A Toronto Story

On Monday

Norman sat under a tree in Queen’s Park

neither hungry, nor sleepy

his body wanted for nothing

and he closed his eyes

the noise of traffic receded from him

and his breathing steadied

after a while

he felt his body no more

his being began to expand

stretching out to fill every corner of the park

the sensation was exhilarating

but he kept his eyes closed

lest he ruin the moment

after another while

his being returned to normal

and he rose and returned to the office

filled with a sense of contentment

and knowing he was one with his secretary

a young man named Abdul

who sported a luscious beard

and really enjoyed smiling.

The next day

Norman waited patiently for lunch

and returned to the park

people milled about

seeking small pleasures

an old woman fed the pigeons

under the disapproving stare

of a Minister and his deputy

she was clearly unconcerned

Norman found his tree unoccupied

sat and closed his eyes

mindless of the root pressing into his buttock

and again felt his being expand

this time

it did not stop at the edge of the park

but expanded to fill the city

the streetcars ran through his arteries

the office buildings full of people lived in his liver

planes took off and landed in his lungs

and still his being expanded

until the suburbs belonged

as his own body belonged

then a tap came on his shoulder

“Did you forget you have a meeting, sir?”

Abdul smiled down at him from within his own self

and his beard, magnificent and black

grew stealthily from Norman’s own chin.

The next day, Wednesday, it rained

and Norman stayed indoors at lunchtime

he closed in his eyes in the lounge

and though the feeling was smaller

and harder to reach

his being expanded yet again

only reaching as far as Mississauga this time

still, his wants dropped from him

like skin shed by a golden lizard

and he realized that this moment

was as perfect as a moment could be.

Thursday, there was no time for lunch at all

but Friday was a special day

the sun was generous

the air was filled with movement and longing

and Norman’s tree was unoccupied

he sat and stretched out

and this time, his being seemed limitless

it left the confines of Earth

and sped outwards

gathering momentum

until his body was an atom on a beach

and his being was the ocean

that surrounded an island

still it kept on going

racing past stars, filling every void

and finding oneness in the ovoid shape of time

when his watch beeped

he heard it and felt no tug

for his being had reached the limits

of limitation

and burst the banks of space

he did not return to work

and was oblivious to Abdul

who looked briefly concerned, a face that seemed wrong on him

before smiling and returning to his own work

“Norman is away today, can you call back Monday?”

On Saturday morning

Norman remained in his place

his body had grown needy

and he retracted his spirit

with a great joy

knowing that he could return

when he wished to return.

He opened his eyes

blinking against the light

three pigeons and a squirrel

sat staring at him

electrons spinning in their heads

as Norman’s spun in his

further away, a seedy man

his clothes filthy and his eyes dark with shame

sat watching him from a bench

Norman beckoned him over

and gestured that he sit

whereupon he began to speak

in a voice that was a river of blossoms

laced with the love of bees

when he was finished

the silent bum was a monk

Norman gave him all his money

and bade him buy a nice piece of fish

and maybe a bagel

and not to come back

until he wore clean clothes and far less hair

Norman sat for hours

not bothering to wonder

whether the man would return

ignoring his body’s growing demands

practicing his expansion and contraction

until he could reach the big bang with ease

by mid-afternoon

when he reopened his eyes

a sea of pigeons and squirrels surrounded him

a couple of gulls standing nervously like sore thumbs

the monk, now dressed in clean jeans and a t-shirt

handed him a pumpernickel bagel with seeds

and some light cream cheese

covered with an excellent lox

Norman thanked the fish for sharing

and fed his body, the monk sitting before him

birds and squirrels continued to gather

then mice and even some unloved rats

insects, being intrinsically evil in most cases

stayed away, even retreated

except for a blue and orange butterfly

which landed on Norman’s head

and wouldn’t leave.

A policeman noticed a ruckus in the park

and came to investigate.

A crowd of children had gathered to stare at the birds

but now their eyes were locked on the gentle storm

that was the man who had been Norman

one by one, they sat on the grass

tugging on their parents hands

and when they were seated

ex-Norman began to speak

his tone was gentle yet commanding

his voice was commanding yet hypnotic

his words were hypnotic yet compassionate

and the children closed their eyes

their beings began to expand

and everyone of them sensed every one of them

and they broke down in giggles

the ex-Norman smiled at them

told them to be good children

and in every heart was a promise

the parents were a little worried

but the children’s joy was infectious

and the ex-Norman had asked for nothing

in return for the happiness he spoke

some of the parents resolved to investigate

and others swore to their children that they would return

the policeman, his heart filled with yearning

nevertheless decided that it was his duty

to cite Norman M. Weiskopf for unlawful protesting

but he didn’t think the charge would stick

the ex-Norman took the ticket cheerfully

and handed it along with his credit cards

to his monk, who went to the internet café

and paid it online

on the way, he ran into his street-buddies

and promised them nirvana

if only they would come to hear the ex-Norman speak

and besides, there was a nice hot meal in it

when they all got back to the ex-Norman’s tree

the entire park was filled with birds and small animals

passers-by’s dogs strained at their leashes

wishing to get closer

cats had begun to walk among the assorted vermin

but politely refrained from eating the audience

the policeman had called for backup

but by the time they had arrived

the ex-Norman had gestured munificently

and the birds and animals had dispersed

leaving nary a dropping behind

when the policemen pulled up in their black van

their colleague was sitting on the ground

enveloped in the ex-Norman’s words

and remained oblivious to their presence

after a while, they too sat

and the street people sat

and the monk in blue jeans sat

and men, women and children

began to filter in from the edges of the park

and they sat

as did the ex-Norman, his words quietly-spoken

yet heard to the periphery of the city-block

the crowd grew larger

and the ex-Norman spoke on

when night fell, he bowed low without rising

and the crowd stood up and headed home

their thoughts confused but their brains hard at work

knowing only that happiness was within their reach

the policemen had families

so they couldn’t hang out

but the street people stayed until the ex-Norman

bade them shower and find shelter

only the monk and Norman remained

holding hands and awaiting the rain

within seconds they were soaked

but their spirits were elsewhere

and so they remained, their bodies asleep

and their beings far away and everywhere.

Sunday passed in the same way

by nightfall, traffic was being diverted

by the most peaceful of policemen

hot dog vendors and chapati makers

wandered in the crowd, handing out food

and ice-cold beverages

and asking nothing in return

the Minister’s deputy had joined them

and was using his expense account

to distribute pepsi-cola

because the government had signed an exclusive contract

and coke was not allowed on property owned by the people

when the Minister phoned

with an emergency request that he desist

he begged his boss to come downstairs

it’s Sunday, what are you doing in the office anyway

and soon the Minister had shed his jacket and tie

and was contemplating buying a pair of jeans

and a nice white t-shirt

preferably without one of those itchy labels.

Night fell, and the ex-Norman ate

and the people went home

on Monday, there was a run

on jeans and white t-shirts

a local tent-rental agency brought him a roof

and Abdul, now wearing the jeans of a monk

got his friend Sharif to loan them a fine Persian carpet

with a picture of a horny gazelle on it

a doctor examined the ex-Norman

and told him to get some exercise

his butt was looking kind of sore

so the ex-Norman took his monks for a walk

used the facilities in the museum

and then returned to his tree

to find a thousand humans in jeans and white t-shirts

waiting for his words

the ex-Norman spoke longer and deeper and wider

than he ever had

and simultaneous tears grew like diamonds

on the faces of his people

still they listened, munching on delivery pizza

and drinking evian water supplied by a local retailer

who had decided that he already owned everything

he would ever need to own.

Tuesday came, and Wednesday, and the crowd grew

tv was there now, and channel 24

was broadcasting every word he spoke

along with up-to-the-minute traffic and weather

their ratings were sky-rocketing

Oprah was considering a guest appearance

but whether she would go to the mountain

or the mountain should come to her

she could not decide

on Thursday, the ex-Norman met his first serious resistance

his speech on compassion ran into a brick wall

put up by those to whom compassion was mere weakness

and whose spirits were confined to what they possessed

they met in secret

in a restaurant in the murky depths of downtown

to decide what must be done

decisions were made, agendas were plotted

personal assistants were called upon

but the phone calls went unanswered

the captains of industry felt alone and vulnerable

unloved

so they got on the phone to Ottawa

who were sympathetic and monitoring the situation carefully

but saw no reason to interfere as yet

perhaps if there were to be a riot

or better yet, a terrorist attack.

On Friday, the Mayor, a fat angry man

had declared war on the ex-Norman

who was now known as The Speaker

and whose following had declared Friday

a day of random Fun

in clear contravention of the laws of good business

his face red with a convenient fury

he decided to call in the army

whose discipline had made them bored

and who certainly could use the stimulation

they poured from green trucks

sidearms at the ready

and did nothing for many hours

eventually, their officers rounded them up

and returned them to their base

where a sergeant of the regiment

his bald head shining in the moonlight

lectured them on the eternal peace of humility.

Saturday dawned cheery red, and a vast crowd

uniform and comfortable in jeans and t-shirts

were already seated and waiting when The Speaker awoke

his subtle smile became a gesture of welcome

repeated on a million faces

as he took the bowl of bran flakes with raisins

that his First Acolyte handed him

when he began to speak

his voice was heard all over the country

as the combined servers of nine great enterprises

laboured to spread his words

free of charge

ads for The Speaker’s recordings began to appear

on almost every network not owned by a fascist state

FedEx had volunteered to deliver them for nothing

and as the sun sank below the horizon

and The Speaker’s voice fell silent

his words were rebroadcast again and again.

On Sunday

the government met to consider the problem

the economy was at a standstill

other speeches were going unheard

crime seemed to be waning

people were just giving stuff away like crazy

nobody was afraid of anything anymore

many of the government’s yes-men

had become whatever, man-men

the CBC was ignoring threats and showing

Live The Speaker TV

24-hours a day

the politicians gravely nodded

as their fierce leader, immune to The Speaker

demanded a firm and forceful reaction

the problem, said the Ministers

was that none of their people cared anymore

and a few ventured to say

that they weren’t sure they cared anymore either

the leader thundered them from the room

and they organized a car pool and headed for the big city.

The Speaker, his voice almost inaudible now

stretched out his being

and every ear and microphone hung on his every word

by Monday night, the War had ceased

not because there had been any solution

but because the young men no longer were willing to die

no matter what their elders demanded

it was not exactly peace

but it was better, really it was

a tidal wave of sick days and vacation time

swept over the planet

The Speaker begged those in essential jobs

to continue their work and he would get back to them later

The People needed to eat, to shit, to ride the bus

his audience thinned slightly as those

on whom The People relied for their daily lives

showed their generosity of spirit

but his audience was soon replenished

The First Acolyte took many aside

and organized them into a roving monastery

that The Speaker’s words would be heard

where there were no electronic resources

Abdul, his beard looking relaxed and fit

sat by his master’s side, pouring water.

Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday passed

The Speaker’s voice now not heard at all

but carried on the frequencies of spirit

and on Friday, The Speaker

who had now rejected such titles

as Prophet, Boddhisatva and Messiah

told his worldwide audience

that he was nearing the end of his Speaking

that the First Acolyte would soon take over

the job of repeating the first days’ speeches

which had occurred before tv had arrived

and expanding and clarifying where necessary

the First Acolyte had by now

mastered the trick of extending his being

to the limits of the city

and was working on the next steps

his street-buddies and the policemen

now monks of a high order themselves

were getting into it massively

Google announced that The Speaker

was now the number one search

but surprisingly, searches on terms

such as Jesus, Buddha and Atman

had seen great jumps in popularity.

On Saturday

rain came again, and The Speaker sent The People home

TV took a break, and instead of Live The Speaker

showed documentaries and foreign movies

interspersed with news of the world

which was mostly positive for a change except when Timmy fell down a well

Osama bin Laden released a rather boring recorded message

so did the queen, who is a nice lady when you know her

people checked their supplies

and realized that they would have to go shopping soon

they couldn’t keep this up much longer

in the park, The Speaker

now sometimes addressed as Rabbi

spoke with his immediate followers

and told them that he was not much longer

for this world

the First Acolyte had already realized this

and seated by The Speaker’s side

refused to feel vulnerable

the monks noticed, strangely enough

that The Speaker seemed somehow larger

although he had ceased to eat and lived entirely

on Abdul’s carbonated water with a little lemon

suddenly, dripping wet and shaking

the government’s fierce leader stormed out of the rain

shouting angrily, almost incoherently

he’d had to drive himself all the way from Ottawa

while the President harangued him on a borrowed cell phone

the monks listened politely

and The Speaker’s smile never wavered

the fierce leader fell into weeping

and was offered a sandwich.

Sunday came, the end of three weeks

the great crowd had returned

but it was obvious that there weren’t enough facilities

to handle them

The Speaker announced

that today would be his last speech

and that the next week was for The People

to practice what they were learning

he would remain under his tree

answering questions and giving guidance

and referring the needy to the appropriate monk

then he began to speak

his mouth closed, his eyes closed

his body expanding with each phrase

until he towered over the crowd

he spoke to them of The Method

the stretching of the being

the reaching of the furthest reaches

and the encountering of all life along the way

the crowd closed its eyes and mouths

and felt for each other

and for the pigeons and squirrels, who seemed to be waiting

when their minds ran out of useful chemicals

the Rabbi sent them home

telling them that it was time to do good works

to help the world turn

to let the children evolve

for now they knew everything he knew

then his voice fell silent.

For a week, the Rabbi received visitors

world leaders, industrialists, circus performers and feminists

lined up to ask what we ought to do now

the Rabbi would put his hands out

touch the supplicant on forehead or breast

and give each answer through the palms of his hands

which were as soft as a doe’s sleeping breath

he never spoke again

at the end of each visit, he would place white scarves

around the necks of the seekers

and a monk would gently guide them away

to continue their discussions

the roving monastery continued to grow

scarf factories began to concentrate on white scarves

those who could not visit the Rabbi

ordered them over the internet or phone

no credit card required

missionary monks began flying to every remote corner

saying little, but handing out white scarves

like free popcorn at a fair

those who stood in line to question the Rabbi

now had to look up at a steep angle

for he had grown so tall that his First Acolyte

had requested that a platform be built

Abdul, who seemed to have given up all bodily functions

sat leaning against the Rabbi’s solid bulk

blowing balloons, that he might twist them

into pairs of creatures.

On Friday, as the day of the New Moon approached

the Rabbi ceased to receive visitors

and ceased all movement

save the motion of his hands

his eyes remained closed

his smile perfect and fully functional

his body still like stars in the velvet of night

but his hands addressed the aether

work came to a standstill again

the world watched as the Rabbi

wove a new language for all

from the fabric of space and time

when he was done

he placed one giant hand flat on the earth

and lifted the other high into the air

one great finger pointing toward a supernova

that wasn’t due to shine for a million years

and there he froze

all communication stopped

and from everywhere, the pigeons

and this time the bluejays and sparrows

and woodpeckers and robins

came to sit around him, and on him

all manner of creature came and stared at him

until each had received whatever it had come for

and left again, returning to the hunt

the First Acolyte, under his own tent

also went silent

and the monks

and the audience.

Abdul, who had been silent for two weeks already

stayed where he was, and took up blowing bubbles.

Saturday dawned

the Rabbi was now as tall as a building

and his skin was changing

as if he was turning to stone

his features had changed as well

becoming almost sexless

his perfectly calm and disarming face pointed slightly down

as if to welcome visitors forever

the First Acolyte approached him

leaned over and touched his body

it was hard and cold

no sound came from it

but as the monks came one by one

and laid hungry hands upon it

a smile like the one on the face of the Stone One

stole over his or her features

and he or she would pack his or her spare jeans and t-shirts

and head out into the world to do stuff

by nightfall, the park was empty

save for a few animals and a quiet policeman

now returned to service

and determined to guard the statue for as long as he breathed.

As the final day of the month of Enlightenment

sneaked up from the horizon

the world breathed a sigh

and the Stone One

alone in the rain once again

thought its last local thought

and became perfect.

Abdul, his black beard and his smile intact

quietly stripped off his jeans and t-shirt

climbed atop the monument

and cast his spirit aloft on the wind

feeling the exhilaration of expansion

pushed his being to the end of the universe

filled space with his being

and stepped out of his body

which fell lifeless to the ground

he had other planets to visit

and he felt his job here had come off rather well, don’t you think?