
Latin Americans of the North¹

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A man goes to a village in search of his father. The father he learns, is dead, the village is dead, and soon the searcher will also die, but the search goes on. The dead are linked with each other and with the living, and frequently confront one another by asking, « are you dead or living, I forget. And the light is so bad here. » The ritual life of the village remains intact, feuds go on unabated. All is dust, all is passion. It is a novel, of course, totally imagined, one of the supreme fictions of the century. Its first sentence goes like this: « I came to Comala because I was told that my father, a certain Pedro Páramo, was living there. »

Death is not the point, of course. The erasure of a single life does not affect the community. Continuity is the point, survival is the point.

The name of the novel is *Pedro Páramo*, published in 1947 by the late Mexican writer Juan Rulfo. Many Spanish language authors consider it the greatest of all Latin American works. It is brief, 123 pages in the standard Grove Press edition, but endlessly complicated. It suggests, among other things, that the search for a father is a return to birth and a surrender to death. The journey is inevitable, the father remains a stranger, but the compulsion to learn the truth of one's origins, to confront them, to make peace with one's father, is stronger than survival itself. « Make him pay for the way he forgot us », his mother

begs the unnamed narrator. But the father never pays for an abandonment; it's always the wife and son.

I have taught the book many times, but not until last year did I grasp its pertinence to me, and to French Canada.

Leap ahead to the summer of 1989, the place is Lac-Mégantic, ten miles over the Maine border, and I went there because I had never seen it and it was the place my father, Léo Joseph Pierre Roméo Blais, known to me as Lee R. Blaise, son of Achille Blais and Orienne Boucher, came from. He had abandoned us. Despite the fact that I was never a French Canadian, never spoke the language as a child, never took a puck in the face for old Québec, was never a Catholic, never munched my way through a *réveillon*, Québec is, in a profound sense, my home. In the language and culture of my wife, who comes from Calcutta, it is my *desh*, the father's birthplace, hence my only home. The sadness in my life is that I'm a native of nowhere, I come from no place, no people. Where is Noplace? It must be just over the border.

Geography is fate. My father's village was frontier, a town founded in 1885 on the fringe of the oldest New World white community, lying just 100 miles south of the oldest city in North America, perched on the shoulder of a giant lake – «the trapper of fishes» – fed by a stream, the Arnold River named for America's most notorious traitor, which in turn feeds a north-flowing river that leaps like a horizontal Niagara out of the cleft of rocks between the original settlements of Mégantic and Sainte-Agnès, then cuts and finally seeps its way through the fertile farmland of the Beauce to join the St. Lawrence, just upstream from Québec City. The new and old, the loyal and the treasonous, the pioneering and the moribund, the quick and the dead. That was my father.

It is a chilly, cloudy, windy day in August; the Canadian autumn has just begun. The lake is flecked in whitecaps. The anomalous Dairy Queen sign flaps in a wind. I remember suddenly the cold, gray summers in Gaspé and the Laurentians, those seasonal *casse-croûtes*, *roulottes* wheeled to the side of a mountain road, skinny children selling cans of blueberries, the other side of Appalachia, and the *bombe* of hard ice cream wrapped in paper like a stick of frozen

butter that would be dropped in the top of an ancient machine to be exploded and belched out the bottom like a giant rosette in a waiting cone. *Une molle à la Québec*. Standing there in the parking lot of the *hôtel de ville*, I remember how my father ate his ice cream, how he bit the scoop, even of Dairy Queen, and never licked it, how he chewed it, never let it melt. My tongue-patterns, his chisel-marks.

« Elle a survécu ! » I say to Mme Beaudoin as I hand over to her the old parish ledger for xeroxing. For two days now, I have been tracking the family, recording each birth and death, learning the family names of *parrains* and *marraines*, the various witnesses to deaths and births, identified in the records as godmothers and godfathers, cousins and uncles. By marriage, I am related to all the Lamontagnes, Chouinards, Paquettes, Roys, Richards, and Nadeaus in Lac-Mégantic. It gives me, at forty-nine, a sense of rebirth in a new family, as though I have been adopted by a tribe.

« Elle a survécu ! » means I have found the birth certificate of a surviving aunt, only five of nineteen births. Bella, Léna, Oliva, Corinne and Léo, the eighteenth. Mme Beaudoin lets out a little cheer; I've been depressing her these quiet afternoon hours on a slow August day, bringing out the ledger to xerox each « Blais » death. The appalling mortality, fourteen out of nineteen. To be born means, three-quarters of the time, to die.

But the ledgers mean that I've got, in one family traced through little more than twenty years from 1887 to 1909, the story of a remote town in Québec. The family arrived and transformed themselves from « cultivateur » to « journalier », from tenants in the rich farming lands of Lambton, in the Beauce, to the timbered remoteness of Frontenac. They uprooted themselves from the passive life of farmers to the beginnings of a money economy. The wanderlust started here, instead of praying or cursing for rain and a better fate, they became locusts picking up and feeding off better jobs, higher wages. Illiterate Achille Blais worked the mills, as *journalier* at a dollar a day. My father remembered him without affection as a log-walker, the fearless man with the long « kendog » for spiking the logs and turning them (an old Québec joke: if a man is going to drown, shout out, « save the kendog ! »), who walked far out into the lake unjamming logs as they

drifted to the mill. He remembered him in the winter, on skates, extending his arms under a buffalo robe and being carried out beyond the plywood factory. Walking on the water, summer and winter. Stuff of epics.

Achille's brothers came, and even his parents. Stearns Lumber, a Scottish-owned company, controlled the only industry. Mégantic was an industrial town. Achille chose industrial labor over farming. This is the beginning of something, this speck of community, Scottish and French, in the back of beyond.

Reading the parish records is like reading a Latin American novel, *100 Years of Solitude*, for example, as the French push out the Scots (though the local paper still published a weekly page in Gaelic until the 1920s). The same year Achille and Orienne arrived, 1888, the town's most famous resident, the so-called «Megantic Outlaw», Donald Morrison, was tracked down and arrested for the murder of the town's only policeman, Lucius Warren, a deputy hired especially for Morrison's arrest on an arson charge. Warren himself was a bootlegger to the workers in the CPR works just over the border of Maine. The mayor, McAuliffe, was a usurer richly deserving of more than Morrison's blind, futile arson. Morrison was hidden throughout the winter in the crofter's cabins around Mégantic; when caught he was given a fairly light sentence and eventually freed. The stuff of legend (poetry and drama, too, as James Reaney's play, *The Megantic Outlaw*, attests). This all transpired in the summer of 1888 and winter of 1889. This is the year Achille and Orienne and six of their children arrived. The major forces in Québec history are all at work; my grandparents and infant aunts and uncles are part of the giant migration, French filling the old pockets of Scottish settlement in the eastern townships. Later, they will be part of the second great migration, the French into New England. The restlessness in my father, and in me, begins here.

Up close it must not have felt like history. It must have felt like grief on an epic scale.

In 1897, an uncle, François Chouinard, signs as a witness to his infant daughter Blanche's death. His signature is frail and uncertain. Two years later, witnessing the birth of my own aunt Blanche (who

died herself before the year was out), he takes up a full line of the ledger with a sweeping signature: « Frank » Chouinard. He changed his personality; it was a decade of massive self-transformation. Did he go to the States? I wonder. The only relative of my father's that he ever mentioned to me was Frank Chouinard.

One day, a « Frydmyn » enters the parish records. Eliezer Frydmyn from Poland, son of Sophie Grynzpyn, takes up five crossed-out lines of the priest's writing, as Father Choquette tries to sort out the vowelless word. In my mind, a comic film unrolls, the girl's father and brothers – she's a « fille mineure » – are all present: one can practically smell the gunpowder from so many loaded shotguns. One remembers the arrival of the gypsies in *100 Years of Solitude*, and how, for better and worse, the isolation of the settlement was broken.

Lac-Mégantic was reasonably prosperous because of the CPR line that passed through, connecting Halifax with Montréal. The town used to turn out once a day to study the immigrants who got out to stretch their legs. Twelve percent of breadwinners, according to figures in Jean-Pierre Kestleman's valuable study, *Histoire de Lac-Mégantic*, earned over \$1,000 a year. Fifty-five percent, a far larger percentage than Montréal's or Sherbrooke's owned their own homes. One can imagine that Achille built his own place, and put his « cultivateur » background to work by growing much of his food.

The population of Lac-Mégantic doubled from 1,173 to 2,259 in the eight years of my father's childhood. Except for the memory of his father on skates, my father never told me a thing about it. I only know that he, after the death of the nineteenth child, Rolland, became the youngest boy, thus the *donné*. He was given to the Sacré-Cœur fathers in town for training as a priest. The only education he ever received was at their hands – often literally – until he was eight, and walked out.

There is something dark about my father, a shadow on his character. My mother, who never stopped loving him even after a cruel divorce and his two subsequent marriages, nevertheless called him a « sociopath ». She read his character through a *Reader's Digest* article, « Are You Married to a Sociopath? » As in all things psychopopish, the answer was clearly, « yes, you are ». He lied, he had no

friends, he destroyed his creations, he was violent, cruel, incapable of sympathy with other people, incapable of love but reflecting endless need. All of his life he claimed birth in Paris of fallen aristocracy, a Harvard education but no degree.

He feared *mémère*. He also feared my mother, that calamity of literacy in his life. He feared his father, a man with a violent temper, who beat him. The Brothers in the monastery beat him. He hated the church, against the church he could at least fight back with divorces (four of them), with blasphemies, with an almost systematic gutting of the creed. He stored a lifetime of sins, bit back a ton of confessions. He became a boxer, a Golden Gloves champion, fighting as Kid Leo, a bantamweight. He drove Montréal whiskey trucks into the States during Prohibition, dropping them off in Troy. Everything he told me about his childhood and pre-fatherhood I remember, but he told me practically nothing. He was ashamed of it all. How like a modern Hispanic, I think – entering the country fists-first, using the temper, the rage, the untrained intelligence. His culture placed no value on education, only on obedience. He came from a wife-beating, child-beating culture, and that was my mother's lone demand, their marriage-bargain – he would never raise his hand against her, or against me, a bargain he kept until the last months of their marriage.

He never told me about his first marriage, to Delia Chartrand, in Wethersfield, Connecticut in 1925, or about their divorce in 1937, for reasons of «fear of mortal injury». My cousin Grace in Bensonhurst, now in her 70s and whom I did not meet until last year, remembers Uncle Léo and Delia in Manchester. Delia was a big, dark woman. The original marriage licence calls her a shoe-worker. Her father, Henri, lived in Manchester – did their fathers know each other? Grace, who was twelve at the time, remembers being told, «don't ever go over to Uncle Léo's alone». When I ask why, she says only «a boy shouldn't be told bad things about his father». «But I'm fifty years old», I plead. «He was supposed to go crazy around women. Then there was their baby boy who died...» «My brother», I interrupt, wonderstruck. «No», she corrects. «He was your father's boy.» A Catholic distinction, I thought then, old world. Like the stranger on the road to Comala in *Pedro Páramo*, «you're looking for your father? He's my father, too.» It is a truth acknowledged, but it does not confer

brotherhood. Men create children, but relationship is established only through mothers, who bear some moral sense.

Pedro Páramo is fiction and it's Mexican and commonly seen as a progenitor of Márquez, Fuentes and Donoso. But it's also village and Catholic and as such relates as strongly to Québec, to Marie-Claire Blais, to Anne Hébert, to Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, for example, and even to Franco-Americans like Kerouac in *Doctor Sax* and *Visions of Gerard* and Robert Cormier in *Fade* as to anything specifically Mexican, Spanish or Native American.

In other words, it is about death and fate in ways that English-speaking North Americans, call them gringos or *maudits Anglais*, can never understand.

I make a copy of every birth, every death, I study the elegant handwriting of Fathers Cousineau, Choquette, and Beaudry. Here, my father is born:

Le douze février, mil neuf cent cinq, nous, prêtre vicaire soussigné, avons baptisé Joseph Pierre Roméo né la veille, fils du légitime mariage de Achille Blais, journalier, et de Orienne Boucher, de cette paroisse. Le parrain a été Pierre Richard, et la marraine Césarie Blais, son épouse, cousin and cousine de l'enfant, qui, le père excepté, ont signé avec nous.

and compare:

Le six décembre mil huit cent quatre-vingt-douze, nous prêtre soussigné avons inhumé dans le cimetière du lieu le corps de Joseph François Homère décédé, depuis deux jours, à l'âge de dix-huit mois, fils légitime de Achille Blais et de Orienne [*sic*] Boucher de cette paroisse. Étaient présents Joseph Laroche et Achille Blais qui n'ont pas signé.

and then, in one terrible summer week in 1888:

Le vingt-neuf juillet, mil huit cent quatre-vingt-huit, nous prêtre soussigné, vicaire avons inhumé dans le cimetière du lieu le corps de Achille Blais, décédé hier, âgé de trois ans et dix mois...

and:

Le cinq août, mil huit cent quatre-vingt-huit... le corps de Orienne Blais [décédée à] l'âge de trois ans et demi...

Twins, named for their parents, dying within a week of one another. In the same August week of 1888, while the law was pursuing the Mégantic Outlaw, Marie-Alice Blais of Longue Pond, Maine, a cousin, four months old; on August 19th, Marie-Anna Blais; on August 24, Joseph-Alcide, eight months old... In one week, five children, all under the age of five, died. I had heard of the calamity, as a kind of distant tragedy, but because it had come from my father, I'd also disbelieved it.

I wonder about this family, its genetic or hygienic competence. No other family makes the same number of appearances in the parish ledgers; we have manured the cemetery with fallen children, as Faulkner might have said. Cause of death is of course never given, we are in the realm of ritual, not science. Were these sickly children, doomed like Kerouac's Gerard and Blais' Emmanuel, or was it sanitation and accident? Or violence?

Is my family especially cursed, did they live with a special sense of frailty that propelled the two surviving sons, Oliva, to France, and Léo to the farthest recesses of America, as far away from Québec and the family as they could get? My aunts remembered birthdays and holidays with Catholic greeting cards; my mother answered. What does this do to faith, to character, what sense of entitlement devolves upon survivors? And the three surviving daughters, Léna, Bella and Corinne, who go to mass every day, never to leave the same block in Manchester, New Hampshire?

All the women in the village are always pregnant. They must meet at these services for the dead, they must promise that little Marie-Alice, little Blanche, will live on, for the aunties and cousins name their next-born for the most recently fallen. In a profound way, they have found a way of cancelling death. The priest, carried away by the formula of his writing is half-way into baptizing a child before remembering it was a burial, and crosses out a line of the ledger, erasing the happy « baptisé » for the tragic « inhumé ». The eye of the modern reader must scan four or five lines before the nature of the entry reveals itself, before Mme Beaudoin can give her little cheer, or commiserate with the American *chercheur* in the back room.

In *Pedro Páramo* and in the unwritten novel of Lac-Mégantic parish records, the dead communicate with the living; the benedictions bind them together. This is the stuff of epic fiction, Russian stuff, the grief and determination, the unbowed quality that makes the modern reader cry out, «enough!» This is the stuff of India, of Central America in our times. The trail of lone, by now familiar family names snakes down the left hand columns like a row of marching ants, every year three or four «Blais» entries, one for a birth, three for deaths. This is the revenge of the cradle, but on whom is the vengeance wreaked? What does it make of the survivors, my disreputable uncle Oliva, fired a dozen times from Amoskeag Mills in Manchester before taking off for France, of my sociopath father, for example, the eighteenth and last, but for the doomed baby Rolland? Rolland lives in the family as the purest, the angel, the embodiment, yet my cousin Grace made a trip to the graveyard in Lac-Mégantic and found no records of Rolland or anyone else. They are paper deaths, ritual deaths only. All these baby bones were dumped, the physical evidence exists only in these calfbound ledgers in the anteroom of a records office in the *hôtel de ville*, a hideous 1960s style piece of Québec provincial government *bon-goûtisme*.

I only know, because the Canadian records cease in 1911. In that year they must have left for the United States; my grandfather, renamed in the time-honored American way, «Archie Blais», shows up in the Amoskeag Mills records a year later. There are no school records.

More information comes from a new cousin in my life, Jean-Marie Blais, retired *quincaillier* in Lac-Mégantic, grandson of Louis Blais, Achille's brother. «Uncle Achille worked at Bates Shoe in Maine», he tells me, out on his porch in August 1989. The giant lake glitters at our feet. His wife and grandchildren and Father Sirois, who's driven me there, sip tea with us. «Then they went to Connecticut, I heard.»

The larger sociology of French Canada and Franco-America confirms everything in my microreading of a single family. My grandfather who averaged a dollar a day in Canada settled finally in Manchester, New Hampshire, where by the 1920s he was building

fine houses on Page Street. My aunt Léna, the lone survivor of that first generation, recalls their prosperity. He built six houses in Manchester, but the Depression wiped him out. Somewhere that no one now remembers, in a year lost to the record keepers, Achille died. He was typical of his time and place, but extraordinary; his life spanned 300 years. He changed countries, languages, professions, and a way of life. He learned, by the end, to write his name.

Orienne lived with my parents in Montréal for a year. My mother remembered her as smart and jolly and religious. She passed on one question: «Why did a good woman like you marry a boy like Léo?» And my mother, a staunch, rational Protestant from Winnipeg, remembered her mother-in-law surrounding herself with candles during every thunderstorm. She died in 1939, back in Manchester. My parents left Montréal and headed west to Winnipeg. Marriage to a Frenchman was the worst thing my mother could have done; in 1939, Canada's sacred divisions of language and religion were as fervently guarded as Ulster's or Lebanon's.

He found work in the States just in time. I was born just over the border in Fargo, North Dakota in 1940, saved the curse, as he saw it, of being French Canadian.



Note

1. This text is a chapter from my book tentatively titled *Postures of Faint Amazement* to be published in 1993 by Addison-Wesley.