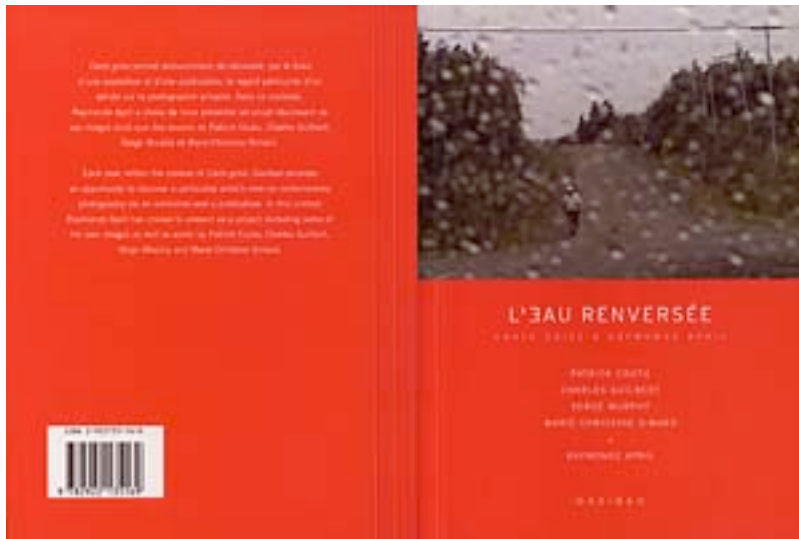


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**SUBVERTED WATER
(L'EAU RENVERSÉE)**



You walk straight ahead and the road goes round in circles. Actually, there has never been a definite goal in your life. All your goals keep changing as time passes and as locations change, and in the end the goals no longer exist. When you think about it, life in fact doesn't have what may be called ultimate goals. It's just like this hornet's nest. It's a pity to abandon it, yet if one tries to remove it one will encounter a stinging attack. Best to leave it just hanging there so that it can be admired. At this point in your thinking, your feet become lighter, it is fine wherever your feet take you, as long as there are sights to see.

Gao Xingjian, Soul Mountain.



I went to Saint-Juste-du-Lac for the first time in 1972. I was part of a team of young people from the Cégep de Rivière-du-Loup. We were interested in the early mills, flour mills, saw mills, carding mills, water- and steam-driven mills, mills in ruins. We rode in a van over pitted roads. We collected the accounts of priests and retired workers, and made slides. Travelling the back country was both extraordinary and terrifying. I wasn't making photographs back then, but quite a few films, in my head.

Those villages of the Témis—"on the Témis," people said—were on the wrong side of the tracks both geographically and politically, and the government wanted to close them down. The region had been struggling to survive since the 1930s, and had been exploited mainly by logging companies. Close the post office, cut the electricity, dishearten the inhabitants and drive them toward Trois-Pistoles, Dégelis and Cabano (where services were concentrated)—such was the master plan of the period's bureaucrats. I lived in Rivière-du-Loup. In my parent's house the word "Témiscouata" implied dire poverty, rubber boots, wood trucks, flasks of De Kuyper gin and asphalt shingle cabins. On the edge of the Saint Lawrence River, it goes without saying, we always thought we were better than the others.

From Notre-Dame-du-Lac, a tiny ferry that looked like a platform took you to Saint-Juste across Lake Témiscouata, and from there you could go on to Saint-Émile-d'Auclair, Lejeune and the region of Squatec. We made the crossing one fine, sunny day. On the other side, once we had passed the white wooden church, there were no more paved roads. Unassuming houses, stuck

here and there and visible from very far off, pointed the way to the next village. We had photographed a saw mill at Saint-Juste, but which one was that now? And why were we so intimidated by the affable people from whom we tried to extract bits of information and anecdotes? Did we imagine ourselves so different? Did we feel so out of place?

Although we didn't know it, there were already utopian communities, ecologists, hippies and hermits who had gone back to nature at Saint-Juste, Auclair and Lejeune. Opération Dignité was preparing to stand up to the schemes of the bureaucrats: it would take several years and would extend all the way to the Gaspésie. People would win back their rights to their land, their forests and their work—but for how long? The territory defined by the three villages would henceforth be known as J.A.L.

And I went off to study at university, and then to live in Montréal.



In Quebec, the entrepreneurial spirit of colonization, [the imperative] to clear land at the expense of the forests and the “wilds,” lasted up to the first third of the 20th century. Thus in the early 1930s, the Témiscouta tablelands, around what would become Saint-Juste, Auclair and Lots-Renversés, saw a vast influx of settlers whose behaviour was in keeping with a long tradition:

The settler's dwelling had to be built before he could obtain permission to bring out his family. A salary of two dollars a day was paid to workers building the cottages or working on the roads. Cooks and kitchen boys oversaw the preparation of the meals. Camp dormitories separated from dining hall camps provided nighttime shelter. As soon as a settler could, with the help of his team mates (all of whom were paid), get his house into an inhabitable condition, he obtained authorization from the missionary and made haste to bring out his family and household, whose transportation was completely paid for.

Normand Cazalais with a quote from Genèse d'une colonie québécoise 1931-1935 of Pierre-Léo Bernier in Ma cabane au Québec.



I met Patrick Coutu at UQÀM in 1995. He already knew Serge Murphy and Charles Guilbert and, like me, had played a role in Rien ne t'aura mon cœur. He was helping Serge Murphy make his sculptures, which was no mean task. Serge had spoken to me about Patrick, and about his roots in Témiscouata. Patrick's mother is a Pettigrew from Saint-Juste. Her mother's name was O'Leary. Descendants of the Irish or Scottish settlers? Patrick had shown me his photographs: landscapes, group scenes and portraits, scenes from memory, sculpture studies, vernacular constructions from which he extrapolated complicated stories. He had just turned twenty. He had spent all his summers in Saint-Juste, in a cottage built by his father on the edge of the lake, close to the Pettigrew farm. I was looking for a remote place where I could put some order into my piles of

photographs and make my way toward what would become my film *Tout embrasser*. The memory of the platform crossing the immense lake had never left me, nor had the vision of the dirt roads rising up vertically before our eyes. I was able to rent Patrick's parents' cottage for two weeks, and arrived there on a Sunday in July, 1997. I went back four years in a row, and friends came there to see me, people who, for the most part, had never in their lives set foot in Témiscouata.

It's a long way from Montréal to Saint-Juste. First you have to go to Rivière-du-Loup on Highway 20. Then you turn away from the river and go straight south on Highway 185 to Notre-Dame-du-Lac. You take the ferry, leaning on the guard rail to get the most out of the ride. On the other shore you climb a steep slope and, after passing the Chômage Road, continue on past the campground instead of going up into the village. In front of a farm building in grey sheet metal, you turn down toward the cottage. You leave the car in front and go down a series of steps—in wood, then stone, then wood again—until you reach the lake. You enter the lake.

In front of you, in the direction of Cabano, three identical columns of smoke rise from the Cascades factories. Motorboats go by in the distance, some with streamlined roofs that call to mind Pharaonic ships. The wind picks up. There are no flies or mosquitoes. Let's go get the bags out of the car.



Reality exists only through experience, and it must be personal experience. However, once related, even personal experience becomes a narrative. Reality can't be verified and doesn't need to be, that can be left for the "reality-of-life" experts to debate. What is important is life. Reality is simply that I am sitting by the fire in this room which is black with grime and smoke and that I see the light of the fire dancing in his eyes. Reality is myself, reality is only the perception of this instant and it can't be related to another person. All that needs to be said is that outside, a mist is enclosing the green-blue mountain in a haze and your heart is reverberating with the rushing water of a swift-flowing stream.

Gao Xingjian, Soul Mountain.

The coregonus is a fish commonly found in Lake Témiscouata. It is also called the pointu, on account of its pointed muzzle. This species swims up the tributaries in October. Then a night-time fishing exhibition is organized, preceded by community meals, all sorts of activities and a parade down the main street: this is the Festival du pointu de Saint-Juste-du-Lac.

During the summer, the ferry Le Corégone makes the crossing from Notre-Dame-du-Lac to Saint-Juste-du-Lac. This venture spares travellers a detour of some forty kilometers. The ferry service is not very profitable and is constantly threatened with being phased out. But every year Le Corégone, a symbol of rootedness for the population of the J.A.L., comes back with its crew of the same four employees, whom it is always a pleasure to see again. The ship's deck is a meeting place for farmers, summer visitors, couriers in their vans and old hippies in their pickups. The trip lasts only fifteen minutes, and you never lose sight of either shore. Yet the contrast between the two sides is striking. The road leading to Saint-Juste is steep and strikes off immediately toward inland.

During the winter, locals, to avoid going the long way around, cross the frozen lake in their cars and trucks. But the trip is quite unnerving and more than one driver, breaking out into a cold sweat, has been tempted to go flat out. Sometimes a nasty, cracking sound is heard. The lake is deep, and the underwater currents very strong. Trucks that break through are never seen again, nor are the drowned. At least that is what you hear, leaning on the railing of the Corégone, drifting toward Saint-Juste.



The plane of immanence is like a section of chaos and acts like a sieve. In fact, chaos is characterized less by the absence of determinations than by the infinite speed with which they take shape and vanish. This is not a movement from one determination to the other but, on the contrary, the impossibility of a connection between them, since one does not appear without the other having already disappeared, and one appears as disappearance when the other disappears as outline. Chaos is not an inert or stationary state, nor is it a chance mixture. Chaos makes chaotic and undoes every consistency in the infinite. The problem of philosophy is to acquire a consistency without losing the infinite into which thought plunges (in this respect chaos has as much a mental as a physical existence). To give consistency without losing anything of the infinite....

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, What is Philosophy?

When I was little I thought it was L'Eau Renversée. But this crossroads is actually called Lots-Renversés, because the lots or parcels of land slated for settlement were marked off at a right angle to those of Saint-Juste. Lots-Renversés is part of Saint-Juste, whose total population has been recorded at 677. Wherever you may want to go from Saint-Juste—toward Auclair and Squatec, Trois-Pistoles and Rimouski, or Dégelis and Edmundston—you have to pass by Lots-Renversés, or “the Lots.” Each time I go by there, and even each time I attempt to relate the experience when back in Montréal, I feel a catching in my throat and find it hard to contain my emotions.

It begins with a roller-coaster ride over a series of steep hills that rise up one after the other. From the top of the first hill you see the second one with its five white houses, while behind that, the third rises to gradually reveal a distant horizon caught in the gap of a cliff cut through with dynamite. And then it becomes more intense. Coming out the far side of this sculpted portal, you immediately pick out, up ahead to the left, a giant saw mill surrounded by ponds, while something resembling a village appears on the right. At the same time you sense, before you actually see, spaces fanning out swiftly below the road, and you feel as if you were suspended in the void. Below, a huge untidy space drops away to each side, strewn with piles of logs going off in all directions like gigantic snakes. You can't slow down and stop in the middle of it all, nor can you manage to look up ahead and to both sides at once, yet this is what it would take. You have to keep going all the way to the bottom, to the stop sign where the roads cross and then turn right or left toward Dégelis (the lake) or Auclair (the woods).

You can try to understand by turning back toward the blasted gap in the cliff, or you can come back along the road from the other direction. But what happens here cannot really be grasped from the other side. I have tried to photograph it several times, but it simply defies representation: all I get are variations on the colour of the sky, the position of the sun and the flow of trucks and tractors. I have also filmed the descent several times, but the sudden gap in the land that follows the passage through the rocky door resists to the motion of the camera. Nor is slow motion any help. It's too late: the present is past.



Some images carve out a tiny hole in our heads. — Sometimes I wonder whether it's really possible to represent life and its little trinkets, or the passing days, or animals. When I observe others carefully, whether they are sipping coffee and reading a newspaper, or buying a winter coat in March, I tell myself that these things are worthy of reflection. I sometimes feel as if I were the pivot of a fragile merry-go-round that turns in slow motion. Dizzy from this insistent ballet, and drifting toward another me, I attempt to fix these images, collecting them and juxtaposing transparencies of them haphazardly, in a joyful disorder.

Serge Murphy, Carrousels.

Serge Murphy and Charles Guilbert have come to Saint-Juste several times. And each time they turn everything upside down. They drop their wet towels everywhere: in fact, they leave them wherever they happen to fall. They settle down at the big kitchen table to paint watercolours. Their dog Castor dives for the rocks we throw into the lake for her, and nags Ti-Mousse, Mister Pettigrew's nearly paralyzed old dog. In the evening, just when we begin to feel perky, they decide that they're tired and no longer want to drink or stay up. I am left alone in my tiny room, where I listen, terrified, to the lake lapping, as if the bones of the drowned were clicking together in the water below my window.

Serge and Charles, along with Adrienne, have often known rainy weeks, as if summer had it in for us. Adrienne grows up swiftly and her interests change accordingly, shifting from brightly coloured spiders to oversized shoes, and from red bikes to little friends. During the long, wet days, Serge and Charles have filmed a number of scenes for a new video, making use of whatever happened to be around and calling upon Adrienne for silent or speaking parts. They have made a way of life out of the gift they have for loving and upsetting at the same time, for celebrating cliché and turning the sublime into ridicule (or vice-versa). Constantly on the look-out, they are merciless when it comes to half measures, hesitations and quibbles. Absurdity and bombast go hand in hand, improvisation takes care of details, and moments of singular grace continue to fill us with joy. In the failures and reworkings of the unused scenes that I have made my own, the landscape of Saint-Juste reappears as a cameo, as a bizarre background; neither a subject nor truly a setting, it is like a kind of objective and thematic datum that you want to forget in order to take off. The spinning wheel brought out into a field, a boat at the end of a stick, two twin toasters—that is Murphy all over. In a flash, the field, the lake and cottage are back within their lots.



There are no tides on the lake, although sometimes there are waves almost as high as those on the Saint Lawrence River. Charles Guilbert films the rain, the gutters, the wind and the waves as part of his work on tears. He begins filming a documentary on Le Corégone and assiduously shows up to interview the shy crew of the ferry. He and Adrienne strike up a friendship with a young cabinetmaker and father, his Cambodian wife and their children. Serge prefers to read the fourteen (?) volumes of Renaud Camus's memoirs in his deckchair. We managed to have dinner outside only once last summer, either because of bats, high winds, cold, rain, farm smells or God knows what.





Bound together for better or worse, they disdained nothing. Their beautiful hands separated to do housework, to sow the seeds of the garden, to varnish the furniture, to shine up and put a lustre upon every marvel of their small and blessed universe.

I got up at six o'clock. My Beloved and I went to the garden. We sowed three kinds of cucumber seeds. We put oil upon the parlour table, with the assistance of the "Spinhamland" which we received. We dined in the kitchen to allow the oiled table to dry. A comfortable and fine dinner of cold lamb and mutton. We found Margaret (the cow) at the gate waiting to come in: we opened it for her. We took a walk around the meadow and came back by the lane... The country is marvellous.

Colette, with a quote from Eleanor Butler's Journal, in The Pure and the Impure.

Usually it is to her cabin in La Conception that Marie-Christine Simard retreats. Located in the middle of a pine forest close to a river, the Red River, in which you can swim, the cabin is without electricity. One day Marie-Christine and Christine will build a bread oven. But there's no rush. A lot of work remains to be done outside, and here in the Laurentians there are lots of bugs and you don't always have the energy to fight them off, even passively.

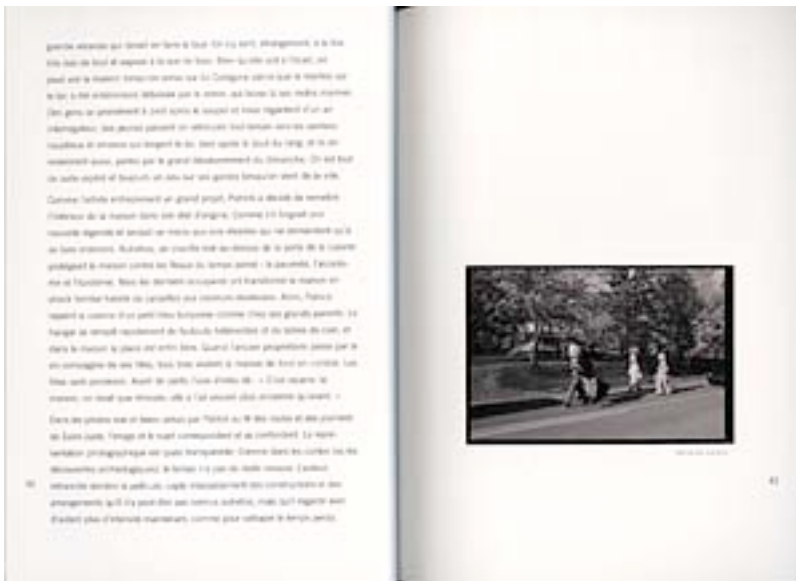
On the path that runs along Lake Témiscouata, the women advance leaning on their sticks. They carry video and photo cameras, a watercolour pad and containers for wild strawberries, and nothing escapes their notice. Here life ripens like a fruit, full and delicious. It's one long celebration, and we gather images as we go, without taking away any of the pleasure. Marie-Christine Simard's images exist before Saint-Juste, are found there as if they were hiding from everyone but her. They are Apollonian, as fine as the mind, as modulated as an ode, in perfect balance on the air. They tame the space by keeping always at the same distance, close enough to discern the ongoing activity of the spiders and ants in the grass, yet far enough to make you want to get closer. Fawns and hares come to be photographed by her.

In Squatec, two old ladies keep a store selling odds and ends, T-shirts from 1966, lottery tickets and sewing articles. This is the 5-10-15 (3), just in front of the church and the co-op, and not very far from the most enormous saw mill of Squatec. The ladies are dry and peevish and take a lively interest in new visitors. They believe—or pretend to believe, like investigators—that we are three sisters out on an excursion.

Marie-Christine Simard is a regulating principle of existence, and her calm and clairvoyant mind can adapt to any situation. Perhaps she is preparing an encyclopaedia on life and things. Who knows if her work will contain some pictures of her stay in Saint-Juste, when she and Christine were driving down to Nova Scotia?



Today she is on duty at Concordia. She has been doing so all week in fact, since David dislocated his wrist and Jojo went off to Vermont to do a workshop on digital printing with Cone Impressions. She answers students' questions and gets them what they need to work (lenses and negative carriers for enlargers, light kits or 4 x 5 cameras for their shoots), in addition to answering the phone, reserving equipment, removing twisted test strips from the colour machine and ensuring that a host of tiny problems are resolved. The students also ask her opinion of their images, and hang around her door to discuss any number of things large and small.



I am aware that at this moment I am surrounded by a world of dead people, and that behind this wall are my dead relatives. I want to be with them again, to sit at the table with them and listen to them chatting about trifling things. I want to hear their voices, to see their eyes, to actually sit at the table with them, even if we don't have a meal. I know that eating and drinking in the world of ghosts is symbolic, a ritual, and that living people cannot partake of it, but it suddenly occurs to me that just to be able to sit at the table and to listen would be a blessing. I creep up to them but as I cross the ruins of the wall, they get up and quietly vanish behind another wall. I hear their departing footsteps, rustling, even see the empty table they leave behind. Instantly the table is covered in velvety moss, breaks, cracks, then collapses into a heap of rubble and bushes sprout all over it.

Gao Xingjian, Soul Mountain.

Left alone, the house stands quietly among the weeds, in the wind. The doors are padlocked, but you can see inside through the window. There's nothing to see. Everything is bleached, stripped, scraped down to the bone. The house is as clean and dry as driftwood. There is a chrome table in the centre of the kitchen, and a faded plaid shirt hangs from the back of the one chair.

Patrick Coutu bought the last house on the road, known as the "bank's house", because its first owner was unable to pay his bills. Covered with imitation brick shingles, the house has an oversized roof: the man who built it never got started on the large veranda that was to go all the way around it. Here you feel, strangely enough, far from everything yet exposed to every gaze. Although it is off the road, you can see the house from Le Corégone because the hill on the lake has been cleared of trees by the neighbour, who leaves his motorboats there. People out for after-dinner walks eye us quizzically. Youths on all-terrain vehicles pass by on their way to the winding, rocky paths that lie beyond the end of the road, then make their way back, drawn by the yawning idleness of Sunday. We are immediately spotted, and are somewhat on our guard because we are from the city.

Like an artist undertaking a great project, Patrick has decided to return the interior of the house to its original state. It is as if he were forging a new legend and holding out a microphone to faint voices that ask for nothing more than to be heard. In former days, a black crucifix above the kitchen door protected the house against the plagues of yesteryear: poverty, alcoholism and epidemics. But the last occupants transformed the house into a family shack laid with carpets of dubious colours. So Patrick repaints the kitchen a turquoise blue, the kind he's seen at his grandparents' house. The shed soon fills up with an odd assortment of armchairs and corner tables, and the room in the house is finally free. When the former owner stops by with his daughters, all three visit the house, top to bottom. Before leaving, one of the girls says, "It's strange but, renovated, the house looks a lot older than before."

In the black and white photographs that Patrick has taken during his time in and around Saint-Juste, the image and the corresponding subject meld into one. Photographic representation becomes almost transparent. As in stories (or archaeological discoveries), time cannot really be measured. The artist, hidden behind the camera, untiringly captures constructions and arrangements that he may not have known previously, but he looks with greater intensity, as if he were trying to catch up with lost time.



My grandmother went to the movies only once. The film related the adventures of a married woman who fell for a young shepherd. The husband was bald. He drank cognac constantly and ceaselessly lost his temper. The young shepherd had fine curly hair. He knew how to amuse the children with simple objects: a pebble, a string, a piece of wood. My grandmother preferred the lover to the husband. Her toes turned outwards in her leather shoes. My grandmother quickly realized that these stories were going nowhere.

Charles Guilbert, Les Inquiets.

During each stay in Saint-Juste-du-Lac, I have this intense and unaccountable feeling of coming face to face with nameless tragedies amidst this rustic beauty, along the dirt roads skirting the lakes and valleys, with cords of wood stretching off endlessly on the horizon. It is at the highest point of these sunny days, with their pleasant odours of clover and fir resin, that this feeling is strongest. Driving through the countryside I am unable to linger, so I go on casting furtive glances at the houses and woods; then I stop, exchange a few words with the man or woman at the grocer's before leaving, and everything returns to normal.

The skeletal beauty of the settlement houses, the comings and goings of the logging machines, tractors and wood trucks, the undulating outlines of storm clouds which come from so far away

on the horizon that they never burst at the place you expect—all this composes and defines the landscape. But what haunts it are its buried and secret narratives. Those old men who walk along the road in the rain, those mothers leaving the corner store with their three children, the boys at the gas pumps wiping their hands with a blackened rag, the teenagers gathered in small clusters for the arrival of the ferry, the families piled together on the outboards on Sunday afternoons, or the fathers with their sons in rowboats in the evening after dinner—they live a life that is, for us, impenetrable, although it is interesting no matter how you look at it.



All that I will never be, that I would never want to be, that questions me in some way, that derides me or couldn't care less about me, comes together in this anarchic and arid landscape. Saint-Juste will not let itself be known or taken. Besides, why should it be otherwise? Through a double effect of displacement, it is here that I feel the laceration of having left those close to me, of being uprooted, even if it was not to go very far. And of having thereby missed something. But what?

Our first days back in Montréal, still used to being alone, visible from a distance and untouched, we bump into passers-by on the Plateau Mont-Royal, strident echoes of ourselves. Our time resumes.

translated by Donald McGrath

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