BAPE est la démocratie, la transparence et la consultation (quant au thème de ma nouvelle je dois laisser au lecteur le plaisir d'en trouver un). La beauté de cette histoire inventée de la démocratie fictive c'est que toute opposition peut être subséquemment récupérée, pour renforcer l'histoire. Après, le gouvernement dira, « Et voilà qu'on a écouté tout le monde, cela nous intéresse vraiment, c'est sûr qu'on ne peut pas plaire à tout le monde avec un seul projet, mais voilà qu'on a fait nos devoirs et modifié le projet en conséquence. » N'importe que les modifications soient plutôt cosmétiques, ce qui compte est que l'histoire inventée ait une certaine cohérence. Finalement, on rédigera un rapport qui dit, « on a entendu x nombre de personnes qui ont parlé de y nombre de sujets, » pour donner une idée de l'ampleur et l'exhaustivité du processus, pour renforcer, encore une fois, la dissimulation.

Malheureusement, si on peut qualifier ce processus de consultation comme « fictif » on ne peut pas dire autant des effets négatifs, très réels cette-fois-ci, qui vont en découler de ce projet mal-conçu et dommageable.

N.B. Le choix de soumettre cette "mémoire" uniquement en anglais n'est pas un choix politique. Cela représente plutôt un désir de ma part de ne pas massacrer la belle langue française en faisant une traduction médiocre et truffé d'erreurs.)

Calum looked out the ceiling-high industrial window panels of his rented loft. There was the weather that matched his mood: second week of April, and still the rain falling over Montreal was mixed with fat snowflakes. In the loft, it was chilly and humid, like a crypt, the management having prematurely turned down the furnace after a short-lived warm spell the previous week. There was the traffic: backed up on the elevated interchange that passed directly in front of the loft. The cars were so close he could see vaguely the faces of the drivers, their expressions, or lack thereof, through the dripping windshields and furiously agitated windshield wipers. The great majority of vehicles contained a single person, alone, pale, clearly wishing to be somewhere else, anywhere else. Their destinations were elsewhere, and while waiting to arrive, no real living could be done.

Their masks were down, Calum thought. Alone and impatient in their cars, they could afford to let a hint of the futility of their being be shown on their faces. Though at least they were moving, they were going somewhere. Calum felt like those drivers, except that he had no idea *when* he would get to where he was meant to be going. He didn't even know *where* he was meant to be going.

He sipped his espresso, and resisted the urge to go and get the half-smoked joint from yesterday resting in a ceramic ashtray on the kitchen counter. He resisted the urge to light it up, to inhale the sweet, acrid smoke and let time pass in a half-paranoid, half-blissful blur. He had that restless feeling that time was once again his

enemy. It either passed too quickly, and he felt that he accomplished nothing. Or, it seemed to grind completely to a halt, and he didn't know how to fill it.

As if from a great distance, he heard that someone was tapping at the door. Calum sighed, covered his espresso with a saucer and rose reluctantly to see what was wanted of him.

He opened the thick aluminum door. The metal handle was cold and clammy to the touch. A young woman stood there, smiling at him. Calum stared at her through his bloodshot eyes. She was pretty, stunning even, though it was not so much physical but in the energy that she emitted. There was simply something compelling about her, he felt that right away. She had curly black hair pulled back simply, without a part, and – it was amazing – eyes that were green with an inner band of brown. What was remarkable was that the brown was lit up, as if there were literally sparks burning there where the brown met the green of her intelligent eyes. Her face was quick and sharp and kind. She wore no make-up, and was dressed in a leather biker jacket and white, tight-fitting jeans. Though she was holding a clipboard, and had a satchel full of pamphlets, Calum didn't close the door and brush her off, as he normally would have, as he had done to a hundred other solicitors. He even managed a weak smile.

"Yes," he said, "What can I do for you?"

"Hi, my name is Melissa and I'm with 'Change the Interchange'? We're organizing a meeting of concerned residents to oppose the Transport Ministry's plans to tear down this building in order to expand the highway."

"Yes, I've heard about it," Calum sighed, "Do you really think its going to do any good?"

"Well I guess if I thought it wouldn't do any good I wouldn't be here knocking on your door, would I?" Melissa frowned and put a hand on her hip.

Calum smiled. He appreciated her bite, "Well, of course, but I mean, don't you think the government's got its mind made up, already?"

"Of course they do. But that doesn't mean we can't force them to change it."

"Force them? We can't even get our landlord to turn the heat on."

"That's because you're not organized."

"So, okay, we get organized and then the Transport Ministry goes right ahead and do what they have decided to do from the very beginning: tear down this old building and expand their highway. Sure, it makes me sick. There aren't many places left like this in Montreal, you know. The rent is low, I mean I've got a thousand square feet here, you know what I pay?"

"Um, no I don't, why would I?", Melissa said.

"Six hundred. There's a nice mix of people here. Artists, semi-successful multi-media types, and losers like myself," Calum chuckled in self-deprecation. "OK, lately some yuppies have been moving in and doing some fancy decorating. And then down on the first floor there's some kind of biker guys that people say are in the Hells Angels. To see it all go, sure, it breaks my heart, but you know, what's a hundred and fifty residents up against the needs of progress?"

"You call that progress? I call it retrograde. All over the world, cities are reducing the place of cars, eliminating highways from the downtown areas. Here its like the Transport Ministry is still functioning with a 1950's mentality. And what about global warming? Aren't we supposed to be reducing our emissions, instead of

paving the way for an increase?"

"Yeah, but its no good being naive. After all, we still live under capitalism, at least for the moment. For capitalism, if commerce doesn't constantly grow, the economy collapses. Commerce requires transportation, right? And so to grow, commerce needs transportation to grow with it. For transportation to grow, highways need to be expanded. If the commodities cannot be moved quickly, they lose exchange value. But look, it is inevitable, anyway. If the government hadn't decided to tear down the building to make way for the highway, the real estate developers with their friends in City Hall would have found it and converted it to high-priced condominiums, like all over the rest of the neighborhood, the city, and the Western World."

"What are you, some kind of Marxist?" Melissa curled her mouth into a sly smirk.

"What? Well, I...why do you say that?"

"'Exchange value'. 'commodities', 'capitalism' – that's Marxist talk."

"Okay, McCarthy, listen, I've done some reading, that's all. I don't know what I am. And why do I have to be something? The point is, these powerful interests, they've got everything all sewed up, they don't care what we think."

"And we're just supposed to give up, to let them get away with it?"

Calum didn't know how to answer. It was tempting, for him, though, to give in and go along with her enthusiasm. This Melissa was winning him over, by the sheer force of her personality. Here was another potential savior for him. And what a lovely way to be saved. The problem was, he didn't know if he was ready to fight, or if it was best to flee, like he had done so many times before. It was a tactical decision, rather than a moral one. What would be best for him, what would be best for the community? He truly didn't know. You couldn't know, you just had to take a chance, and hope you made the right decision.

And he'd been through it before, as an anti-war activist back in the States. They'd gotten all excited, all worked up, they'd put up posters, printed up fliers. There was a moment of initial momentum, and some pretty big demonstrations and then they'd spent hours and hours arguing in meetings, turning round in circles, disputing over tactics and strategy. They ended up dividing into factions and spending more energy fighting each other than the government, because, after all, the government was far away, practically invisible, hard to touch. And then, of course the war had happened anyway, and his fellow citizens, despite the best efforts of the activists, had quickly jumped on board and supported the effort. In was in the wave of disillusionment that followed that Calum had left his native California, seeking some sort of escape, and following the first savior that came along for him. It had turned out to be Severine.

Now, part of him wanted to be convinced, to be won over, to be saved again. At the same time, he thought it would be dishonest, and even at counter purposes with the movement's goals to burden them with his complicated make-up, "Listen, I wish you the best, I really do. I just don't have the time. I'm sorry."

He started to close the door gently, but Melissa stopped him, "Wait a second! Take the flier, okay, and think it over. We need people like you."

"People like me? Um, don't be so sure"

"Okay, well, I hope to see you there anyway."

"Yeah, maybe I'll see you around the neighbourhood." Calum shut the door and went back to sit at the his

table covered with several old editions of the newspaper, dirty espresso cups, crumb-incrusted plates and several library books.

It had been a lie about not having the time. He'd been on unemployment since last fall, when his position as a van driver at the local health clinic had been eliminated in a cost-cutting measure.

He thought he could have told Melissa the truth: that he was doing them a favor by not getting involved. That the holes inside him were too gaping, the emptiness too hungry, and that trying to fill them with activism would just complicate things further for everyone. But it would have come out wrong, and she would have been uncomfortable. Anyway, who was he to mess with her illusions?

He finished his espresso and went and flopped down on the ragged sofa-bed in front of the television, grabbed the remote, flicked on the tube. On the local news they were showing the traffic report, they had a camera somewhere that showed the stretch of highway just outside his window. He turned the TV off in disgust and thought about the half-smoked joint again. As with everything, smoking pot would be a gamble. He could float his evening away, soft and light, or, he could go down into a small black place, frozen in fear and dread on the couch, staring out the window, unable to make the simplest decision. The soft light place would be so nice, but the small black place, tonight, could be disastrous...

He looked around the loft that had mostly been decorated by Severine, before she went back to Paris. She'd left behind most everything when she went off, even most of her clothes. She had said that she'd had enough of America, by which she meant the continent, and enough of Americans, by which she meant Calum. Not that any of their possessions were of great value. Most of the furniture they'd inherited from neighbors who'd moved out, or they'd scavenged on the sidewalk. The sidewalk business they'd had to put an end to after an infestation of bed-bugs set them back several hundred dollars in exterminator fees, and ruined their sleep for several months. At first they'd thought they were just spider bites. Severine had been the bed-bug's first choice. Apparently they preferred her soft skin and sweet-tasting blood. It was when they both had their torsos, hands, and groins covered with neat little rows of red, itchy bites, that they realized there was a problem. They'd had to put all their clothes and bedding into plastic garbage bags, throw out their mattress, and wash everything in hot water. The exterminator came, and told them to cover their counters and table in plastic sheets, so that the poison wouldn't contaminate them afterward. They had to evacuate for twenty-four hours. Unfortunately, the bed-bugs had made nests in the cracks of the old wood floors, and the poison didn't get to all of them. The exterminator had to come back three times, over a six-month period, before the bugs were finally eliminated. Each time the bugs came back, Calum had a terrible, sinking feeling of discouragement. He felt guilty about the infestation, that somehow he should have been able to prevent it.

She'd loved him, he knew that. And he had loved her too, in his way. But it hadn't been enough. No one person would have ever been enough for Calum, he thought now, he was too needy. She had been needy too, and so it turned out to be an impossible combination. But while Calum was prone to black moods and immobility, Severine was a whirlwind of intensity. Never able to sit still, always a dozen different projects going on at once. If she was still here, she would have dove into this interchange mess, made it into a personal crusade, probably would have become one of the leaders.

It was after the third bed-bug infestation that Severine had left. And of course, once she left, the bugs never

came back.

When she left he was at first somewhat relieved. One less person who expected something of him. Sure his pride was somewhat wounded by the curt note he discovered on the kitchen counter when he came home from work. "Calum, Je ne suis plus capable. Severine." After that momentary irritation, he felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, it was a sort of liberation.

That effect too, however, was only temporary. It lasted about three days. After three days he started to feel lonely, he started to miss her constant drama, and Severine's departure became just another piece of evidence for him that something had gone wrong in his life, somewhere along the way. At thirty-two, he already felt that he had somehow missed all his opportunities to make things right. He had an increasing, and sickening, suspicion that life was like that. You had a finite number of opportunities, and when you'd used them up there was nothing to be done about it.

If he could only pinpoint the moment, the moment things went wrong, he could maybe reverse the tendency. When was it? When he dropped out of university? When he moved to Montreal? He didn't know, he just knew that he hadn't always felt like this. Life hadn't always been a chore, something to be gotten through. Yes, he had felt anxiety and stress, but time hadn't always had that menacing quality to it. When did that change?

Calum knew that this desire, this desire to find an answer, was also a cause of his distress. Severine always said he thought about things too much. That he should stop thinking all the time and start acting. He tended to agree with her, he just didn't know how to change that. One technique was with the cannabis. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it stopped him from thinking (though of course it didn't help the action side of things). Lately, it mostly didn't work.

He knew he was in a pattern: every time he started something new, every time he reached a new stage in his life he told himself, "finally!" This had been true, for example, when he got the job as a van driver. "Now I've made it," he said to himself. The job was not too difficult, with decent pay and full benefits. He had time to read and write in his journal, during slow periods. He could listen to the radio all day. He saw himself carving out a niche for himself as the Clinic driver, staying on for ten, fifteen years. Then, after about two years, he got bored. He was tired of running over the same streets, every day. Instead of feeling like he'd found his place, he felt like he'd hit a dead end. He was relieved when they eliminated his post.

This was also the case when he moved to Montreal. "Finally," he said to himself, "this is a place where I can be happy. This is what was missing from my life, I was just in the wrong place. In this wild mixture of languages, cultures, and origins, I can be what I want. There are no expectations of me. There is no single way of being. My family and old friends are far away. They won't hold me back anymore. I can reinvent myself."

And the loft. The loft had felt like part of an answer, too. Here, in a sort of no-man's-land, stuck out on the very periphery of the city, of civilization even. Surrounded by empty lots, train-tracks to the South and the highway to the North and the West. In this marginality, Calum felt secure, at first. He had even pictured himself growing old there, with Severine, like the painter couple in their seventies who lived down in the basement.

He had to admit now that the charm of the loft's marginality, and of Montreal's diversity, had already worn off, even before the government announced its plans. What had been exotic, marginal, anonymous for him had already become routine, centered and normal. It was his life, now, it was no longer something new. And he was

horrified to discover that wherever he went, his life followed him, and it was always the same life, with the same problems. No matter how many times he tried to kill himself off, he always came back to himself.

Now, sitting there on the ragged sofa bed he and Severine had hauled up from a neighbor's place on the first floor, he had an overwhelming feeling of just being sick of it. Sick of the highway and the traffic backed up outside his window every day in the morning and the evening. Sick of the train tracks. Sick of the yuppies. Sick of the trash-strewn vacant lots. Sick of the dogshit-smearred spring sidewalks. Sick of the grizzled old welfare men with nicotine-stained lips, rank breath, and ragged, ill-fitting clothes. Sick of the newcomers who thought they could stave off this abyss with flowers and community gardens. Sick of the broken glass. Sick of the junkie punks. Sick of the local toughs, with their fur coats and pit bulls. Sick of the alcoholics who spent the summer drinking beer together on the front steps of their walk-up apartments. Sick of the bikers. Sick of the long-winter, the short humid summer, and the disgusting spring. Sick of the fat men with beards. Sick of the anorexic girls with sunglasses. Sick of the sensitive dads with babies strapped to their chests. Sick of the simpering bureaucrats, sick of the lying government. Sick of the bed-bugs.

Sick of Calum Howard.

He rose lightly from the couch, sprung up with a new-found energy. He suddenly felt like moving, that he had to get out of the loft. He went to get his black wind-breaker from the hook next to the door. He tied a scarf around his neck, and put on a tuque. Checked his pockets for a lighter. Grabbed a pen from the jar next to the telephone on the kitchen counter and scrawled out a note on the backside of a take-out menu from Miracle Pizza. He took the half-smoked joint from the ashtray and put it behind his ear. He didn't even bother to lock the door of the loft, as he went out into the unheated hallway and then down the stairs to the ground floor.

By the front door of the building, he ran into Melissa, who had finished her rounds. He was genuinely happy to see her again, and she flashed him another of her compelling smiles.

"Hey, did you have any luck?" he asked her.

"So so. Actually, you might not believe it, but a lot of folks are even more discouraged than you."

"No, that doesn't surprise me. Hey," he had an impulse, "Come with me, I want to show you something."

She nodded, and smiled again, and they walked out across the parking lot and onto the gravelly terrain next to the train tracks. The rain mixed with snow had now stopped, and a southerly breeze had kicked up, blowing the winter's trash accumulated along the tracks around with little gusts, and warming the air slightly. Calum pointed west, towards the looming interchange. "Look at it. Doesn't it have a sort of doomed beauty? I don't know, its like, I never really saw it before, it was always there, but I never saw it."

"I know what you mean," Melissa said, "Now that we know that it will be demolished, we suddenly feel nostalgia for this thing, though we may have always thought of it as ugly and unpleasant. How many more times will we see it? You can count them. And so the finiteness of everything strikes us..."

"There's something majestic and terrible about it. And an innocence. A brutal innocence, from another age."

"They made no bones about it, back then, eh?" Melissa said. She assumed a deep, facetious tone, ""We crush you. We tower over you. We have the means and the technology to construct massive cathedrals to our God the automobile.""

Calum laughed. "They are slightly more clever today. They talk about 'consultation,' and 'integration.' Its all

hypocrisy but in the meantime they put us all to sleep by showing us projections where the new highway looks more like a park than a river of toxic emissions. I guess they hope that if it seems to look nicer, people will forget about the health problems for the local residents stemming from being exposed to the exhaust of over 300,000 cars a day."

"You're really sure you don't want to get involved?" Melissa asked again.

Calum sighed and looked back into her green eyes scrutinizing him with hopeful calculation. He said nothing.

"Okay, listen I've got to get going," Melissa said, "Thanks for...this."

"I will think it over."

"Please do. I'll see you."

"Bye."

Calum watched her walking back across the gravel to the parking lot. Seeing her go, he felt a sudden wave of sadness and regret.

He turned his back on the neighborhood, and walked toward the towering interchange slated for destruction. Directly underneath, Calum looked up at its eroding span. The Ministry had patched sections with squares of metal mesh, to keep chunks of concrete from falling to the ground below. By a trick of acoustics, he could barely hear the traffic whizzing by a mere thirty metres above his head. He took the half-smoked joint from behind his ear, lit it, inhaling deeply. He kept the smoke in his lungs a moment, then exhaled with a burst of coughing, spewing out his own little contribution to the ambient pollution. He started walking, holding the burning stub in his right hand, walking toward the train yards to the west of the interchange.

After his second puff, a shadow approached Calum from his left. He started.

"Hey brother, could I get a hit of that?"

It was a young man, seemingly about his age. He had a junkie's bad skin, sunken cheeks and stinking breath. His unevenly cropped yellow hair stuck out at odd angles from under his black cap. He was grinning at Calum through exposure-chapped lips and yellowed teeth.

Calum took another puff of his joint and said, "There's not really any left, sorry." He hated it when strangers called him "brother" or "friend." Usually when they said that it was quite the opposite.

"Ah, come on, let me at least have the last hit," the man insisted, reaching out his left hand towards Calum.

Calum backed up slightly, then had just the time to feel a rush of adrenaline as he saw the man's right arm swinging around violently towards him. Perhaps an effect of the adrenaline, the short club the man was swinging at his head seemed to split the air in slow motion. He watched it, stupidly, frozen, thinking vaguely "Oh shit, he's attacking me." In the distance, he heard a train tooting its horn, like a symbol of something, a warning. At the moment the horn cut, he felt a sharp pain on the side of his head, heard a deafening, sickening bang and then everything went black.

He woke up on his back on the gravel, with a terrible, throbbing pain in his head and a vague nausea. He stared up at the interchange, directly overhead. He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious. Slowly he sat up holding his head in his hands. He looked around himself, was wondering why it was dark, why he was cold. Little bits of gravel were stuck to his palms. His palms were cold and clammy. There was an unpleasant,

metallic taste in his mouth. One of his teeth, his left incisor, seemed to be chipped. His tongue felt swollen and cottony.

He remembered the man with the club. He stood up, swayed, and felt another wave of nausea. Felt his back pocket to see that indeed his wallet was gone. He groaned, staggered a few steps towards the tracks, then gasped.

There was a bloody mess there, by the side of the tracks. Calum saw a pair of legs, crossed at a crazy angle, as if the victim had been sitting and reading when the train ran over him. There was a bloody torso that was too horrible to examine, and a crushed mess of hair and bone fragments and a gelatinous pale substance that must have been what was left of the man's head. Apparently his assailant had tried, very unsuccessfully, to jump a passing train.

Calum bent over and, grimacing and holding his breath against the fecal smell of eviscerated intestines and the cloying smell of slaughtered meat, gingerly felt the pockets of the blood soaked jeans. His wallet was there. He took it, lurched away in a dizzy panic and went to sit down on a concrete block a little way back from the tracks.

He sat there, feeling numb. He looked at the interchange, still looming there, impassive and neutral, and back at the pile of mutilated flesh that had been a man. He had been a man, minutes, or hours – Calum still wasn't sure – before, now he was only this abominable mess. For that one, at least, there would be no more struggle.

Suddenly, his head cleared. With a startling lucidity, he realized what he had to do. His plan was vague, it was really only a tiny, fragile spark that would have to be nurtured and protected carefully. It would require money, that much was clear. He did have a few hundred dollars left in his checking account. It wasn't much, but it would do. It would have to do. He took his bank card and the bills, and then gingerly eased his wallet back into the pocket of the mangled corpse. That part was necessary to his plan, that the corpse be identified as Calum Howard, whenever it was discovered. He hoped it wouldn't be any sooner than the next morning. That way he could withdraw the money from his account without it appearing odd. Most likely one of the many dog owners who brought their animals down by the tracks to do their business would find the mess the next day. By then, he would have disappeared.

He turned one last time, looked at himself lying there, felt a rush of pleasure, and walked back towards the neighbourhood.

