

FRS
(from *Minding the Darkness*)

II.ii

As an only child
 whose father was often absent
 I studied his ways

not just on fishing trips
 when from the back of the canoe
 he showed how to twist the paddle

silently in the water
 so as not to scare the loon
 or when at Lachute

how to make the boomerang
 float through the blue air
 to drop at our feet

I remember his netted sling
 I thought of him as David
 when the round pebble sailed

far over the cedars
 and in his absences
 at meetings to make things better

for prisoners poets
 then hopefully all Canada
 through the CCF Party Cooperative Commonwealth Federation

I knew that he had angered
 not just the Montreal police
 or the McGill Board of Governors

when he spoke up against
 the attack with truncheons
 on the march of the unemployed

but sometimes friends and allies
with his dominant will
Why even he confessed
how when he and his brothers
camped in the wild country
up the Murray River
they would climb to a cliff top
and topple huge boulders
to crash through the forest beneath—
a side to the law professor
and defender of human rights
against the excesses
of the Prime Minister of Quebec
not everyone knew about
(he candidly admitted
that even in wilderness
you couldn't be certain
there was no one else around)
It must have been Frank who showed
how to rock a rotting tree trunk
slowly backwards and forwards
finding and feeding the rhythm
that would finally bring it down
in a chaos of broken branches
and the first time I did it on my own
in front of four young girls
as the pine began to fall
there leapt out from a hole near the top
one two three four five a whole family
of flying squirrels
as I looked in the feral eyes
of the youngest sister
I saw myself as demiurge
and believed for a moment with Goethe
that to discover the mysteries
of nature one must violate them

Was there something in our line
that was tempted by decay
to bring it crashing down?

When after Kent State
and Nixon's invasion of Cambodia
I moved the faculty amendment
to suspend all campus teaching
and the Governor responded in rage
did I pause even for a second
to ask What have we wrought?
and though by acting out
that particular drama I still believe
we avoided the violence
that divided teachers from students
at Harvard and Columbia

I have finally seen this moment
why Milosz remembering
the gangs of Central Europe
turned his back on me then
the same year my father
in the *Crise d'Octobre*

Quebec crisis 1970

counseled Pierre Trudeau
to invoke the War Measures Act
and for the sake of law
to suspend due process
while rounding up leaders and poets
even the chanteuse Pauline Julien
who lived near us at North Hatley
and sang for the anti-war movement
My mother who like myself
took the part of those arrested
understood better than my father
that his paranoid fear
(giving her a US \$50 dollar bill
and saying *Meet me in Rouse's Point
across the border*

if we get separated
and if the rioters
have not closed all the bridges
off Montreal island)
 went back to that week of terror
 Quebec City in 1917
 six days of martial law
 from the conscription riots
 and before that the gangs speaking *joual*
 that used to wait for him
 on his way home from school
 Must our states become engines
 of self-fulfilling paranoia
 driving peoples apart?
 I remember my father's sling
 it was just before she died
 my mother told me
 how police had come to the door
 of St. Matthew's Rectory
 in the Upper Town of Quebec
 to show my grandfather the Archdeacon
 the stone that had broken a window
 in the French-speaking Lower Town
 the same year my father
 obsessed with the explosiveness
 of guns and gunpowder
 stuffed one with the other
 yanked the trigger with a long string
 to which nothing happened
 till all at once the gun
 blew up in his arms and face
 not even the special train
 from his uncle the Vice-President
 of the Grand Trunk Railway
 that took him from Quebec to Montreal
 could save his eye and his ear

Québécois

1917

Nothing not even the fire
 has affected me like that
 I escaped in World War Two
when by accident I bicycled
 through the middle of what turned out later
 to have been a conscription riot
with no worse than catcalls after me
 and I have learned from experience
 how even a rotting pine trunk
may be someone's home
 while my father a rugged man
 beloved by many
though usually from outside
 with a mind sometimes benign
 or else volcanic with frustration
from his failure to build
 the Blakean commonwealth
 of the Anglican Hymnal
I will not cease from mortal strife
 sung by a whole football stadium
 on the Pink Floyd record
a poet with his own voice
 and also that older voice
 Till we have built
Jerusalem
 speaking in Wordsworth's dream
 of apocalyptic deluge
approached his death struggling
 with almost prophetic forces
 from something unfulfilled
inside of him still cursing

ii

the mindfulness
of fire-tending

taught me by my father
the importance

of not resorting to paper
how in a rainstorm
to split softwood with an axe
and kindle with splinters
from the tree's core
or with a penknife
to whittle dead twigs
for their inner shavings
how birchbark
will burn when wet
the secret
inner heart
of that public man

[*Minding the Darkness* is the sequel to *Coming to Jakarta* (1988)
and *Listening to the Candle* (1992)]