

*THE FIVE OF WANDS*

*G.R. KEARNEY*



## *Joan's Childhood: Soliloquy One, Part One*

A man barely has time to write his soliloquy in life. I've resolved to write mine in death. My body's long dissolved, my new body's a body of knowledge, and that body of knowledge the whole world's. I can barely remember my discontents or what I cared about or why I did. But, I can hazily recall my life in Quebec when it was still called New France and during one of the last chapters in mankind's history where wealth meant little. I died far, far away from New France but now my soul's back and I haven't felt much of a desire to leave. I've been slivering between lovers in Montreal nightclubs—mostly *TRH* nowadays, but every so often others—since they've existed. Only the drunk girls can see me and only sometimes. I'm either naked or in colonial uniform or dressed in pure *Bardo*, as a well-traveled Jesuit told me the Hindoos call it in the 1750s. Buddhists, actually, as you would know if you paid a visit to *The Word* or the Westmount Library. A semester at McGill would've killed a Jesuit from back then. If I'm in the colonial uniform the girls will run up and take pretentious polaroids with me and, lording over their shoulders, I'll giggle when I don't appear in the exposure and then float away into the night with my hands in my pockets. If I'm in the nude or the *Bardo* they run away screaming or laughing and typically slip on ice, if not worse.

The only deviation from those three is, apparently, an eidolon of Sigmund Freud. Last year I attended a Halloween dorm party as, unbeknownst to me at first, Sigmund Freud. The whole peanut-munching gamut of collegiate doubting Thomases tugged on my ears and cheeks and my moustache in disbelief. A guy even took me home that night or, at least, tried to. I put aside my Catholic sensibilities very briefly and out of sheer curiosity, but by the time I arrived at his door I had dissolved like a snow cone and blown away like

## The Five of Wands

dust or Democritus' atomic soul, much to his astoundment. Was it divine intervention? I have no clue. I thought that, perhaps, Mount Royal was my seven-tiered *Purgatorio* of Dante. Twice a day, I effortlessly ascend and descend it to no avail. Death as nothing is much preferable to death as something, so I've come to learn. I spent the night before my death with my hair tangled in my fist, reciting the Lord's Prayer by the yard.

My father was always clad in an oxbide jacket or grey fleece—a coat to him, perhaps, in the sense a dog's fur is its coat—and a knitted cap. His name might as well have been *monsieur* to me, but his face was, like most everyone else's, weatherbeaten by the bleak, hoary banks of the St. Laurent, which debouched and tightened and winded like a blue vein. He spent his life in a manse which represented only a middling number of arpents along the river, and where a wooden beam would drape a shadow over the green and red chessboard and the long untouched clavier. He would do the job of clearing the rocks away himself with a hoe or a scythe or the stock of a gun in his snowshoes, living almost entirely alone on the unwanted precipice of the wilderness; and, at night, the blackness was such an iris-constricting blackness that its inexorable sowing of sleep rendered candlelight useless. The only bit of color in our slate-dormered home was an antique Gobelin tapestry, which was a somewhat queer gift. It was given by the governor to my decidedly unpretentious father—willing to name his only son after an Occitan fisherman he once knew—that comprised the length of an entire wall on the ground floor and which was so rich and perfect that it was somewhat difficult to look at in any season other than the springtime, if you were accustomed to cobblestone and dun. There was a similar stinging sensation in my older sister's shingled, boyish flaxen hair. I remember she liked to wear wampum-necklaces like an American Indian.

Even more than the people, the river was alive; second to the river were perhaps the willows or the balsam firs, always waving and bowing and moving; and then, after the rivers and the trees, and only after them, were the people alive. In New France, the people were the most inanimate, because they refused to bend. Even the sky seemed to bend. This became obvious when the first habitants began to trickle in from the mainland, first the men and then the women, both kinds strangers to North America who couldn't imagine a wilderness so dense or wine red or mercurial. It would rain unbelievable, Piscean, fire-snuffing rain, and the monsieur would laugh to himself with his weak smile and say, "Don't worry! It won't last for long." And it never lasted for long.

A meager hamlet slowly erected itself around the cobblestone manse: a disorganized cluster of almost windowless, whitewashed houses raised without a plan and made of whims with battened birchbark doors, as well as some semblance of a mill nearby. There were drugget rugs on the floors and hung on the walls were crude sketches of saints and Marian scenes. Those houses were a dare to a winter not even the Indians dared. In the afternoon, the blearing tallow lamps would stink, but no later than sundown and no earlier than twilight, because sleep came more like death and the dreams were always bemusing, hashish-eater dreams. The sleep was still and unturning. I can no longer sleep.

My father eventually embarked on a trip to exchange a few pots, axes, a gun, and a box of stained playing cards bearing fleur-de-lys for a pair of moccasins for both himself and I and four Indian slaves from the Fox people to round out his population of tenant laborers. A local guide and two tonsured Jesuit men in black robes and beaver fur hats came down the river in a dory to baptize them three weeks later. The Jesuits thought that just because Jesus died he ran out of things to say, or said all he needed to say, &c. For a brief furlough my father no longer took it upon himself to clear the land and spent his

days reading whilst his daughter, my sister, spun or played; and took the time to fashion a special, oaken tobacco pipe for himself on which he'd puff in the summertime to preclude the mosquitoes, while everyone else made do with animal fat behind their ears. Within a few months the first tokens of a disease began to shew themselves where the slaves' satin black hair met their temples, and then they were dead; and my father was, once again, driving away rocks with his rifle.

The wooden pipe became a veil for his quivering chin. His black, dimpled chin was always faltering under some melancholic weight, though he never said what it was. In Paris, he was a chirurgien and a barber, every so often an apothecary, too. Though, the saturnine man dealt, for the most part, in funeral effigies, tutoring sculptors about the veins in hands and other anatomical trivia. It was for that work that he was rewarded with what he was given. Perhaps this tract of riparian earth wasn't worth seeing what he had seen. *His* father's name, my grandfather, was Gilles Luynes. Gilles married three or so times; and, in *Le Grand Hiver* of 1709, he would stalk the streets of Paris out of desperation, competing with the drivers of dead-carts to scavenge the belongings of the starved corpses, and to furtively cut out a chunk or two from what he called the *chuck* of the body to cook and feed to his wife and unbeknownst son. He spent an afternoon pilloried for scornfully grabbing the bodice of an aging, fat noblewoman gleefully skating on the frozen-over Seine and slapping her across the face.

Even at his tender age, the monsieur was thoroughly inculcated by his mother into a fervent Catholicism. She had her superstitions and a charm inscribed with the Jesuit's mark—*IHS*—in a kind of triangle, only one amongst the many philters and fetishes which she had hoped would in some way draw God's attention to her and save her family from the world-ending winter in 1709. When my father, then a boy, discovered he had

been cannibalizing the corpses of his countrymen he cursed his mother for her hypocrisy and complicity and chided his father and ran out into the streets crying, resolving to die and bear the glorious beatific vision in the shivering streets of the august French capital. Lachrymose, his mother followed closely behind, quilt in hand, profusely pleading and promising and apologizing. His father broke down and put his head in his hands and stayed behind. Eventually the boy was scooped up by his mother—not, of course, without kicking and screaming and crying out “*Cannibales!*” to the fevered, slack-jawed passersby—and returned to his père’s home, where the remainder of the night was spent in silence. My grandfather was later bankrupted by the burst of the Mississippi Bubble in 1720 and drowned himself in the Seine, by then thawed, a year and a half after that. For my father, his guerdon for enduring life was a sort of quiet, half-death in the colony. Of course, he never discussed any of this with his children.

I was born in the cobblestone manse in New France and was resented slightly by my father for not having seen many horrors in my inchoate life, which I spent, as a young boy, barefoot in the summertime and giggling and somewhat bored, even on the edge of the home of *sauvages*. Nobody remembers the embarrassments of their childhood, and those of early adulthood are just barely within reach. Everyone thinks they were born grown like the homuncular Christ. To remember otherwise would be enough to drive someone mad. I’ve learned that notion is certainly the killer of sons, and a ruiner of their youth. I didn’t acquire the habit of smoking like most children did, either, at least not then, nor did I have a dedicated education for a little while, other than that of the river’s. The steep dropoff from dead grasses to the St. Laurent was the teacher of a great many children. It was in play that I saw the most nobility, and not only in play but in fickleness. I would beg to play and then curl up to sleep. My little feet would pave desire paths in the earth. I might’ve even been born smiling. I was Ovid’s *puer aeternus*. Even to my peers, I

## The Five of Wands

was the child-god Iacchus of Greek myth. I was often referred to as such. Thus, I had two names, one of a girl's and the other of a child god, and I made them manifest. I have since been robbed of most of my memories of precisely how.

My father, believing himself to be the homuncular Christ, provided me with the necessary terrors to forge a man. He sailed a few miles home in a birchbark canoe with an Indian arrow lodged in his shoulder through his heavy oxskin coat just for me to witness its removal and the bloody wound. If it hadn't been winter, he would've been loath to wear a coat and the arrow, therefore, likely would've killed him. On life I treaded so lightly that the bloody affair didn't seem to particularly bother me: not the wound, nor the arrow, nor the possibility of my father's death, though I loved him dearly. I was more so bothered, but only slightly, by my time being wasted. By virtue of his old profession, I knew he had the means to assuage an injury. So, why didn't he? He should have done as much without speaking to me first. *Maybe he's bragging*, I thought. So, I smiled and nodded along to his averring. The first stirring of my beatitude was yet to come.

## *Appalachia, 1770: Soliloquy Two*

Dear Alice,

I too, have died, quite a long time ago. I'll recapitulate to you something of our life.

There were wildflowers, flattened like a pan, littered at the front door of our clapboard house that no one bothered to remove. Do you remember them? I used to say your eyes were like your mother's eyes. They weren't the same color. It seemed silly. How can you identify a pair of eyes other than by their color? But I still saw her in them somehow, like a superstition or the guerdons of a prayer. Do you remember the dog I never named? I've forgotten where I found it, or when it started following me. *Us*, I should say. He started trailing us when you were carrying your own shakedown underneath your arm, because that's all your tiny body could carry. I recall the dog being a stinking thing like asafetida. When my uncle was sick, a hypochondriac, many years before you were born, a Dutch physician cut him some and gave him a small baggie of asafetida, *Devil's dung*, to wear around his neck like a charm. It wasn't so much for his own health's sake but to keep everyone at a stove's length away. So, my uncle died completely alone sitting on his porch in Pennsylvania with a pipe hanging out of his mouth. When we arrived, there were still hot ashes the color of amber on his waistcoat and smoke slowly eking its way out through his teeth. That's what the dog smelled like, upon reflection: not just the dung, but the smoke and the bled body and a porch in Pennsylvania.

Once we laid down the floorboards, you could hear the dog I refused to name pacing back and forth down in the dark: the clicking of its claws and the creaking and the slight hum of coprophagiac flies pursuing it. You heard as much and thought he should perhaps

name the dog *Beelzebub*. I told you names were for people. Don't reserve too much empathy for an animal that you could instead reserve for a human being. You made the mistake of feeding the thing a bit of raccoon I had trapped that morning straight from the chafing dish. I should've known that the love between a child and an animal is inexorable. You liked it when he twitched in his sleep in the throes of a dream. We more or less fumigated the poor, scrappy Beelzebub with how poorly the fireplace ventilated the first night; that is, before I fixed it. Where was there to bathe him in? A river bath certainly wouldn't have helped, but you took him outside and baptized him in the kill for other reasons: because you were scared the dog might go to Hell. I don't think I ever taught you about Hell. I wouldn't want you to spend your whole life worrying about it. Life's worth a whole of a lot more than Hell—bear it if need be. I told you that dogs don't go to Heaven or Hell and that a death of that kind was a more merciful kind than what's afforded to mankind and womankind. As in Psalms 22:20: *Deliver my soul from the sword; My darling from the power of the dog*. If the dog knew what a baptism was it would've surely resented your giving him one.

I really only came to Pennsylvania for prosaic reasons, mainly that I didn't want to be buried in Bunhill Fields or some other dissenter graveyard far away from everyone else; in fact, I thought Bunhill Fields *wasn't far away enough*. Some stroke of bad luck or another, and you would've never been born. Actually, all bad luck's good luck because it meant you were born. Every father thinks this about their daughter: that they're worth every Christian burned by Diocletian and Shapur and every speculative crash that drives a few hundred to a premature suicide. That's the sickness in love: that dog surely would've followed any fool, it's just that we were the first. Or, is that its virtue? *Bittersweet*, in Sappho's words. I suppose the only difference is that it's slightly more

complicated to woo a woman than it is to toss a dog a slice cut from the chuck of a raccoon that you didn't even kill yourself.

Then, the Cranes arrived with their son, Hannibal, who shot a hole between that Joan boy's eyes in February 1770 and called the Eccleses' girl a *Babalon*, and their phalanxes of blackamoor slaves in tattered, teabag-colored dress shirts with makeshift banjers at their hips who could clear an acre in an afternoon and build a house in an hour while your mother and I were still drafting the meetinghouse. Hannibal Crane arrived with sixty pounds worth of literature and a powdered periwig and brimstone on his teeth and a slave from West Africa to tutor him in Arabic. He was the first of the Crane family to introduce himself to us: on our excuse for a doorstep, with an infirm handshake and a crooked, though clean-toothed, grin and a platitude on his lips. His degree of learnedness obscured, only marginally, that he was of a somewhat simple mind. Much like the pewter basin his hound dog would drink from: broad, perhaps, but also quite shallow. He certainly didn't receive the moral education that one might in England or New England, perhaps because the Cranes believed themselves to have gold in their souls, as evidenced by the slaves. Or, was it perhaps out of necessity, so that he might sleep at night while owning them?

The following is a demonstration: there's a Wampanoag word, *townor*, that I was taught by the whalers in New England—fellow Quakers, most of them—which means to spot the same whale for a second time, which had since entered my vernacular. There is, presumably, an equivalent word for spotting the same whale once or thrice or four times or five times, but *townor* was the only one I knew because *tow* and *two* sound quite similar. One afternoon you were stumbling after a rabbit alongside Beelzebub and I cried out "*Townor!*" ahead of you as I saw the prey dash from one thicket to another. Hannibal Crane happened to be idly strolling nearby—alongside a single, barefoot mulattress—on

some business or another in a slouching, high-crowned beaver skin hat and a matte black cotton waistcoat, heavily perspiring, albeit happy in his usual stupid manner and in the way idiots often are, somehow unaware even of their own suffering. When he heard what I'd said, his ears might as well have perked up like an animal's. His swart, sunburned neck jerked and he stopped suddenly and, brushing away a stooping mass of thick foliage, sauntered over to me with a mosquito sucking on his cheek. Not only did the young Virginian know the word's origin and meaning, but also, as I later came to learn, the entire vocabulary and grammar of the language from which it's derived, potentially without even once encountering a man or woman from that people. That is the absurd degree of learnedness to which I am referring.