

WORKING IN THE BATHTUB

Conversations with the Immortal Dany Laferrière

by Adam Leith Gollner

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EXCERPT

In the text of *How to Make Love To A Negro Without Getting Tired*, you described the act of writing that book as your only chance. It needed to be, you felt, “the masterpiece that will get you out of your hole.”

For me, that’s what this space here represents. I can tell you the story of this universe, carré Saint-Louis, rue Saint-Denis, 3670 rue Saint-Denis, across the street from rue Cherrier, and Café Cherrier, the little boutiques on Saint-Denis below Sherbrooke, the park itself, with its small fountain, its wildlife, the people, the vagrants, the neighbourhood’s bourgeois residents, the travellers passing through, the young women from the anglo part of town, from McGill, who come to this part of town looking for adventure.

All that is in my books, as it is in reality. *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired* is a dog pissing, demarcating its territory. It’s the only territory I marked off in Montreal. And even when there are events that don’t occur here in my other books, I return here. This space here is the space of conquest. Conquest from below. The conquest of the poor—but conquest nonetheless. It’s not Balzac’s *À nous deux, Paris*. It’s just a man, a young man, alone, who believes that the things he names belong to him. Or that he belongs to the things he names. By describing them in my writing, I belong to this space here. At the start, I believed that I was writing my books, that my books were coming from me, but in time I ended up realizing that I myself came from my books. That’s it. We see things; they belong to us. We put them in books and find ourselves within those things as a narrator. And then we belong to those things. These two moments are the grand lesson of literature. It’s more interesting to belong to things than to have things belong to us. It’s more relaxing. When things belong to us, we have to protect the treasure. But when we belong to things, it’s up to things to protect us, so we can sleep in peace. *Tout le temps qu’on ne possède pas, on peut dormir en paix.*

In *The Return*, you write: “The only place I feel completely at home is in this scalding water that warms my bones.” The protagonist even sleeps in the bathtub.

It starts with him reading Césaire in the bath, and it ends in a hammock, beneath apricot trees, in the paradise of the Caribbean Indians. From the tub to the hammock. It’s not a metaphor. It’s not a manner of speech. It’s something physical. I have the impression of being a man lying prone. Always a bit of a dreamer. I think that’s where the essence is, in that activity of the senses. The essence lies in the immobility that constitutes the saying I love most, that I cite most often, that of Heraclitus: “The sleeper constructs the universe.”

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