

*Jean-François Beauchemin*

Turkana Boy

*Translated from French by Jessica Moore*

*Jean-François Beauchemin has been called “one of the best-kept secrets” of québécois literature. He is the recipient of the 2005 Prix France-Québec/Jean Hamelin for *Le jour des corneilles* and the 2007 Prix des libraires for *La fabrication de l’aube*. He lives in Sainte-Anne-des-Lacs, Québec, and writes fiction, autobiography and poetry—none of which have previously been translated.*

*The multifaceted and often surreal novel, *Turkana Boy*, weaves poetry and prose together in an unusually nuanced style to trace the sorrow (and continued wonder) of Monsieur Bartolomé after his twelve-year-old son’s mysterious disappearance. The title refers to an archaeological event in the 1980s when the remains of a boy, approximately the same age as his son and belonging to the species *Homo ergaster*, were found near the shores of Lake Turkana in Kenya. This discovery (though touched upon only briefly in the novel) holds significance for Monsieur Bartolomé, who sees in the lives of these two boys—separated by nearly two million years—a sort of twin destiny. Beyond the immediate space of loss, Beauchemin’s distinctive hero muses on all manner of subjects, punctuating the story with magnificent questions, which are the crux of both the poetry and Monsieur Bartolomé’s search for something greater than himself.*

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14. And then one day, something terrible happened.

Monsieur Bartolomé lost his son. On that day, the child, now twelve years old, disappeared without a trace. No one saw him again. Did he run away? Was he kidnapped? Had there been an accident? No one knew for certain.

There was an investigation, of course; leads were followed, all of which proved false. The neighbor who sometimes looked after him was questioned. Nothing showed in her, apart from that sort of distress that invades the features and is, one might say, the face’s translation of great

sorrows rising from the depths of being. In short, whatever the cause, the child's disappearance remained a mystery.

On that day, for Monsieur Bartolomé, youth died. On that day, the house died. In the street, the neighbors lowered their eyes as they passed, sensing that just there, so close, Monsieur Bartolomé was crying all around the little bed. On that day, the city died, and on that day, half of everything died. Monsieur Bartolomé was like a book unmasted. He had just lost the greatest part of himself, everything that, for twelve years, had made of him a human being among human beings.

15. In the months that followed, he left the city many times and went walking in the forests where the bustle of intersections and grand avenues couldn't reach him. Because Monsieur Bartolomé often thought of the tree the child had so loved, and even more often, of the sky that stood over it through the years. He wouldn't have known how to say why, but it was clear that he needed this sky now, resting on the tops of trees like a benevolent hand blessing them.

He wandered like this for long hours through the fields, on the pathways, and in the shade of the woods. Dust from the paths inscribed his age on his ankles. Often, nothing moved—even the leaves hung from branches as though from coat hangers. In the groves, animals dreamed their grammar of shadows. Then—all of a sudden—clouds of birds would pass, as though they had just been reminded of their task. He thought of the Sunday when the child had been seen for the last time. Suddenly things had been more serious than usual. It would always be so, from that moment onward.

When he got home, he struggled to find sleep, and when, broken with fatigue, he finally sank into it, he often dreamed a strange dream. His dog, who had died years earlier, was running towards him. At the same moment that he felt the big yellow paws of the animal in his hands, Monsieur Bartolomé raised his eyes and saw his son smiling on the doorstep of the house. The child was holding a large ball in his arms and one might have said that the ball was his whole life, held, held back like that between his two small arms, too short still.

Upon waking, this thought stayed for a long time in Monsieur Bartolomé's grieving mind: We say of certain things that they are unspeakable, but I don't believe it. Aren't languages invented by humans?

So they are both made of the same stuff. One day I will know the words to describe the extraordinary joy, mixed with sorrow, that I felt again last night.

16. He would go to collect himself in the small room that had become useless. The child did not see his father's lips gloved with the old song, nor the spear in his pierced heart; he didn't hear this man's voice speaking his name. Because his name was lost in the twists and turns of painful memories. And his name was a hull stranded on a sandbank of shadows.

He would open the window and listen to the world making noise. He could see storms far away, bringing, as they came closer, the murmur of tired birds who had returned to say: "We see nothing now but suns kept locked away. Surrender marks the eyes of people darkly, and they say that tomorrow, rains will stumble upon the stones."

He touched his forehead: A fever made it hot. He wished that one of those exhausted birds, rain folded under its wing, would come and sit there.

17. Higher up there surely breathed skies that escaped the senses. He sensed their existence, as one might divine the roots of trees beneath the soil, creeping towards the underbellies of pathways. He wanted to know these skies. He hoped that corridors would be lifted upwards. He accompanied crowds in their casements of buses, then climbed with them the long vine of escalators. In attics, he received news of planes and sparrows. A chair was held for him on the rooftops. He wrote the itinerary of smoke in notebooks, sent telegraphs to blackbirds, assigned missions to air balloons. Then he went home. He would have liked to have a dog waiting for him, running to meet him, wagging its tail. The words imprisoned in the animal's body would have lived a brief life on its muzzle—and would have made, like an unexpected dance in the hollow of his hand, a sky.

18. It was simply that the world was too small. Monsieur Bartolomé had to lift his gaze above the limits of his enclosure. He loved space, and the inhabitants of its vast prairie: meteors, planets, stars and suns, but also aircrafts, engines and rockets. Because they made it possible to wander way out there, and then return, bringing back fragments of science, a light that translated worlds. He was captivated by the incredible vessels catapulted up there, inhabited by people whose hands were gloved with air, occupied with their fabulous expedition. At times, a mechanical breakdown forced them to take light steps outside. There they were suspended from nothingness as from dreams. One false move, one meteoric distraction, and a tool would slip from a glove, condemned to spin towards the full infinity of orbits, to slide forever between the assemblies of stars. Ah! The laughable enlargement of our human domain! And yet, there were few dawns when Monsieur Bartolomé did not dream of those pliers, that fugitive key, moving towards the next continents.

19. He copied out in his notebook the words that always troubled him, and that he had read many times, in *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar: “This morning it occurred to me for the first time that my body, my faithful companion and friend, truer and better known to me than my own soul, may be after all only a sly beast who will end by devouring his master.”

As though in echo to these words, sudden memories of the child came flashing back, striking against him like a vehement fever. Lightning pierced his flesh, and a raging sea full of shards of broken glass flung itself relentlessly at his sides. Pain itself was incarnated in his voice; it made dark circles under his eyes, a reminder of the skeleton buried long ago beneath his skin. His hour was coming.

Peace, after such torment, took on extraordinary significance. Monsieur Bartolomé welcomed it with the thirst of one who has been brought back from the dead. This took the form of silence—a particular, rare silence. A silence of the organs, inert, permeated with death. It was at these times

above all that he learned that death accompanied him even in the hours when he was most alive—that it was hidden away inside him. Inert. He knew it was waiting; waiting for him, silent, peaceful, and that it wasn't ugly.

20. But there was a light in the middle of the body's shadows: the skeleton, that white vessel spangled with foam, immobile on a sea enclosed by the skin and on which the organs, the muscles, mother of pearl and tissue formed strange pieces of flotsam. The skeleton, though anchored, still covered its share of distances. Its movement wasn't calculated leaning over maps, with instruments of copper worn down by salt on the fingertips. It was a progress of hands lined with confessions, of seedlings threaded through the eye of the earth, an extension of fields: the mark of time upon each of us from the moment of our birth.

21. He entered cemeteries gladly. When he pushed open their iron gates, a peace almost as great as the feeling of his body revived from a fever came over him. Clearly he found, in these narrow rows carved out by contemplation, comfort of a kind: how total it was, the silence of the departed! Monsieur Bartolomé moved across the lawns and the only shadow falling on him was that of the oaks. He read loving words engraved on the tombstones by those who survived. This thought came to him: Nowhere else are love and death so intimately linked than here. Maybe eternity had something to do with it. He observed the trees. He knew that their roots attended to the dead—that they were engaged in the mysterious and contradictory work of chaining to the earth these bodies that were now so free.

22. It wasn't during his visits to the cemetery that the strongest images of his son came back to him. Because he still continued to hope that he would see him again, alive, and not once had he imagined him dead. No, it was the sea, seen on television or in ads posterred around town, for example, that most often caused recollections of the child to rise up from the folds of his memory.

One day while he was lingering in front of one of these posters, he said to himself: I was the father of an island. Because in his mind, the child had

possessed every characteristic of an island. He was alone, surrounded, upright, inhabited by lives and dangers that belonged only to him. There were times when the tides had undone him, just as they do with beaches: disappointments, alarms, or various drowned things would surface unexpectedly. But the tides had also brought bottles whose bellies had unwound secret beckonings. Monsieur Bartolomé had dreamed of knowing the secrets enclosed inside his son. His whole life as a father had been dedicated to this quest. Up until the day the workers had come to take down the elm, the child, in keeping with his secrets there, perhaps, had scattered behind him little bits of childhood, small crumbs. For a long time Monsieur Bartolomé had gathered them, prolonging his own dawns with this bread. He had gathered them in the incongruous hope that he could give them back to his son one day (or at least give him back some of that aerial lightness of the trees) once the more difficult days of adulthood had come.

In front of the ad, Monsieur Bartolomé thought to himself: I was the father of an island. Then, turning his eyes away: Here I am now, the father of a boat.

What is a boat? An island that has escaped.

23. God was of little importance to him. Still, Monsieur Bartolomé stopped at almost all the churches he passed on his way. The bells, like airplanes, meteors, edifices and tall trees, exercised the same mute pull on him: in order to measure their trajectory, he had to lift his gaze.

And yet he entered churches with his eyes lowered. He had long wondered why. Then he saw that he was going to die one day—that he was promised to the earth, not to the sky, kingdom of the stars. He probably sensed this—he had a feeling about it, which is to say he felt it in his flesh. And he responded, and prepared himself in some way: in the contemplation that churches inspired in him, there was always this idea of closeness with the earth—the idea of a low joy.

He entered churches as though they were his home, and maybe this was because he *was* in his house: Something always awaited him, and it was never God.

24. Time passed. In nests, even the birdsong unraveled. Mists wore thin against trees, rooftops, and electricity poles. Monsieur Bartolomé measured the wanings, the declining angle of years. At times he felt that his steps, ripened by interminable wanderings in the city, were filling in with loose sand. He would get lost and then—even in the heart of the city—he would have to reset his course by the compass of the constellations. All the same, his head was of stubborn suns, his heart of straight grain, his body of roads ready to hatch. But in the parks he walked walled in by ageing leaves. Light came over things like ferreting beams of stars. Everything fled. Were the mornings moored to sparrow hawks?

25. This, moreover, never ceased to amaze him: Seasons followed seasons, and he was still on earth, alive. For a long time he had thought he wouldn't survive the child's disappearance. And now here he was, taking inventory of centuries, with scratches from the sun's claws marking the corners of his eyes, and foam and silver birch bark sprinkled through his hair. Pigeons used to come and sit on his shoulder. Now the world settled its pebbles on the back of his neck, that reed. From the light broken by the angles of streets, boutiques, faces and cars, he retained only a little: Life went by, life went by. The city shaped its race of stalls and noises; far off the forest produced its hares.

What was at the summit of buildings? Empty space, attached to unimaginable birds. Yes, time was fleeing. Already Monsieur Bartolomé was not entirely of the world of human beings. He was the fascinated spectator of these miracles: the morning following the night, the leaves fallen and then risen again to the branches. And the summer reappeared, and already it was Christmas again this year.

26. Once, he was prey to an infinitely violent emotion. His son had been gone for some years already. One day while he was turning the soil in the little vegetable garden laid out in the yard, he discovered a metal box that had clearly been buried there by the child. With hands trembling, Monsieur Bartolomé unearthed the precious box: Though its small metal

body was gnawed by the fevers of the earth, it was nevertheless a survivor of its stay in shadows. As for the contents, they had not resisted—all that was left were the mildewed scraps of a piece of paper from which the words had been erased, giving way to a resigned silence. The child's letter, that incredibly innocent witness of his ten years, had grown mute in this parody of a manifesto. Still, Monsieur Bartolomé had to struggle for a moment to deliver the box from an astonishing network of roots. Like the remains of our bodies, he thought then, captive, held by force in the earth that seems otherwise mostly uninterested in the soul.

But maybe, too, it was just that the soul did not carry enough weight. Just a parody of a manifesto.

27. Everything he carried in his abdomen: this dog's soul, these living years sewn together with snow, these horses galloping towards the banks to drink the rivers, these otters finely carved by water and burrows, these pumas roving the grassy ways, these roots risen high only to flatten themselves in the light, these cities tuned to the acts of the sun, all of this inner life escaped from him, day after day. Suns broke him with their dawns. His body suffered from the crack of each gesture. What is the body of a man who searches without ever finding? The clothing of a poor child.

For a long time, Monsieur Bartolomé had known that everything down here ends. He had nothing more pressed against his forehead than the laws of the sun. But inside him, worlds trembled, deep strong valleys, made of half-days and hope, and which seemed so real they could be called births.

28. The fevers and the agitation caused by his wounded memory created in him a strange phenomenon. Because of them he felt that he was living simultaneously within his body and separate from it. This body betrayed him: Monsieur Bartolomé expected it to do its job, but it was often more of an odd storekeeper, more preoccupied with the inventory of its organs than with their proper functioning. Monsieur Bartolomé would have liked to gain strength, to distill and then hurl suitable blood into his veins, to celebrate its mechanics, to tune his heart to the high song that, in his mind,

wished to live. But this body didn't know how to bend to requests. It did as it pleased, as though fulfilling the requests of some other than the one who ensured its subsistence. And so, Monsieur Bartolomé was both beside and within himself, at once the observer and the object of the trespasses, the contortions, and the brutalities this organism caused and whose torture he had no choice but to endure.

And perhaps it was also partly for this reason that Monsieur Bartolomé felt more than ever like he was living beside life. Not in death, but outside of life, meaning as the spectator, observing in minute detail as things consumed themselves. As far back as he could remember, not a day had gone by when these words did not surface inside him: All these people, how do they do it? How do they live as though they were unaware of their death at the end? The world, as it was, was not his master. The body was. He had learned these things from it.

29. After the child's disappearance, the dawn had ceased to bathe the house in its new colors. In the park, the trees were no longer moved by anything but the wind: The birds seemed to have deserted the place. In the evening the sounds of neon signs, on cornices and on walls, rose up from the street. Monsieur Bartolomé would go out to the place where signs never died. Their rays exploded into the darkness dethroned. He walked beneath the white lance of an ad. His face was reflected in the drops left by the rain. He observed the cars left to the mercy of the city, the sidewalks kneeling for pedestrians, the light coming out of establishments.

He possessed only a little, deep down: the night that closes late, the radio airborne on its antennae like gulls leaving the mast. His hair always leaning towards the gleaming sidewalk when it rained. A certain scent on his shirt when the seasons set off again. The curve in the staircase, the comfort and the melancholy of knowing that all is passing, crowned with contours.

What was he made of? He was born of a stone, building his days out of the wood of a few wrecked boats. But what was he made of? So little separated him from those stretched out beneath the earth, cheek to cheek with the animal dens. Yes, what was Monsieur Bartolomé made of? Of

pebbles, of bushes and of a fearful heart when the windows grew dark. Of a little bit of day, and the things it embraces.

30. Out of each hour given to him he made a kind of mirador, an observation post. He kept a lookout for a rain of burrows, a snow of straight ink. He waited for a night when his son, somewhere below, would surely be admiring the stark, piercing beauty of the stars. But something—endlessly, and in spite of everything—called Monsieur Bartolomé to his human task. He walked the streets, and the sun multiplying against the windowpanes threw itself at him like a thousand puppies playing.

31. He left the city more and more often. But he went less often to walk on the trails and beneath the trees. He would take a taxi, asking the driver to bring him to where the last houses were planted. Then he would stand still and observe the horizon. The light that he saw, far away between the hills, was different than the light he had left behind him. It was a light of the beginning of the world—in that place, the earth carried on its back only fish, green limes and stones planning the lives to come. The countryside laid itself down before this threshold of clarity. Behind Monsieur Bartolomé, the city was poised on a pedestal.

Yes, something compelled him to escape the city. During the taxi ride, which the driver would doubtlessly have wished to be more animated, Monsieur Bartolomé didn't speak at all. In the tank, the carbon burned, freed finally from its destiny as a fossil. The radio was on bringing news of an agitated world: People were fighting here, people were thirsty there, planes were hurled at skyscrapers, a dictator fell.

Sometimes he wasn't content to stay standing still looking far away. Once he was out of the car he began to walk, advancing towards the horizon hemmed in by countryside. He took to dreaming the secular rhythm of the tall trees. He crossed over wooden bridges, walked along gravel roads, traversed fields bristling with prickles to arrive at the edge of a forest. He went to calculate the number of rings drawn in the wood of

ancient cedars that had been cut down and left there by a peasant. He became part of the thoughtful tribe of slowness.

At the end of the day he retraced his steps, hailed another taxi in the suburbs and went home. Most times, the night was already far along when he finally slipped between the sheets.

32. One night, two swallows came to the window. One said to him, "Wake up, the day is lengthening over the world, everything is breaking open and calling to you, come with me." Like a soul that won't leave the house though its occupant has departed, the other one stayed, its small body watchful in the curtain's nocturnal trembling.