



I want to put down my head*

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Chapter one

Fridays and Saturdays we're the night watchmen out there. It's an immense and dismal edifice separated into factories, workshops and warehouses. Our footsteps echo all night long, through the sterile darkness, against the shadows of the looming walls. All night long we're the impotent eyes for this skeleton and its countless arteries, coming and going, back and forth, over the endless grains of dust. We clock the distance in sleep. It's the dirty work of the living dead.

Those nights there, I'm not alive. I hold my breath and clench my teeth, as if bracing against the weight of a sentence. I leave early enough from my place. Félix comes by to pick me up.

Ce texte est une traduction du premier chapitre du roman de Jonathan Harnois, *Je voudrais me déposer la tête* (Éditions Sémaphore, 2005). Cette traduction apparaît ici avec l'aimable autorisation de l'auteur et de la maison d'édition.

We drive out of Le Gardeur in silence, keeping the speed limit. We are there, growing pale. Attentive and wordless. Young minds promised to the torments of destiny, forging their armour, silently. On the highway, the lights slip by and we dread the coming night.

In moments like this I have the feeling that I've known Félix forever. And when we look at each other, I know it's the same for him...

We leave Félix's beater in the parking lot of the psych asylum next to the entrance of métro Honoré-Beaugrand. Right before plunging underground, I take a bite out of a pear, just to eat a little bit of life. And then the convoy takes us into one abyss after another. The neon betrays every face. The crowd stifles its breath, anesthetised.

Arrived at the stop, the doors clamour open before us, bellow like a fed up sigh. We finally get outside, just to go from one extreme to another; from a dehydrating dryness to a suffocating humidity. We walk a short way to the south, winding off to the east, by rue Marseille, three minutes more and we're there. Dickson-Hochelaga, where we pound pavement, Félix and me, from seven to seven. I'm already worn out. Montréal I sink into you.

Once there, we enter this monstrosity of walls and fences, an industrial complex, as the sign says... We pass the night hollering at the emptiness, walking all around, outside, inside, either way it's grey, hostile and always the same. Even if we try to stay strong and make ourselves as impermeable as we can, we are surrounded by an inhuman wasteland. One that – even though our shift is up and though the night breaks – places on us in the early morning

a sort of death, a chill fog. Outside, the clouds are dull; they bow before the moon, so far above us, like the membranes of hell.

Our eyes are doomed to see nothing fresh, nothing green; everything everywhere is covered in concrete: the fields are tarmac smooth, the trees have gone to the fireplaces, and the beings, the beings start to fade away, only revealing themselves in order to curse god in vain and to raise their small fists in the air... before their aching bodies fold in on themselves. Each one is like every other one surrounding them. Their walk turns to creeping, they feel like vermin and even the word ocean doesn't speak to them anymore. The sea becomes a legend. The forest a nursery rhyme. They are abandoned. They have wounded eyes, wounding looks that kill any love they had for their lives, because here, the ivy entangles their efforts.

Now that it's autumn, it's starting to get cold.

To warm up our hands we have the keys to the garage of wing B. But it's the sort of place that creates other discontent. We find ourselves boxed in between the four walls that the workers – the same ones each day – see their whole lives. And we start to feel, within the foreign pieces of familiarity, the substance of another daily life, one we don't want to recognise or touch or know about. On the workbenches there are a bunch of centrefolds of young naked women. And on the ventilation grill, dead butterflies piling one on top of the other. It smells of oil, cardboard, smoke, sweat... so we get right out of there.

We spend those twelve hours over there as if on another planet, till we hear the factories swell up in the distance. Till we feel them laugh like a belch from the ground. Till we keep time with

them, our voices shut off. And so it goes, and the later it gets. The morning arrives and we waver. I drift off, resign myself...

But here you have it. Wandering around in this sad set-up till the break of day, it really doesn't give way to the best of thoughts.

I know I can't do anything about that, and Félix, he just goes out and says it.

Soon, I feel it, he's going to quit.

