

## AT THE TOP OF THE CITY

John Woolfrey

To the memory of Kent

*And that arctic air mass can linger well into spring.*

THE SKY AT THE TOP OF THE CITY was made of bands of aluminum and pewter. It pressed down against the burial party, dropping handfuls of snowflakes that the wind caught and blew into our eyes. “Færie dust,” murmured Michael, as he stared through a gap between the mourners. I smiled and looked at him. His black, wiry hair was all frosted by the snow, and tiny snowflake crumbs slid down his red down jacket. His face was red, too, but not from the cold—Michael’s face is often red.

Rows of graves rolled away from us over the gentle slopes of Mount Royal. Beyond them bare grey-brown hardwoods covered the other two summits, and the distant hush of the city encompassed us.

We didn’t know any of the family. We hardly knew Justin. But Michael was adamant about going. “It’s time I faced up to it, James. Unlike you, I’ve never been to anybody’s funeral—always avoided them. But now I wanna see what it’s like.” Michael’s doctor found PML in his brain. No cure for that one. Little by little the body becomes paralyzed, until the brain shuts down. He might live for as much as another year. I heard him tell me all that last month, but none of it made any sense to me.

Since I knew Justin—though only a little—he asked me to go with him. I felt odd about going to the big Catholic church. “He was just a trick!” I’d protested. “Not just a trick, James,” replied Michael. “You got to know a little something about Justin when you met him at Christmas. Not just about his body but about his fears. Something I never knew when I saw him back in Vancouver at clubs and in my HIV-doctor’s office. Between the two of us we knew him a bit.” Then, with very steady and serious eyes, he’d implored, “Just come with me, okay?”

So here we were, watching the family of another queer we barely knew toss earth into his grave. When they’d all taken turns, the woman who I guess was his mother broke down on the shoulder of the man next to her. A guy who looked like a slightly older, less good-looking, version of Justin just stared into the grave.

“Okay, let’s go,” whispered Michael. I nodded. As we walked away he added, “We’ll cross over into the Protestant cemetery and then down to Saint-Laurent Boulevard for food.

It was early April. The winter’s snow had almost all melted away during the thaw of the last few weeks, but a last gasp of arctic air had rushed back in hard and fast during the night—the grave diggers had had just enough time to turn the earth. The sloping roads of the cemetery were shiny black from runoff that had frozen in its tracks, and we avoided slipping on it by crossing over hardened mud and brown grass, trying not to trample too many graves along the way.

We wended our way east like that until we came upon the fence that separated the two cemeteries, where the uniform headstones of soldiers’ graves were laid out in rows and columns on either side. We passed through the gate with its forged-metal posts, each capped by ornate crowns. Michael stopped. “Look,” he said. “The only reason there’s a gate here at all is to let military workers care for the graves of both the Catholic soldiers on one side and the Protestant soldiers on the other. You can bet there’d be no other reason for Catholic and Protestant cemeteries to communicate!”

“Hunh.” Typical of Michael to notice something like that, I thought. “You’re probably right. They probably didn’t let people roam about up here a hundred years ago.” Today the gate serves as a shortcut for hikers and skiers. Michael and I often take walks up here, especially in the spring, when all’s abloom with crab apple, cherry and, a few weeks later, lilac. It’s a beautiful, calm place to be, almost like the country. Like now. But I couldn’t help thinking this coming spring would probably be our last time here together. A cemetery, of all places. But his disease still doesn’t make sense to me. And then, as we stared at the graves, and as though he read my mind, Michael said, “Imagine a graveyard like this, only instead of soldiers it’s all the gay men who died of AIDS in this city.”

We stood still, not speaking, just being quiet. We couldn’t hear the city from this sheltered corner. Some chickadees twittered, and the wind blew through the bare tree limbs.

Suddenly, Michael looked at me. “Did you smell that?”

“Incense? It was just a whiff. I wasn’t sure if I imagined it.”

“Wow. Hey,” he added, brightening. “That gives me an idea. And I bet it’s coming from up there. Come on, I wanna show you something.”

“Where,” I asked, warily.

“Up there.” He pointed to the hilltop above us.

“I’m cold,” I protested.

“Come on,” Michael insisted. “You’ll warm up as we climb.”

After a few minutes of panting up the steep incline, we found the Chinese grave before which a pile of frankincense was smouldering away. “There it is!” he said. We climbed some more until we reached the bare top of the Greek section. It was the second-highest summit of Mount Royal; the view was almost panoramic. We could see the other two summits, the rows and rows of the grey Plateau Mont-Royal district fading into the east like shale, and the St. Lawrence River in the southwest and again in the northeast. Grey cloud bottoms sat over it all.

“Look at this city, James. I just want to show you—though I know you already know—what a weird and wonderful place Montreal is. Those soldiers’ graves with a fence running through them, and the whiff of church incense coming out of nowhere—they just reminded me of how bizarre and mysterious this city is. And up here, on Mount Royal, it’s all summed up.”

I wondered what gems his brain had dug up over the course of his two years here. His face was getting tense, earnest looking; his eyebrows were making *V*’s, and he started to talk more loudly. “What do you mean?” I asked, knowing that was the prompt he wanted.

“For starters, what you call your ‘mountain’ is really just a tiny lump of three hills, right?”

“Yeah ... ”

“Three in one. Like a trinity. How perfect for your Catholic city, *n’est-ce pas*? And each lump has its own, special monument built on it. Over here on the northern one where we are—or is it west. I can never tell in this crazy city with its river-oriented grid that makes the sun set in the north! Anyway, on this hill you have the huge cock of the Université de Montréal tower sticking up all *bandé*<sup>1</sup>, right?”

I looked at the art-deco university tower with its yellow-brick shaft and smooth, shiny, half-sphere head. It reminded me of all those mornings riding with my father to my English university on the other side of the mountain; we’d drive up Darlington, and there it would be, dead ahead and tall and as erect as what I usually had in my jeans that time of day, thanks to the jiggling of the car and my seventeen years. Looking at it anew, I noticed a slight bulge just below the top. “It even has a foreskin,” I said.

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<sup>1</sup> Erect, particularly a penis

Michael giggled. “James! Anyway, over there on the southern mound there’s the enormous breast of the dome of St. Joseph’s Oratory.”

Through the tree branches we could see the larger-than-life stone shrine a kilometre away, its dome a dull green just beneath the clouds. “I suppose you’re going to say the cross on top its big, erect nipple is its body piercing,” I added.

“That’s good!” he giggled some more. “Now shut up and listen. Finally, on the highest hill, ‘lord’-ing it over the other two as well as the entire city, is that damn cross.”

Together we looked over the cemetery at the cross on top of the park. I thought of something he might not be aware of: “Bet you didn’t know the cross’s lights turn purple when Popes die,” I said.

“Get out!”

“Really!”

Michael shook his head and laughed some more. “That’s so funny. See what I mean?”

I smiled and nodded. “And from Roy Street,” I went on, getting into the spirit of it, “those two TV transmission towers flanking the cross look the thieves who were crucified with Christ. A giant Calvary!”

Michael added, “Maybe the one that looks like the devil’s trident is the one who cursed Jesus.”

We giggled and laughed some more. “TV tower!” howled Michael. “Trannies!!!” Finally we both sighed.

“Isn’t it great? You got this trinity mountain, one with a cock, another with a boob, and the highest with an S&M scene! Fantastic! What an ad for Sex City.

“Michael!” I exclaimed. You’re nuts!”

“I know. But think about it.... Crazy, crazy town!”

“Yeah. It is.”

The sun broke out and we fell silent. The city hummed dully down in the distance. A Greek family, an old woman in black among them, was tidying up a grave nearby and changing the flowers.

“You know which one I love the best?” said Michael, quietly.

“Which one what?” I asked.

“The Oratory,” he replied.

“Oh yeah.” Michael had an obsession with it.

“It’s so wonderfully bizarre. How many places in North America do people come from hundreds of miles to climb up hundreds of steps on their knees to get healed? Since you took me there when I first came to Montreal, I always show it to my friends who come to visit. That hot room with all the votive candles, the steps, the escalators, Frère André’s pickled heart! And the outdoor Way of the Cross with the Pascal Lamb’s swimming pool at the top, where you can just sit on a summer’s day and imagine you’re on a hillside in Italy, the trees obscuring the view of the land stretching away.

“Remember that organ recital we came for last spring? The sun was about to set, and as your friend started his Bach toccatta on that magnificent organ in the Oratory’s vast space, the sun streamed in like laser beams through the doors and into our eyes.”

“I was floating,” I murmured.

“And we got to it from above and behind—from Westmount. I’ll never forget the first time you took me that way. Climbing up and up from The Boulevard in your little car, English-looking Westmount with its Gothic mansions all squished onto that tiny hill. We drove around the top, through its forest of streets, turned a corner, and all of a sudden this huge green dome just appeared—looming on the edge of the hill, like some monstrous alien, Catholic spaceship poised

to devour unsuspecting Protestant Westmount! As though the anglo west wrapped itself around one side of the mountain, and the francophone east wrapped itself around the other side, and that's where they met. What a fantastic collision of Quebec-Catholic extravagance and picturesque WASP tastefulness!

"Oh, I love this city," he went on. "It's such a playground. A real party town, everyone says it is." Then he looked north again. "One night I was driving back from the Laurentians, eager to get back to the clubs. As I was leaving the foothills—just before Saint-Jérôme—I could see the city in the distance. All lit up at night, it looked like one big party: the skyscrapers to the left, lots of different lights way to the right, and in between the lights of the road that runs over the park—from the distance they looked like a string of party lights. And with the beams of light from the beacon on the Place Ville-Marie building swinging over it all, the whole thing looked like a giant amusement park!"

I'd seen that view a million times coming back to town from the cottage. He was right. It did look like an amusement park.

"And then here, on the mountain, we queers have our own "Garden of Wonders." Right smack below the cross. Acres and acres of land spread out below our 'Calvary.' Jesus must be very pleased to have all those men on their knees, don't you think?"

"Oooh, Michael!"

"And it's all so deliciously pagan," he went on. "Men hunting each other through the steamy, still woods on hot July afternoons, scrambling up and down steep cliffs, the blue St. Lawrence in the distance. Men listening for the sounds of each other and the clop-clop of cops' horses, picking up the scent of a cigarette, moving stealthily; stalking. All to the beat of the *tam-tams*<sup>2</sup> way down below on Park Avenue, where the not-so-straight straights perform their pagan dance rights around the foot of the statue of winged Victory. Men hunting—not to kill, but for each other's lust."

"Mmmm."

"And then, over on the edge of the park, by the Molson monument in the cemetery—where else but by the tallest phallus in the whole goddamn cemetery would you find queers? Huh! We spend our lives drinking Molson beer in the bars, sucking cock by the Molson family grave—some of us even go to their church—and if we're rich enough, we can be buried near them."

"I never thought of that," I managed to get out between laughs.

Then Michael fell silent. The wind blew. I shivered. The clouds had once more sealed the sky. I looked at my friend. "I'm cold and hungry," I whined.

We started forward again. As we went down the steep hill and past the soldiers' graves again, Michael mumbled, "Hunh!"

"What?"

"These cemeteries. I just noticed it. You Montrealers spend your whole lives more or less apart, the English in the west and the French in the east; but when you die the English get buried in their Protestant cemetery on the east side of the mountain, and the French go to their Catholic one on the west side—just the opposite!"

"Hunh," I said. "I never thought of it. Do you think that cancels out all the squabbling?"

We kept on walking. "What a funny city this is. I don't wanna leave it," he said.

"What d'ya mean, leave it?" I demanded.

Michael turned to me, smiling fondly. "You know that PML isn't gonna go away, Willy. I already have trouble writing. It's only gonna get worse, not better."

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<sup>2</sup> Drum circle

My eyes immediately swelled, my sinuses ached, my cheeks turned hot. I didn't want my lips to tremble in front of him. I didn't know what I could say. I just sort of hooked his arm with mine and said, "You'll never leave us, you nutcase." Then I pulled. "Let's get outta here!"

"Okay," Michael said, as I hauled him forward. But a grin began to stretch across his face. I knew he had another weird idea. "Hey, know what?" he began. "When I die I want you to scatter my ashes from the tallest cliff in the cruising area below Calvary... "

"Michael!" I groaned, rolling my eyes.

"... and the neon cross that turns purple when Popes die can be my marker!"

I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. The only thing that made any sense to me right now was that my friend Michael was very much alive—and that I'd kill him soon if he didn't stop all this nonsense.

"Will you shut up!" I screamed, and we ran as a sudden, thick snow flurry blew us across the cemetery and down to the Main<sup>3</sup>.

*Published in Future Tense: New English Fiction from Quebec, edited by Denise Roig and Ray Beauchemin, Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1997. Also included in a reading list for a course on Montreal literature at the Université de Montréal (along with Leonard Cohen, Mordecai Richler, Denys Arcand, Gabrielle Roy, Hugh MacLennan and more).*

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<sup>3</sup> Saint-Laurent Boulevard: The street that marks the difference between the French side on the east and the English side on the west.