the eel
I will be a man fulfilled if, when my time comes,
I can disappear anonymously and without regret,
At the originating point of our world, the Sargasso Sea,
Where life first burst from the depths of the ocean floor towards the sun.

Se Deus quiser, amanhã ...

Yes, Se Deus quiser, tomorrow, we shall arrive in the new world.
Already the waves have changed in hue.

—Blaise Cendrars
He saved me. Cendrars, that is. Not for what he was—one-armed legionnaire, millionaire three times over, bankrupt, tracker of African and Brazilian tales, inventor of French modern poetry. Thief of Chagall’s paintings, drinking pal of Modigliani. Vagabond.

Ah, wait ... vagabond. That word begins this story. Vagabond. That came like a message from afar. There was a way out of this shit. This impossible problem of being alive. If you were serious about breaking the shackles, you didn’t plan. You went into a trance. You surrendered to voodoo, or you were just rattling your chains.

Cendrars the legend. A friend of gypsies and gangsters. A whaler. A warrior. Leave that for literature. When you’re lying down, forced into the supine position, when illness has removed your very manhood—the ability to move, to fuck, the ability to fight and to fend for yourself—in other words what a man is meant to do ... when the world leaves you as a rotting carcass, and then finishes
The Eel

David MacKinnon

regularly exacted human sacrifices to appease the untamed passions of those in the ether watching the theatre being played out beneath.

Cendrars dead twenty-seven years, now safely in Orion, the realisation of his secret right there for the taking—within his name—and that knowledge blinding me with gratitude. But to burn the old self to the ground and rise as a phoenix, one first had to flee. Fugue. The inseparable trinity. Flight, death and rebirth. Simultaneous, not sequential. For a man to tear up his roots and to flee, you must burn your past to the ground, you must surrender to the trance, move into it, be swallowed up into the fly-trap as you were surely swallowed up by China, when you flew the precarious last descent into old Kai-Tek airport.

Escape! I was the one in a million. So what if one billion Chinese moved in the opposite direction. Danger was everywhere, and yet death’s vice-hold had never been so weak. The man who walked the old Macau lanes with me that evening—a man operating under his fourth name, and from whom lies sprinkled the air like petals from a dying flower, was gesturing at the Friday night lights of the boats and the Friday night visible stench of the putrefying cloud of sin, and me realizing in a flash the acute scintillating beauty of the industrial smoke, and the sounds of gunshots and rolling dice and the cacophonic chatter of street whores, and the scythe like sharpness of the Vino Verde slicing into my own corruptible psyche.

Lee Fook Lam smiled, not knowing my thought, but understanding perfectly the emotion that lay beneath.

“You are now part of all of this. This can all be yours.”

I laughed, and sucked deep on my cigar, and saw in the mind’s eye an image from the past, eight decades old, Cendrars in Beijing, stuffing old copies of *Le Mercure* into an old stoking oven to keep warm.

“It is already mine, Lee Fook Lam. It is already mine.”
Orion appeared out of nowhere, God too impatient to remain invisible in the firmament, but Cendrars’ silhouette clear against the skies. I swore that if the opportunity ever arose, I would pay him back. It must seem a strange thing to make a vow to a dead man you’ve never met, but I knew for a fact that the gods would call upon me to make good on my promise. So, to me, none of this was stranger than the carnivorous, eight-gated path of life itself. Everything crumbled before that reality and until this moment I had been unable to crack the logarithm of the puzzle.

This moment came from nowhere and all at once, like a sword out of the sky. I was glad of the neon night and secure in my privileged position as gweilo barbarian in the dying days of the Empire and the ever-present dangers of 1989 China. Within that hair-fracture second that split celestial heaven and infernal earth, I made my sacrifice and felt instantly the trance of fugue take hold, and I willingly pissed my soul into the gutters of the Macau netherworld. Let anything be visited upon me, I recall thinking, give me the teat of the succubus, that I may suckle upon her myself.

I was drinking of the same fountain as Faust, in full knowledge that the debt would be called in with interest at a time least expected. I knew equally that the flames of hell would engulf me via a woman, and teach me that hubris is not a consummation devoutly to be wished, because the final payment exacted teaches you that your mistake in playing beyond the constraints of human boundaries brings upon the wrath of those whose power we can barely fathom, and by then it is too late.
reincarnation of her father, lay a hard-boiled pragmatist who believed in nothing. Generally, it’s not that people don’t believe. They just don’t want to believe. I have reflected on this and know it to be true. And because the world won’t believe, cannot bear to believe, the world will soon enter into a deep slumber.

During the fleeting and rare moments when I pause to consider those who would judge me, I detect the question “Why?” writ large in their faces. Why—after you had taken such pains to do all the right things, after you had picked up all the pieces of your broken life, why would you embark on yet another shambolic escapade? Why would you torment this old woman and exhume ghosts that are best left in the uneasy slumber of death. Why reduce the tragic story of a poet who lost his arm and recreate the world in its place to a madcap escapade to the Sargasso Sea?

The answer to that question is contained in a single world—you. You are the part of me that was amputated. You are my right arm, removed by malign forces from the unknown, independently of my actions or my worth. You alone are the reason for all this. Why else would a man, otherwise rational, suddenly yield to the urge that perversely led me to do what I have now done?

If a man loses a limb, he cannot replace it. Yet if his imagination and his courage are sufficient to the task, he may yet make something of that loss. And, if a life is removed, can the past be recuperated? I once thought it couldn’t, but the discovery that the line between the living and the dead is more fluid than we surmised changes this.

For a time—a number of years in fact—I believed that delivering Blaise Cendrars’ ashes to the Sargasso Sea would deliver me from my own fathomless depths, my own Sargasso Sea of suffering. Of course, nothing of the sort ensued. My suffering remained, but, for reasons unknown, so did my faith.

There was a time not that long ago, when it was fashionable for certain experts of a sort to claim that men were no longer necessary,
PART I

Doldrums
**Nares Abyssal Plain**

Doldrums. The horse latitudes. Between parallels 20° north and 35° north and meridians 30° west and 70° west. The waters are entropic, at the nexus of a vast ocean system of eddies, currents and gyres spiralling clockwise and paralysing everything within the unknown, shoreless Mare Sargassum—the sea of algae. Under the bathyal zone, on the pressurized intensity of an ocean floor too dark for photosynthesis, 20,000 feet from the surface, lies the obscure eye of this maritime hurricane, known to oceanographers as the Nares Abyssal Plain.

**Se Deus quiser, amanhã ...**

A larval form feeding on plankton has multiplied its weight by five in less than two months. The larva drifts slowly from the entropic waters towards the periphery near the western ridge of the sea and, for fifty-five days, it moves through the horse latitudes over the long-dead corpses of the brave men of the schooners _Rosalie_ or _Ellen Austin_, over the crew of the barque _James R. Chester_ in repose five miles beneath, in a north-northwest direction, weaving as it were through the doldrums towards the great forest, the thick weeded mats of Mare Sargassum, until an eddy propels it from the entropic calm into the Gulf Stream flowing eastward. The quickly multiplying organism now moves north-northeast past the Bermuda Rise and into the wide Atlantic Ocean over the Continental Shelf. During the 300-day transatlantic voyage, the larva metamorphoses into an unpigmented, transparent swimmer known as the glass eel, finally arriving in the estuarine waters of Europe's shores to begin its life as an elver for the next decade. _Anguilla Anguilla_. 
The road which led me to the mission which is the object of this tale was an indirect one. Despite an education and upbringing designed to prepare me for a destiny as a leader of the most promising country in the world, my life quickly proved to be governed by the laws of attraction and intuition. I have generally moved in the direction where the gravitational pull upon me was strongest. Whether that pull came from god, or the stars, or manifest destiny, or a general lassitude is impossible to say. When my life hit these crucial, intense vortexes, shooting me into unforeseen new trajectories which involved escape, rupture, flight, abandonment and utter censorship by my conventional, bourgeois entourage, I was ruled by a fatalistic passivity and moved as if in a trance. Unlike Cendrars, whose life I emulated and relied upon, everything that had conditioned me from birth onward acted as a curse and infused me with dark guilt that only the welcome relief of drink would assuage.
I am quite certain in retrospect that the attempt to create leaders of the world carries with it a commensurate risk of producing unintended results and causes attrition and collateral damage which has yet to be properly charted. The human soul contains a history stretching backwards across infinity. Chalking a few strokes across the fresco of the soul with recently conjured ideas is a random exercise, only allowing for a sort of delineation of character and qualities already determined well in advance. Whether one becomes Gilles de Rais or Thomas Merton is more a question of chromosomes than of cognition.

Given my sojourns at the Sorbonne and the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and further tutelage under the sharpest minds of both French civil law and English common law, it was natural that a number of doors would open wide for me. Get your paperwork in order, the judge had advised, and the world shall be your oyster. And since the judge exercised the strongest gravitational force at the time when he uttered these words, I temporarily acceded to his worldview. But he was a man of destiny—soldier, barrister and statesman—whereas I was a shooting star, or imagined myself as one, bright, transient and ready to disappear into the firmament. Even a bad reputation isn’t built overnight. But my credentials were acquired within a relatively short time frame, as I assumed successively my career postures of lawyer, English teacher, immigration consultant, hack copywriter and oil field worker on a progressively declining scale as the deeper contamination of my friends Dostoevsky and Blaise Cendrars tightened their grip and sent me into a jagged, unending spiral of misadventures. But prior to recounting that, a brief word on how Cendrars helped me to break the shackles of the provincial Catholic family into which I was born.

My father and mother were both children of the depression and the dust bowl years in the badlands of Alberta. He was a soldier at 18, a hero at 23. His life philosophy was simple and similar to that of other Scots Canadians—bite the bullet. I resembled him to a tee, and that brought me nothing but the reproach of those who knew him, as our resemblance ended at the physical. By the time I was an adolescent, the family I was born into had expanded into a clan which reached just about everywhere through Canadian society. Just like families, clans are organic entities living in accord-ance with a set of immutable laws which survive long past individual interests. A man can revolutionise the world, but the same man is powerless to alter the most banal realities of the organic trap from which he emerges.

The logic of a clan is to push out tentacles, each of which is an extension of the original body. When the tentacle doesn’t exercise its designated function properly—i.e., either to gather food or to
defend the host body—the remedy is excision. Childhood is the temporary illusion that this genetic cage is actually meant to protect you. So it went with me for 12 years. Things changed in the course of 10 minutes one day when a band of feral youths savagely beat me to within an inch of my death while I walked home from school. There was no warning of this, no motive, no familiarity with the attackers, whom I never saw again.

Looking back, it seems to me that everything stems from that one day, and the arrival home, and the first understanding that no one intended to do anything about it. The man whom the world universally regarded as a hero had left me to my own devices. During the days which followed, while I lay in a hospital bed with my eyes tumefied and several broken bones, I only knew that whatever I’d been told up until that moment was of no use to me, and I vowed to find out where I had gone wrong and to change everything.

Time moved on, and the incident was forgotten, except by me. Probably the only outward sign of the event was that I started smoking, a habit which brought me great solace and allowed me to mark the passing of time in units measured between the contemplative pauses afforded by a good Marlboro. As I excelled in school and followed politics from an early age, the presumption was that I would eventually play a significant role in public life at a crucial point in Canadian history. That statement, which strikes me as absurd in the extreme today, served as my governing myth right through early adolescence.

As my illusions had yet to be utterly shattered, I still harboured the belief that things would right themselves. Then my father decided to ship me off to boarding school with the Christian Brothers of Ireland. At the time, a tribe of thugs ruled its corridors and dormitories with absolute pater familias powers. The punching and strapping was called discipline. The practice of dark sexual arts with orphans or disturbed children was later characterised by their overlords in the ecclesiastical authority as “looking for comfort in the wrong places.” During the early stages of investigations, parish priests and archbishops glared down at us from the pulpit with righteous anger or with mournful sorrow. Who indeed had the right to cast the first stone? A man had to look honestly into his heart; forgiveness was partaking of the divine. We knew they were lying, but even we were too naïve to realise that the sermons were a ploy to buy time so that the Church could move assets out of reach of the jurisdiction of the courts. Later, when the Vatican itself had no choice but to stop the cover-up, it never wasted a chance to label it the “Irish problem.”

Thus, my formative years were spent serving a five-year sentence under those Christian brothers from Ireland. During the day, it was a war zone. The brothers, in black, swirling skirts, rosaries hanging at the belt, gave full vent to their raging, unbridled tempers, swinging the strap, smashing heads against bulletin boards or against other heads. Where the early days were terrifying, a paradoxical reversal of psychology occurred as we sized up the measure of our enemies: the threat of violence creates a climate of fear, but the execution of it punctures the illusion and deflates authority. When a skirted brother crossed the Rubicon into the zone of turbulence and released the beast within, it acted like a curse. The perpetrator became vile and tainted and marked for revenge. My classmates—a motley crew of scavengers, vagabonds, orphans and delinquents—were seasoned veterans of revolt, and we marked the brothers early on as an enemy to be sabotaged at every turn. They were no match for us, because they still feared exposure, whereas we had lost everything.

When the school bell rang, we drifted down to the train yards on the docks of the Fraser River. There we awaited the first passing freight train and hitched a ride to the south side of the river, where we trespassed onto farmland to steal mushrooms rich in psilocybin. We had found our first bootlegger, an ill-shaven animal out of the Cariboo-Chilcotin district who had an eye for young boys.
The Eel
David MacKinnon

One teacher, Barnett, seemed the only regular man of the lot. A former truck driver, he taught mathematics and Latin, and he taught them well. A long time later, while reading the case law, I fell upon an Ontario decision in Chambers, ruling on a plaintiff’s motion to seize all the assets of my alma mater to pay off 36 million dollars in execution of judgements for complainants of sexual abuse. The motion was dismissed. Apparently, the entire share capital of my alma mater consisted of three shares, and one of them was held by Barnett. The bastard was sitting on 10 million dollars’ worth of blood money. I filed that for future reference, and a long time later, from another country, I dealt with this treachery in my own way. But that is another story.

On my 16th birthday, Banahan, a close friend and fellow scavenger, dropped by for a visit to make the following announcement: “I’m leaving tomorrow. For Europe.”

“You sounds good. Can I come?”

“No.”

For the next year, I climbed the walls, living for the arrival of Banahan’s sporadic but lengthy air-mail letters, which recounted the bohemian life. He lived with a Chelsea stripper and made regular side trips to the cathouses of Hamburg or the coffee shops of Amsterdam. He spoke of a “Magic Bus” which had taken him from Amsterdam to the Khyber Pass, of converting to Islam to follow a girl into Saudi Arabia. He sounded like a man alive in a way that I had never been.

In one communiqué, Banahan simply forwarded two excerpts in French torn out of a book titled Bourlinguer, penned by an author I’d never heard of named Blaise Cendrars. The two excerpts were heavily annotated with Banahan’s script. I imagined him in Tangiers, strung out on heroin, his glaucous amphibian features pushed up against the page as he attempted to decipher the meaning of the message. I placed the two passages inside a day journal I was keeping, giving no further thought to their contents. They...
The Eel

David MacKinnon

possessed talismanic, not literary, value for me, and the proof that I would keep my vow to escape the prison of family.

As I had a plan, overnight my marks improved, and both my teachers and my father, while at a loss to explain it, decided I was finally finding my way after a brief period of rebellion and lack-lustre performance. I could have just fled, but I feared the risk of returning penniless and defeated. I wanted to bury this beast in one coup. My opportunity arose at one of the formal Sunday dinners over which my father, a Supreme Court judge, presided. I announced that I was leaving the country for Europe.

“An ambitious scheme and one that requires an equal dose of planning,” decreed the judge, looking over his half-moon bifocals as he reached for another glass of the Portuguese Mateus that he favoured. “Have you picked your country yet?”

I answered simply that I was leaving the following day to read history at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, the great mediaeval institute and alma mater of Erasmus. I laid out the confirmation of registration from the university; following the judge’s advice to the letter, my paperwork was in perfect order. The shock was too sudden and the time too short for them to react. I shall never forget stepping into the taxi waiting for me in front of the family home, and the lot of them standing on the driveway, raising their hands limply in farewell like a Rockwell painting. Pathos.

On the way to the airport, I was seized by a terrible guilt—at having escaped prison camp and left others behind to their fate—and the power of it nearly convinced me to turn back. But I held firm and, once on the plane, the die was cast. I have no idea how the matter was discussed. Maybe they filed my conduct under the safe label of a gap year, a convenient myth harboured by parents in 1974. But I knew from the first minutes when I saw their faces recede and then disappear that I’d never turn back.

In a matter of days, I stepped off an inter-city train in the mediaeval city of Leuven in Brabant province, Belgium. I was greeted by a dowdy, near-vacated waiting area and a shabby set of exit doors leading onto the main street which bore an indecipherable name—Bongenootenlaan. I reached inside my pocket for a city map but found myself looking at the scrap of paper containing the excerpt from Bourlinguer. I decided to save it for good luck.

Several months later, I was still in Leuven, shivering in my one-room flat with only cold running water, a Turkish toilet out in the hallway and a torn excerpt of Bourlinguer as company. I reflected back on Banahan’s Chelsea Bohemia, then laughed at my earlier fantasy. The sparse solitude of my new life did nothing to discourage me. On the contrary. The right place, the only place, to make sense of Cendrars was in a miserable, unheated flat while drinking red wine warmed up by my Bunsen burner.

The international trains passed through the station from 4:30 pm onwards. There were usually five or six of them, running in both directions. I had time, all the time I needed ... at precisely four o’clock, I threw my suitcase and jacket out of the window, and risked my neck on the narrow corniche, shuffling down it until I arrived at my sister’s bedroom. Once I penetrated her room, I swiped twenty or thirty hundred sou coins that my sister kept in the drawer of her commode. Then I slipped into the office of my father, and grabbed a few packs of smokes perched on the furniture ... in the dining room, I spotted half a dozen sets of silverware, stuffed them into my pockets and, in my mother’s study, I pried her secretaire open, and stole a few hundred franc notes.

Although my departure was more conventional, I felt an immediate attachment to Cendrars as a brother vagabond, someone who had fled in order to escape the confines of a provincial bourgeois family with nothing but security and prestige on the brain. I proceeded to the following passage, the effect of which was even stronger on my mind:

The international trains passed through the station from 4:30 pm onwards. There were usually five or six of them, running in both directions. I had time, all the time I needed ... at precisely four o’clock, I threw my suitcase and jacket out of the window, and risked my neck on the narrow corniche, shuffling down it until I arrived at my sister’s bedroom. Once I penetrated her room, I swiped twenty or thirty hundred sou coins that my sister kept in the drawer of her commode. Then I slipped into the office of my father, and grabbed a few packs of smokes perched on the furniture ... in the dining room, I spotted half a dozen sets of silverware, stuffed them into my pockets and, in my mother’s study, I pried her secretaire open, and stole a few hundred franc notes.
So, there I was in the train. Everything had gone as planned. I had been cool, as if I'd prepared the coup for a long time, when in reality, everything had been improvised on the spot and it was only at the last minute that I yielded to an impulsion. Obviously, I had been in a dream state for the four or five days previous, feeling intermittent desires, but it would be wrong to see any meditated plan and still less an act of will. In short, I climbed out of that window like a somnambulist, and that's probably why I didn't break my neck. I felt vertigo on the train and was stunned to find I actually had left for good. I felt a sudden malaise at the prospect of having turned my back forever. It was the first time that I had obeyed this need for evasion which so often took hold of me, and has pushed me into such eccentricities, taking endless extreme resolutions, as sudden as they were without reflection, risking everything, even death, to emerge from the trance shattered, but ecstatic, in a state of ravishment, in the absurd, at the end of a cul-de-sac, or in full flight, but never regretting anything, or anybody, and always extraordinarily content and proud of what I had just sacrificed, while laughing at myself and, although intoxicated by the sensation of being lost at sea, or approaching a new world, still maintaining a healthy disdain for myself at continuing to believe in life.

I concluded that my recent departure was totemic, that it had not been a rational decision at all, but something containing only contours which I was yet to fill in. I felt that I was being reborn in my lonely digs and dwelt in an intermezzo, fluid phase while my new self annihilated the old. And then I discarded the thought. This Cendrars had nothing to do with me. He was a bum, a gypsy and a writer, from other places and times, and I had my own destiny, and nothing to justify. If I had escaped and severed the links with my past, that was my business and mine alone. Or so I thought at the time.
After a few weeks, I was well into a routine—reading and studying during the day, and at night exploring the niches and corners of that strange, mediaeval city. Under the tutelage of the Vlaamse, I was learning the art of drinking Belgian style in the Oude Markt cafés, particularly three holes known respectively as De Werelt, De Delper and Den Allee, where you could swallow Maes Pils or Jupiter for a dime a glass until the sun rose.

Leuven suited me all right—it was ancient, baroque, Teutonic, macabre. There were no fights in pubs or cafés or even out in the street. And no hallucinogenics. In Leuven, everyday life was hallucinatory and could test your sanity to the limits, so my former attraction to mind-bending hallucinogenics died a natural death upon arrival. In Leuven, reality appeared to be palatable. And despite my rough New World beginnings, I looked forward to entering more fully into the life of the mind and its myriad representations.

De Werelt, which was frequented by roadies for a local band, became my home away from home, as I'd struck up a friendship with the drummer for the band, a Dennis Hopper look-alike named Eddie. During one of our all-night forays, Eddie recommended I check out West Flanders, a place where he said the students congregated in mediaeval student clubs and, in Eddie's words, "pretty well anything goes."

I took a train out to West Flanders on the weekend and looked up Eddie's Tante Blanche, a friendly, middle-aged woman who ran a grocery store in a village named Wingene on the flatlands between Ghent and Bruges. Tante Blanche had purchased her store after selling her piggery to someone named Uncle Seff. Tante Blanche seemed pretty happy to see me, despite not knowing me from Jan Peter. She introduced me to Madeleine, an old lady who moved through the room glumly in an ankle-length black crinoline dress while massaging a crucifix hanging from her neck. Madeleine would spend my Saturdays filling me with stoofvlees or witloof and generally looking sour.
The previous year, another Canadian had made an entrance in Wingene—an Italian from Winnipeg named Sonny. Blanche’s living room was littered with photos of Sonny. Particularly against the bland furniture and the crucifixes hanging on the walls, Sonny, with his curly black hair and his gold neck chain under an open-necked Greek blouse, looked like some kind of Vegas star doing one-night gigs at the Sands. There was no point trying to live up to the act of Sonny the Winnipeg Italian.

It was a village, and people were curious about the Canadian newcomer, whom they called De Canadese, as if I were some kind of Javanese bastard just off the boat, who came to learn to live like a Belgian. Which wasn’t that far from the truth, when you think about it. Within a couple of days, two atavistic-looking identical twins named Carlos and Ignace dropped by.

“You know how to drink, Canadese boyka?”

“I think it’s rude to refuse a drink,” I responded.

“You come with us, we’ll learn you how to drink. Fifty, sixty beers per night.”

Later the same day, a slick looking, pug-faced character named Gerrit came to pay his respects, arm in arm with a tall, black-haired Vlaamse beauty named Magda. Gerrit drove a used gold Mercedes-Benz and managed a hotel in nearby Bruges. During that evening and many to come, Gerrit would take me out to the local haunts and ply me full of wine while I tried to figure out how to fuck Magda. Gerrit was a Flanders version of Mister Manners and, pretentious but exquisitely coiffured son of a bitch that he purported to be, he decided to pass on a few of his hard-earned trade secrets to me while keeping my glass full at all times. That gave me an angle on Magda, whom I had fallen in love with, and so we started spending our Saturday evenings together. During one of our outings, we got to talking about books.

“You ever read Henry Miller?” Gerrit asked.

“Never heard of him,” I said, which was true.

The fact was, I’d read Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Pushkin, but I had no overview about reading at all, because I didn’t discuss the books that fell into my hands with anybody. The next day I found a copy of Nexus waiting for me on a coffee table in Blanche’s living room with a note signed by Gerrit, saying: “Try this.” I opened the book by Henry Miller, skipping the introduction by Erica Jong. Oddly enough, the first page opened with a dog barking.

“WOOF! Woof woof! Woof! Woof!”

The sound of that dog barking inside my head was to change the entire course of my life.

Barking in the night. Barking, barking. I shriek but no one answers. I scream but there’s not even an echo.

“Which do you want—the East of Xerxes or the East of Christ?”

Alone—with eczema of the brain.

Alone at last. How marvellous! Only it is not what I expected to be. If only I were alone with God!

Woof! Woof woof!

Old Madeleine, miserable old slut, hunched over, fatally churning a marmite of mustard soup with unidentifiable remains adrift on its surface, to be followed by the inevitable beer stew. Her spindly legs reminded me of a rotting oak tree’s roots. Another glass of thick brown table beer, the ambient mumble of a red-nosed Vlaamse priest while he allowed Blanche to pour more cognac into his snifter. I thought I could smell excrement on the thick boots worn by the priest. I glanced back at the page. A propos of nothing at all, Miller was listing some names he claimed were old friends—Whistler, Lovis Corinth, Breughel the Elder, Botticelli, Bosch, Giotto, Cimabue, Piero della Francesca, Grunewald, Holbein, Lucas Cranach, Van Gogh, Utrillo, Gauguin, Pieranesi, Utamaro, Hokusai, Hiroshige...

I laid the book down and closed my eyes, savouring these mellifluous names, each of which seemed to suggest a thousand stories.
The priest was fumbling around for his pouch of tobacco stuffed like a handkerchief in his pocket and sniffing at his cognac like some kind of a dog. I looked at the cover again and at this writer with the shoeshine-boy name and the look of a Mongolian with dubious plans.

Well, I thought, if they are your friends, then they are also mine! If you please, Mr. Henry Val Miller, let me also meet this Lovis, and this Breughel fellow, and this Holbein. Blanche had placed an LP 78 record on the turntable for the priest, which was playing the theme song from *Un homme et une femme* and Lara’s theme from *Dr. Zhivago*. He looked ecstatic. I wondered whether his daily vespers gave him the same high that he was obviously getting out of his Zen moment in Blanche’s living room.

WOOF! Woof woof! Woof! Woof! To be sure, I knew instantly that I wanted more of whatever this strange codified message from Miller delivered me. I would do anything to get it. I found myself making secret vows, like some autistic shepherd boy struck dumb by a vision of Christ.

Men like Miller and Cendrars, who was partially introduced to me by Miller, attract first the vilification and then the morbid curiosity of the establishment, who seek vainly to understand what could possibly motivate a man to write in this mad, formless way. He was a runaway, says one. A nonconformist, says another. Crude. The king of smut. A sexist, say the feminists. None of the above. All of the above. An enigma. *Inclassable*. A bug on a wall. A guru. A good man at a party. A man who stood on his own two feet, and enjoyed life and hung out in the street. If there was any doubt in my mind about being a lifetime exile, that day in front of Nexus settled it. I wasn’t going anywhere near kin, and I wasn’t going home.

Within a few months I was fully integrated into Belgian life, such as it was. During the week, I studied and played rugby with the French-speaking Walloons. On the weekend, I fell in with my cronies of the Flemish-speaking Schreveke student club, led by the identical twins Ignace and Carlos, and Geert, a loyal regular who looked straight out of Van Gogh’s *Potato Eaters* and whose plump girlfriend had a roving eye for something. During the raucous evenings in that hamlet, we’d salt away pentjes by the dozen and sing ludicrous Vlaamse songs like a chapter of grizzled legionnaires, except we were all under twenty. Maybe it was the table beer from birth, but the Flemings seemed to travel from wide-eyed childhood to bug-eyed old age without the usual interval of puberty.

One morning, I stumbled out of the Schreveke in the predawn and spotted Magda sitting inside the gold Mercedes-Benz on the Tieltstraat, smoking a cigarette and, as far as I could make out, Gerritless. By that time, Miller and my dawning life as an exile had moved guile a few rungs higher than scruples on my hierarchy of values. Since closing the last pages of Nexus, I had vowed that I would fuck Magda some day. And now, there she was. High cheekbones, angular, tall beauty, dressed in black, waiting. An apparition, looking as bored as Bacall behind the wheel of that Mercedes-Benz. It was the chance of a lifetime and the work of a minute, taking her up to my room over the grocery store.

Making love to her was like stepping off a cliff into an abyss of ecstasy and despondence. I fell asleep, amazed and grateful to the gods that such a stunning beauty could be languishing in a prison of her own and that I would ultimately be the beneficiary of her disconsolate fate. Later, I was awoken by the sound of angry voices in the grocery store and could hear the word *Canadees*, one of the very few I could demarcate from the as yet indecipherable, sartorine phonetics of the Vlaamse. I quickly ushered Magda down the stairs under the shadow of Madeleine’s scowling face in the rear kitchen, where she was already stirring some unholy concoction while soaking beets through a white rag. Beets for breakfast, for god’s sake! After successfully pushing Magda out onto the Tieltstraat, I poured myself an acrid coffee and returned to my room to plan my next move.
A while later, I decided it was safe to make an entrance downstairs. Blanche was playing cards with three old ladies in the living room as I came in and, upon seeing me, all four looked shocked about something.

“Return to your room, boyka!” Tante Blanche ordered.

I retreated up the stairs in a state of confusion and sought refuge in the bathroom, where I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I recalled Magda the previous night saying she wanted to see what was concealed under my beard. After stumbling up the stairs, drunk with Duvel and Leffe beer, I’d started shaving it but only made it halfway through.

Later that day, I was on a train passing through Ghent towards Brussels and noticed Geert, the guy out of the Potato Eaters canvas, locked in an intense set-to with his plump girlfriend. He was banging his fist on the table. He was very upset, crying about something. I couldn’t make head or tail of these people. One minute they seemed frozen into a lifeless stare, the next they were weeping with no sign of what triggered their emotional states. I quickly retreated to a sleeper car, found the beer wagon, and spent the remainder of the trip salting back Maes Pils until I arrived safely back in Leuven.

The next weekend, a Peruvian friend took me along to Paris for the weekend. I had the number of a friend’s older sister who could lodge me on the rue Séguier in the fifth. Coming out of the Porte d’Orléans/Clignancourt line at Place St. Michel, I wandered into the rue St.-André des Arts and instantly fell under the spell of the calm effervescence which permeates the Latin Quarter. Before the week was out, I had enrolled at the Sorbonne, found a flat in the ninth and defaulted on my contractual obligations in Belgium. My brief sojourn in Leuven had been eventful, but here was destiny writ large upon the walls of the city. From the instant of my arrival, my transient days were over. I was home—home at last.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two litres of Nicolas red table wine per day</td>
<td>FF 132,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at FF 1,10 per bottle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten pouches of Drum tobacco</td>
<td>FF 20,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixty CROUS Resto U tickets for student restaurants</td>
<td>FF 180,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent for flat at 9, rue de la Victoire, Paris 9ième arrondissement</td>
<td>FF 205,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>FF 537,00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My in-depth discovery of Cendrars the writer came about at the age of 21, shortly after my own return from three years spent in Paris during the mid to late seventies. At that time, it was possible to live in the city on nothing—or close to it—and thus escape the yoke that crushes virtually all humans for the better part of their existence on the planet. It is perhaps useful to reprint the costs of what I considered to be the staples of monthly existence required for a young man of my inclinations:
If you were disinclined to work, and only a fool would work for a boss as cruel and miserly as the French patron when Paris beckoned, you could live and live well in the former neighbourhood of Henry Miller for 120 CAD$ per month. This placed me in an idyllic position which the great masses of successful humanity failed to achieve after a lifetime of bashing their heads and scraping their knees along the road towards imagined material wealth. Most died en route, some upon the very day of completing their 40-year corvée and, of course, these were the success stories. The heavy underbelly of mankind expired anonymously in lean-tos, cawing and bleating as those less unfortunate refused to share the fruits of their own desperate efforts. Early evidence, as I sized it up, reinforced my intimate conviction that my philosophy of fatalistic attraction and avoidance of responsibility was as good as anything else being offered up.

It is impossible to replicate the feeling of ekstasis which seized me randomly during my daily walks from my one-room chambre on rue de la Victoire to the Sorbonne, passing by the Folies Bergères, the punt shops of the Faubourg Montmartre, the old Bouillon Chartier, a grand old belle époque restaurant with skylights embedded in high ceilings, where you could be served pommes à l’huile and œuf dû mayonnaise by rondin-clad waiters, all for a fair price. I moved across the grands boulevards under the shadow of the old Stock Exchange and from there into les Halles, which still had the old slaughterhouses and butcher shops emitting their rancid fumes, having only a couple of centuries previous been the site of the Cimetière des Innocents, where 2 million wine-soaked Parisian corpses lay until the toxicity of their decayed bodies poisoned the drinking waters of the city and threatened to bring the remaining living underground to join those who had preceded them.

Every day, until it became a wondrous, internalised, banal quotidien, I strolled past the early morning whores of rue St. Denis, the detrital alleyways of the rue de la Grande Truanderie and the rue des Prêcheurs, where Villon and his cronies stole, harassed and molested, occasionally murdering a priest and without fail squandering their ill-gotten gains on drink. I then crossed the Seine into the Latin Quarter, where during May ’68 the students had gone on a rampage of anarchism and sexual fraternizing which resulted in the downfall of no less than President De Gaulle. Arriving at the Place de la Sorbonne, I passed under the statue of Auguste Comte, the positivist philosopher, whom my own professor, René Poirier, a co-founder of the Oulipo school of absurdity, loved to mock humorously. Poirier liked to mimic Comte’s arrogant sense of mission, the great philosopher pompously announcing to his looking-glass as he rose from bed each morning, Il y a de grandes choses à faire.

Poirier would then direct our minds to the antics and mind-bending tricks of the word wizards of French literature, particularly Alfred Jarry and Raymond Queneau, the Gallic Lewis Carrolls. Poirier’s Oulipian asides shared from the erudite benches of the Galérie Richelieu rescued me from the subterranean muck and stalactites of my Nicolas wine hangover, and brought me back into the world of ideas. I have no idea what effect Poirier had on the 20-odd other students in his class, but I had found the antidote to the petrifaction of my former life. My corruption was reaching noxious intensity. There were days in the courtyard during the break in Poirier’s three-hour lectures under the shadow of the statues of Pasteur and Victor Hugo when I thought I would explode with joy. I had tasted infinity and surrendered to its spell. But alongside my ecstasy, as the end of my three years approached, I felt a creeping dread of my impending return to the New World and wondered what punishment awaited a man for having committed the crime of finding true happiness.
In fact, my return to the New World proved even more catastrophic than I had anticipated. No one in the Vancouver of 1978 appeared in the least interested in Paris, let alone the immensity of riches it had to offer. My enthusiastic renditions of day-to-day life in the City of Light met with blank stares or snorts of disbelief. The only questions on the minds of family or acquaintances concerned the names and dates of my interviews with prospective employers. I initially enjoyed taunting these apostles of income with mock earnestness, safe in the knowledge that I’d be leaving them behind sooner rather than later. As my resolve to depart hardened, I adopted a social veneer of gravitas as if considering seriously the various career alternatives being offered up at the family dinner table, each of which privately appeared as the door to a separate Dantean inferno. The effect of maintaining this hypocrisy while every part of me ached for fugue began to tell, and within three months my health broke down, eventually causing my physical

---

Then Chagall returned to Russia, fought for the revolution, fell into misery. More drawings, more canvasses which are sober and splendid. In Paris, he was considered a dead man. When he returned in 1922, his studio had been broken into and his pre-war works resold. He suspected Cendrars of having a hand in it all. End of a friendship.

—Philippe Lançon,
“Blaise Cendrars et ses amis de bohème”
Libération, July 28, 2009
incapacitation and forcing me to endure the charity of a man who saw his offspring as an extension of a principle utterly foreign to me—that of prairie Catholic conservatism. My father’s strong point and my weak one coincided at the quadrant of will. Like the Europeans before the discovery of the concept of zero, he saw my worldview as nihilism, whereas I felt I held the key to infinity. Our courteous but relentless stalemate nearly killed me morally and physically, and none of the dangers I later ran into—from the perils of Hong Kong in ’89 to those of courting the daughter of an Antibes mobster—put me closer to death than this brief period of return into the supposedly safe embrace of my family.

Lying face down on the bed of your childhood sorrows gives you plenty of time to mull over these things. Although the thought of suicide occasionally hovered on my mental horizon and the rational consideration of murder offered me periodic solace, neither held my interest for long, and both seemed rent with hidden complications and contingencies which would make my present plight appear trivial in comparison. Coincidentally, I came across a newspaper article around that time which reported that a man had pointed a shotgun under his chin “apparently in an attempt to take his life,” as if there might have been other intentions on the poor fellow’s mind. In any event, he only succeeded in blowing off part of his jaw. I am not sure what motivated the reporter to include front and side photos and a graphic sketch showing the trajectory of the bullet. Summer is a slow time for the papers anywhere. In any event, it put me on guard that, while things weren’t looking good, they could always get worse, and it convinced me that a fair dose of social hypocrisy was a necessary strategy under what I identified as conditions of extreme duress.

The day which followed my reading of this article, Stanton dropped by with a copy of a book titled Moravagine, Idiot by Blaise Cendrars. As I was more or less being treated like Moravagine, the criminally insane idiot-genius sequestrated in the Waldensee sanatorium near Berne, Switzerland, and since the frontispiece reported that the author had narrowly escaped the mercantile prison erected by a Scottish mother and an Anabaptist legal father, it looked to be an appropriate read. A few pages into the book, I came across the following passage which discussed the nature of sickness itself:

What is conventionally referred to as health is in fact only a momentary aspect, transported onto an abstract grid, of a morbid condition, a particular case which has already crossed a threshold, and been recognised, defined, finished, eliminated and generalized for the common usage.

From the outset, the narrator and accessory to the criminally insane genius, rapist, murderer and terrorist Moravagine denounces the advent of junk scientists and charlatans who classify as mutant that which is simply different.

Pursuant to what law, what morality, what society do they hand down their exactions? They intern, sequester, isolate the most remarkable individuals. They mutilate physiological geniuses who carry within themselves the prophetic genomes of a future time. They proudly proclaim themselves princes of science, and as they suffer from a persecution complex, they easily wear the mantle of victim. Sombre, obscurantist, they clothe their language of defrocked Greeks and having donned this apparel, they insinuate everywhere in the name of a boutique-style rationalist liberalism. Their theories are jaundiced, fetal, dejected. They are the henchmen of a shameful bourgeois virtue, formerly the exclusive domain of sanctimonious hypocrites. They have delivered up their knowledge to a State Police and organised the systematic destruction of everything that is fundamentally idealistic, i.e. independent. They castrate those convicted of crimes of passion and even attack the lobes of
the brain. Senile, impotent, eugenic, they fervently believe in their power to eradicate and uproot evil. Their vanity is only equalled by their deceit and treachery. Only their hypocrisy prevents them from levelling the ground before them—hypocrisy and their sexual obsessions.

Moravagine certainly wasn’t a novel in the traditional sense. He was the protagonist, Dostoyevskian, but without any redeeming feature. The book read like a charge sheet against the rule of sanctimonious hypocrites and what he labelled a *fureur nivellatrice*, or levelling frenzy. Cendrars *J’accuse* took on intellectuals and scientists—whom he clearly saw as war criminals—through the eyes of a nihilist physician and an anarchist serial killer. Through the musings of the narrator, the book prophesied everything that would happen in our times, when good men would be purged throughout every sphere of society, always in the name of a greater good—the most sinister, Stalinistic utopia being that of equality—impossible to define, impossible to refute, and therefore a preferred weapon of the Kafkaian *nivelleurs* that have led us to the present impasse.

Outside of its harsh polemic, *Moravagine* is a eulogy to action. At one point during my reading of *Moravagine*, I fell across a sentence which stood apart from the tale itself, as if written in graffiti.

*There is no truth. There is only action.*

I confess that during my convalescence, I was piked to the eyeballs with an experimental drug that would later claim several hundred lives, and thoughts and discoveries came to me in fits and seizures as well. So, I seized that phrase to give me the strength to survive my own ordeal. That a whole series of disasters followed is a detail. I rose from my bed, showered up and walked down to the local manpower office. The first posting on the jobs board advertised for a kiln loader. Within the day, I was on the assembly line at Crane Pottery Works, loading units into a 2400° Fahrenheit brick kiln. That I endured that Dantean inferno for 17 hellish months is a footnote. My recurrent discovery of Blaise Cendrars—poet, adventurer, immoralist, brigand, legionnaire, precious stone dealer, friend of Chaplin, Braque, Picasso, Modigliani—gave me the knowledge that now, no matter what misadventure or folly I concocted (and my follies would soon become the rule of my existence), every one of them would appear as flecks on the screen, silhouettes fad ed against the infinitely larger chiaroscuro of this man who had achieved the greatest of feats and become human, just a human.

There was another problem disclosed to me by Cendrars, expressed in the way of a koan by one of his heroes, Gérard de Nerval. *Je suis l’autre.* As I mulled over this riddle and how the difficulty of the problem had resulted in de Nerval being discovered hanging from the bars of a grate which closed off a sewer on the rue de la Vielle-Lanterne, my predetermined life, the one which my father had charted for me in advance, was already a fading memory, and the new challenge of living up to the monster who was Cendrars/Moravagine became my sole and abiding obsession.
David MacKinnon is a Vancouver, Canada-born novelist. After reading history and philosophy at the universities of British Columbia and Louvain (Belgium), and at Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne (Paris), he worked in the Alberta oilfields and a series of jobs on the assembly line prior to being admitted to the Montreal bar, where he practiced as a trial lawyer. In '89, MacKinnon left for Hong Kong to assist Chinese nationals to escape the crackdown which followed the Tiananmen Square uprising and narrowly escaped himself after a group of Shanghai businessmen attempted to coerce him into a people-smuggling scheme. In 2004, during an extended sojourn in the Seychelles, he was declared persona non grata for writing on the money and gun laundering engaged in by the tinpot dictatorship which runs the Seychelles to this day. David MacKinnon has written eight novels, including Leper Tango (Guernica Editions).