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David MacKinnon



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*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

*HIM*

**H**e 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 job off with Christian pity, you don't need a legend, you need to go into a trance. You need *fugue*.

To be sure, Blaise Cendrars was a legend. He exuded the deep, unfathomable mystery of the Sargasso Sea and the Amazonian jungle. But that's not why I owed him my life, and now as I look back at the tumult of my own existence, a flash. 1989. The middle of the night in Macau, in the year that China prepared to swallow up Hong Kong—a spit in the South China Sea—the way that Stanley Ho's Dragon Mouth entrance at the Kingsway Casino, where I was headed that evening swallowed up its patrons and emptied their pockets of a lifetime's earnings. Where suicide and murder and whores and windowless VIP rooms and toothless millionaires and one-armed bandits mixed with the chack-a-chack staccato of the baccarat tables that was the governing drumbeat of those islands in those days. And, where the easy purchase of a stiletto-heeled hooker gave an unworthy sod a brief taste of the vices of the gods.

I had just finished a bottle of *Vino Verde* and half a dozen plates and bowls of seafood in an open door café with a dirt floor. Lee Fook Lam and I were moving along the *rue de la felicidad*. The air was thick with an acrid vapour that enveloped us and the baked dirt alley we turned onto littered with mini-skirted whores, the lights of Friday night junks and floating restaurants illuminating the South China Sea, and Kowloon marking the dark silhouette of the mountain passes leading into Guangdong province. And, I felt so alive, voluntarily abducted as I was from that cocoon of certainty that had nearly asphyxiated me with its policy of love and morality. And I felt that my lungs had been pre-designed to feed off the fumes and the stench of whores trampled upon by other men before I too would leave my imprint. And I felt that I couldn't get enough of this corruption, and lit up a cigar to stoke the cauldron within that was my soul, ready for every sin under god's hemisphere, if only I first got a taste of life, this accelerated life, where every minute contained an eon, and where the China night sky

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 cacophonous 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.



## *YOU*

*T*he world doesn't have to see why I did this, but you do. Don't confuse this with any sentimental attachment either—sentiment comes only with physical proximity, and you and I have had none for two decades. My sensitivities have long since atrophied. Although I no longer enjoy the usual feelings of other human beings, the gateway to my inner soul is safely shut. I am long past the day now where others openly question my lack of orthodoxy. Since I have ceased to have any impact upon the world, I can be safely ignored, and since the result of awakening the beast that lies within is unpredictable, I am largely left to my own devices.

Naïve as I was, even when I undertook this folly at such a cost, I presumed only that one person would believe in its aims and purposes. Of course—and this has been the experience of my life—this person ultimately proved to have no distinguishing features from the great amoebic mass of humanity. Behind the mish-mash Vedantic credos, the eccentricities and the claim that she was the

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 word—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,

except as procreators. While we foolish men mulled over our existential posture, our partners in destiny reduced us to being nothing more than carriers of seed. Of passing physiological interest, and little more. None of this is important, but it brings me to a short anecdote that I wish to recount.

While walking to Chartres in 1990 on a pilgrimage, I came across a Portuguese immigrant out gathering mushrooms with his son. During my brief conversation with the man, I learned that he had no gainful employment. And, although this man would feel shame in my homeland, here at least, both he and his son's universes appeared to be complete by the mere presence of each other. There is no moral to this tale, other than to say that I had an immediate realization that my own life had been filled with such frescoes, except that no figures had been traced out within and there was no discernible narrative tale. And, so I picked up the easel and the paintbrush, and I began to fill in the empty spaces.

Still, not even that proved enough, as you will read in the following pages ...

PART I

*Dofdrums*



### *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*.



*Nothing is true ... so everything is permitted.*

—HASSAN-I SABBAH

**T**he 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 Dostoyevsky 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.



*I have no roots.*

—BLAISE CENDRARS

**M**y 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 accordance 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 Caribooster, as we labelled him, was our go-between for beer and whisky. Then it was down to the river for more scouring or just watching the tugboats and river sturgeon, log booms and barges move past.

On occasion, we spotted the keys in the ignition of a half-decent outboard, a temptation too good to pass on. One afternoon, we managed to steal a Carolina skiff boat with an Evinrude outboard from the local marina and sped downriver towards the delta while gobbling down mushrooms. Strange, atavistic life forms seemed to spring out of the riverbanks—rebels, bums and outlaws inhabiting ramshackle bric-a-brac constructions, balancing on makeshift cedar pylons planted into the shifting silt of the riverbed. These men sat on their porches, indifferent to the relentless buzz of stevedores unloading ships, sawmill workers pouring into the mills and river dredgers fighting against the great river's currents. They reclined on makeshift scraps of furniture, passively observing, drinking beer or coffee and smoking.

It struck me that these supposedly worthless and shunned river dwellers didn't look all that unhappy. Within the haze of my beer- and mushroom-induced fantasies, they were guardians of another realm. The sight of them as the river took on shapes of the sidereal Eiffel Tower or a Gaudi cathedral untethered a dream within—of the day I would flee my drab existence.

Adversity is meant to build character, but in my case it simply confirmed a growing suspicion that the world did not correspond to the user's manual I'd been handed. On the home front, it looked like the judge had long since concluded that his son wasn't made of the same fibre as he. I saw things differently. I'd spent my formative years devising various strategies to keep myself and my handicapped brother from being slaughtered by local thugs or, when on school premises, from being set upon by a clique made up of psychotically violent tyrants, pederasts or both. The casualty of this paradoxical quandary was morality, an obsolescent credo better suited for other places and times.

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."

"Sounds good. Can I come?"

"Have you got a passport?"

"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

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 lacklustre 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:

## *About the Author*

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).