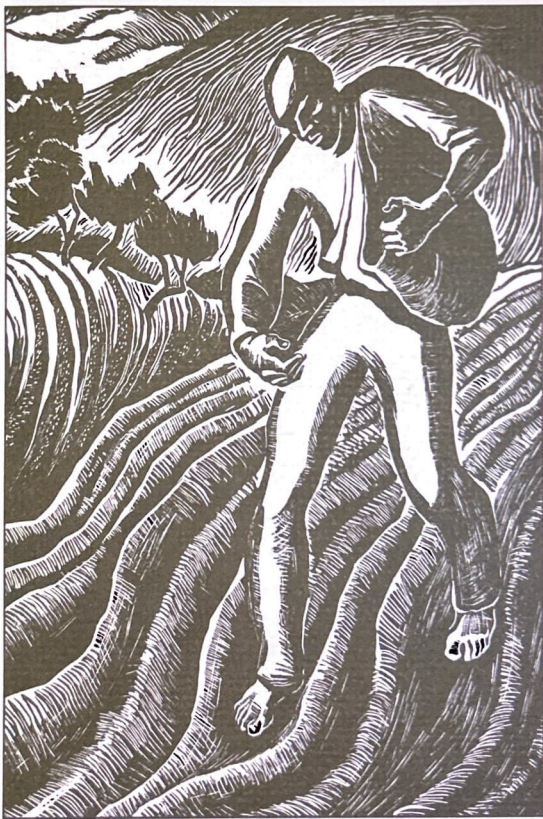


Green Mountains Review



Derek Walcott
Peter LaSalle
J.P. White

Leslie Ullman
Naomi Shihab Nye
Pattiann Rogers

Bill Tremblay
Peter Cooley

New Series

Spring/Summer 1990

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Kate Riley

Currencies

I know enough to know when I need a friend, and so sauntered over to Madeau at the *gare* in Nice, out of cool determination, that is a certain desperation.

It happened to be evening, almost sundown. I'd been sleeping out in people's fields, a matter of my own choice and daring. Each morning I woke up safe and sound, convinced the night to come could no longer hide me in its folds. But as each afternoon began to fade and mix with dark, I once again felt twilight comb its glowering fingers through me. This night was no exception: I was feeling scared.

So when Madeau returned my smile, and shaking hands, began in English: "You are American..." I was more than relieved. I did not know then that, as it turns out, she is always eager to meet English-speakers, in order to practice.

But by then in the habit, I responded, "*Oui*," and so our bilingual arrangement began.

She speaks English and French, which speeds the exchange of elemental information, no doubt, but at moments I feel frustrated. An idea in my head seeks some certain effect, which requires some French construction before she can respond. With success comes satisfaction, the kind proceeding from geometric proofs. Still, I fear, for the ideas—translated, they lose all nuances, are perhaps simplified. And I wonder at the texture of our friendship, trusted over when tongues fail to intertwine.

Not wanting to know the men I meet, I use this barrier. But with Madeau, it was supposed to be different.

Also, I could not know that first night in Nice that she had just run out of money and was searching at that moment for a companion to hitch with north. Her boyfriend had been writing letters; he missed her and was sorry. He was about to leave for Bonn to study Heidegger for three weeks. She needed to see him again, to reconsider and decide in the interval how she felt after all.

We stretched out under the stars, outside the *gare* where other travellers have won a patch of lawn bare, passing night's awfully morning trains. Two German boys were sitting down their packs not far away; a Danish couple had rolled out their bags beyond that. Under the concrete eaves of the station's dead café, North Africans were playing cards between their more permanent boxes of flattened cardboard boxes.

Madeau attempted to reassure me: "Here we are secure." I was thinking her presence was more comfort than any words could be. Instead, I said that the only part of Nice I liked was the old city: the him, high-aisled and bulging streets, where immigrants have changed guard through the centuries—from Italian to Tunisian most recently—and women hang out their clothes to dry with the pigeons. That was the first detailed sentence I'd tried in France. Madeau looked bewildered. I waved it away. Next morning, somewhere in Midi at a gas stop, I was in the bathroom when the truckdriver proposed to her: sex on his cab cot. Madeau refused, but he remained polite. "Always there is a smile," she explained in her broken French, her seat between us. "They are that way. You must try to not

English from her seat between us — all the way to Paris

English from a social scene. "I was driving us all the way to Paris," he said. "He was driving us all the way to Paris." I did not tell her my own experience of hitchhiking south to see the painted caves. Half-way to Nîmes I was picked up by a truckdriver returning, as far as I could gather, to Barcelona. I figured I could take care of myself, but he asked me to go back to Barcelona. I never knew dissolved when he started talking about French and Spanish I ever knew dissolved when he started

His neck was beef-red and some greying black hairs had crawled out from his collar; a roll of stomach gaped from between his shirt and belt. I told him, then out my window.

"Merci, non," smiled briefly over, then out my
He jiggled my elbow. "Si, stop? *Faire amore?* Tu y moi? Si, Si?" He
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"Okay, okay." No stop. "Quiet only a moment, he pulled out his wallet, stroked the mattress behind him. I looked at him seeing
split its lips and thrust a hunk of franc notes my way, while with his other hand continued to street. "*Francois?*" he asked.

I shook my head, not looking. He began a stream of Spanish and crushed

Finally, he slowed down, fed up I guess and not about to force me. By the time the truck stopped, I had my door open, was out on the pavement, jiggling and dizzy. I told myself it was just a voice, some franc notes, nothing horrible. But after that I took the train.

Maldeau steals. She says everyone does. The expression in French is *tout le monde* — all the world — implying in her case a lot of Parisians her own age, class, and mostly students. She says it is not that she is poor, but that we would be living less well if she did not take some food in this way. Though only at *supermarchés* because they are such corporate, money-making affairs, she will never miss it, or from those stores that have sold her rotten fruit in the past and a million others who hold a personal vendetta.

But it is more than just food, I see now. Her kitchen is furnished with her school's utensils — her way of fighting academic pressure. Printed matter, as well, is expensive beyond reason, she explains, so bookstores are ably raided.

I admit that after a month sleeping out under the sky by myself and sixteen hours on the road from the south of France in the big truck's snout, it was wonderful to be drinking wine and eating peaches inside her cool white walls, with full-length windows overlooking the Sorbonne, and Danish wood shelves packed with rows of shiny paperbacks. She had not read half of them, but continued to abscond with a greedy abandon.

Then again she is only 18, and I, though 21, have not read half of what she has already. Last fall she plowed through sixty titles by coming straight home from school and staying awake until four in the morning. But by Christmas she was crying instead every afternoon and night. She decided what she was doing was probably crazy.

She quit reading, found her boyfriend — half-punk, half-philosopher — and started to dance. She says she is afraid they will be kicked out of the superior normal high school they both attend. She also claims she does not care.

When I first arrived in France, in sitting or walking anywhere, I was approached. I tried to stay aware of the set of my face, the way I wore my clothes, if I could not change something. But nothing mattered. Eventually, I came to understand, it had less to do with me and more to do with arbitrary things: the flexing of a crowd, the nuance of a place, the energy flowing from wine or time or weather. All the more, I felt out of control.

At rare moments I discovered some seal of anonymity from which to watch the men who stood at the edge of Metro stairwells, arms crossed, eyes half-sunk, or else, half-turned, tilted toward the street. Most were shades of Mediterranean dark. Or that was my selective presumption, my unconscious response to their attention, to the way they watched women: dress stuff gliding over nylon knee raised to step off the curb.

One afternoon, Bastille Day to be exact, a well-shaven Moroccan (he could have been from Tunisia, but I confess I'd quit caring to distinguish) addressed me at the edge of a small summer crowd gathered around a guitar-playing duo. I was eating a sandwich of tuna, olives and hot peppers, waiting for sand down and the fireworks to begin. He spoke in French first, then German, finally English: I kept my eyes averted. He specified my eating: "You enjoy your sandwich . . ." I turned to him to say: you bother me. But speaking French, I used informal *tu*, then realizing, cursed a language that lays one open to being so misconstrued.

His smile was a snake at the end of his neck: if you're not looking for this, what are you looking for, eating alone in a crowd, young, blond, in summer scant clothes? He kept up as I walked. Like blind sheep, I swerved and he followed. I had no direction; he had only me. "*Je veux pas te gêner*," I swivelled and screamed: "Then just leave me alone, won't you?"

Some say I cannot scream but my voice cracked at that; people looked. In his pressed pants, he stood a moment, taken aback. Then he was gone.

Let loose, I 'stammered' (Mauclau's word for 'hesitate'). Wishing to return to the fold, to finish my sandwich, I sought a spot in the shade. But putting one foot here, lifting the other to a small wall there, it all felt too postured. I withdrew the foot, budged on still clamping, close-circled the audience's fringe. Hitting the gutter, I cast off into the street, kept my eyes to my feet, and threw out the crust.

Just then a woman dressed tightly in black, less than four feet tall in high high heels, crossed the street carrying a flush pink rose between thumb and finger, between thumb and thumb. Spanish rich hair fell to her thighs, curtained her back. In front her chin was high, and her shoulders hunted around her squat neck. One arm hid beneath a veil of sheer black, rubbing some swelling which was neither stomach nor breast. But the arm with the rose at the end swung wide and free past her hip.

I gathered this moment in. I went so far as to wish I were she: sensually flamboyant, displaying her defects with such admirable command.

I was once rather romantic, I admit. I expected to get by returning giving for giving, feeling for feeling. I hoped to keep material debts submerged, and depend on spiritual bonding to cover costs. I figured quality could outweigh quantity any day, and I believed my having money would never affect anyone.

But early on in my travels, I began to dwell on the cash-based nature of all my encounters. From bookstore acquisitions to café-left checks, transactions were framed: a few foreign words at either end, a smile at most. Coins bridged the personalities. It worried me.

In recent weeks, I've given up on discovering a universal currency. The exchange rates are unstable; the little charts men whip out of their desks differ from bank to bank, country to country, day to day. Travelling, I have run up against the reality that not everyone sees set values in the same particulars. The world has fragmented for me, not into cultures, but into gestures and thoughts. I am struck by the fact of each individual act, the potential exception to the customs of a people: any one move may snap the rules of our own preconditioned thoughts.

For instance, there have been moments when a man crossed the street to sit beside me and I have not been sure in what relation I stood to him, or should: whether to stand and leave, or stay and in broken French plunge half-witted into his deep-most thoughts. Perhaps in this one after all an undercurrent would overtake me, envelop me more urgently than anything I have yet met in my own language, race or creed.

I admit, some illusion to that effect persists, despite the fact that frankly a wholly contrary conclusion has also occurred to me, that those who sit down beside me may have no thoughts at all. That, of course, cannot be, and yet . . . The first time I neither left nor stayed, spoke deeply nor retreated, I broke

the inhibiting outlines of my bland background. Money is a medium; it cannot define me, must not confine me. With that slight shift, I disposed of my wistful conception that some one person will ever share my precisely private culture.

Perhaps due to their numbers, I've begun to judge them like sleek bulls at auction, hides groomed shiny as obsidian in the noon sun, eyes sharp and roving under a russocky brow, piercing the audience. The bull believes it is up to him. Yet the flick of a finger, the bat of a bidder's eye, fixes the bull's fate past all controlling.

The man believes it begins when he surveys a fleet of café sitters, chooses and slips sleekly into a chair beside mine. But now it no longer ends there as it did when I first arrived. I do not close off, trapped by the situation for a moment. Men sit, speak, girl leaves. Instead it is I, I realize, who have lifted my finger, if imperceptibly. I allow glances to catch, let sentences lengthen. Conversation ensues, though discussion does not develop. Eventually I may rise with him, go with him.

Hard to say why sometimes I do, other times I sit still, stare at the passers-by, shut my mouth on my words, and eventually he leaves. I take note of his physique, how he holds himself, certainly. Then also, I know, that time of day affects me. Something about late afternoon, the way light slants in under awnings, over tables, and through beer, has begun to make me feel powerful.

We never go to Madéau's. Always his place. Unfamiliar surroundings apparently engage me: strange room, sheets and smells. Rarely am I pleasantly surprised, although, that is, sometimes I am. Then I spend the night, which does not take much: one simply falls asleep. To these men I have begun to make returns.

Once, by accident, I left money: a one hundred franc note slipped from my pocket to the floor where my pants lay loose. As it happened I knew had pleased me surprisingly, out of all proportion. I had forgotten I knew how. So when I saw him again in the street a few days later and he mentioned what I had lost, although his hands were not groping then and there deep down in his pocket for the very scrap of paper, I said, "*C'est va*," so it goes, and proposed we walk *ensemble*.

To ones such as he I have returned more than once. It is not hard to meet again once you have met once. Paris is not that large a city. And gradually, it seems some come to understand that the money is meant as payment for what pleasure they provide and, it appears, the ones whom this interests harder. To these I go back. And so systems are built: facetly but over time, and out of necessity.

And really, what I remember about the way I felt so recently, it is amazing how well I get now, knowing that this is happening because I wish it, that the proof of my desire is in the money left. Concrete leavings.

More and more I feel confident of its formulaic simplicity: In the beginning there is softness, openness, but with a tension like wet concrete, which stiffens and forms to just that dimension, then dries and that is that. Some, of course, are unavoidably insulted. They put on grand airs of incredulous, pained resistance: their designs were honest, they insist. Or else, if I leave before they notice, they turn indignant backs next time we meet.

Only one became irate. From India, he spoke English well — perhaps this was the problem. A student of Economics, I believe, a Socialist perhaps. I was niching a bill beneath his bedside Marx, when he stepped out of the bathroom. A noise began in his throat. "What is that? You intend to debase me?" Real fire lit his eyes and I imagined him bedecked in a jeweled white turban, curved dagger at his towel-wrapped waist. Fortunately I was dressed, my bag ready at my feet, and the exit behind me. "You are not woman at all. Maybe in body, but in spirit where it counts, no!" He leapt up on the bed that lay between us, and I saw it was time to depart.

People might say it was a matter of mechanics: he broke me with primitive thrusts when careful soundings would have served us better. I do not know nor does it seem important now. The facts are clear that at the beginning no amount of use could use me, dry me. I attributed this state to years of unrequited need — not physical, yet all the more so, emotional.

Then had him; he cared for me. Nightly for two years he cared. But toward the end, at his approach, I felt more like two-day old melon rind. I read a book on sweat glands and prepared readiness. The man must take an interest in said wetness before driving home.

With him, however, it was not a matter of lack of interest. He did what the book said, and to my fits of inadequacy there was always only reassurance. But that just fed my envy of his ever-ready stance. He said all I needed was a sense of security, which he was willing to offer, he suggested marriage. But I'd begun to feel dizzy, nauseous almost, lying back on the grass watching clouds traverse blue sky. My feet were not firmly planted again until I boarded the plane for France alone.

Now I dream of the woman, his most recent prize pupil, whom he turned to since I left. Three dreams already in France. But it is not the same, not the jealousy I felt when I was there and there was no reason. In the one I had last night, she seemed to have merged with Madéau's full body. She was a where in a peep show at a fair. I first sighted her at the end of a long bowling alley so she looked more like a target than a woman, like a lit picture caricature from a pinball panel: big-hipped, large-breasted in a thin waisted costume, orange or green and rubbery like a skin-diver's. It sterilized her action-packed, cartoon applause, her z-kneed stance and flat shrieking mouth which flattered the stick man stuck in his spread-eagled pose ogling the ball-striking pins.

Then, suddenly, she was flesh and blood alive. I saw them in bed and was startled because I felt good for him. The sex seemed good. The sheets were white and clean and her breasts looked plump and tender in his hands. His large frame did not squelch her. Then I got angry and left. Yet it was no lingering anger, following like a call and chain. Rather, I left quickly, on purpose. Immediately as I shut the door, my anger dissolved. I woke.

At the start, Madeau seemed content in offering me this place of peace and repose, a location for my transition — the books, the bed. I think my mystery appealed to her.

But when her boyfriend got back from Bonn, I sensed she anticipated some problem. The evenings I return to the apartment, to rock-n-roll slithering down three flights, and find them dancing in the living room, spinning, touching from then backs, hands clasping, then passing. They never stop, but once he leaves, Madeau acts self-conscious. She tells me about how her roommate last spring was "immature and paranoid."

I am not sure how to respond, whether to open up and tell her my stories of worldly experience, or simply to listen to her fears, and ally them by my refusing to judge. So far I have told her enough of my past to reassure her that I did not appear from nowhere, but I've left in the dark those things which might disturb her. Though in some respects she considers herself wild, she clearly has some well-defined rules.

For instance, she told me the other day she will never have an affair with a married man because of what it did to her mother when her father ran off with a much younger woman (she has forgiven her father, of course, but not her step-mother). So I said I agreed: affairs with married men are hard. She gave me a quizzical look. I think she hoped that I had missed it. On my part, I did not press the point that I'd spent two years so intimately with a married man before I was her age.

Also those nights I do not come home now, I call to say that I've been stranded out of town, have missed the last train, and am staying in a hotel. And sometimes that is what I do. I enjoy being alone in new towns within a safe and anonymous room that I have paid for.

This process grows easy as clockwork. Leaving the apartment at noon, I can almost smell how it will go. I do not plan, but something chooses for me — toward the river or across, to Pompidou Place. Otherwise I go to the Jardin de Luxembourg. There a statue of a woman named Bertha (or so it is called in some) sits with a miniature man in a throne on her outstretched palm. Sitting at her feet, I feel sure I know how to control events.

Quickly and without undue stress now, I can make someone leave by pretending he does not exist. In the strictest sense, I wipe him from my consciousness, turn my head, listen to something else, or smell the falling leaves.

I suppose if he held a knife to my ribs, unbeknown to me, that would be too bad. But in other ways I have closed the door on mishap.

And now I seem to know within the first few moments just who will be good for me, who will fit with my designs. There are not too many. The ones who please me most are usually incensed, while others, who would not mind the money, are much too self-centered, driving their own bargains. There is little overlap in the appropriate direction. Still it is better than how it was before.

The Jardin I discovered one day after being with one of those I despise most. He was tall, cognac brown and tanwood, with round rolling muscles which he watched with devotion as they flexed to enclose my inconsequential body. Somewhere in the middle I tapped him on the shoulder, requesting to be excused with a jut of my chin toward the bathroom. He rolled off. We had begun with a shower, so my clothes were at hand. He rolled off his sprawled form and he did not notice.

The Jardin was just a block away. Large black birds were hunching and punting on the green even lawn, and squawking on Bertha's lap.

The other day, in line at the *gare*, it took me several moments to register that the Norwegian-looking man in back of me was standing much closer than was warranted. If he had had dark skin, I would not have allowed such intimacy to begin. I would have cautiously hedged my personal space from the start. Instead, he had a knapsack and hiking boots, and my body became a surface to press his voluminous loneliness up against.

What is there left to isolate and hate? In passing a line-up of dark-skinned men, I no longer feel my blondness at their mercy; my shoulders and ass are my own, ungrasped by their stares. It is no longer they exhibiting me, but I choosing to accept or reject. Yet I continue to set them apart. In my efforts to be self-determined, I have been too selective. I have turned my racism inside out, exposed it to the world in my feelings, thoughts, and acts.

No more! Staying an instant longer, I memorized his blond breath on my neck, then took a step away, felt out of line, and walked head down until I reached the Jardin.

I would not have met Michel except for this. He would never have approached me because he is not, even at first glance, that type. He sat on the rim of the fountain, feet crossed and skinny arms wrapped around his knees, pressing them close to support his chin, staring down into the water. His skin is not white, but no color I can precisely describe. I addressed him in French. What's in the water? He answered too rapidly.

Resting the front of my legs against the stone lip, I bent forward to see for myself. A long, turbid fish, with tail so thin it was invisible in the murk, broke water just then, mouth gulping to taste a morsel of moist cigarette that spilled wet strands like a split straw doll in the rain. Other backs bulged to the

surface with filmy, beaked-down fins, then faded again in the quick gloom, tailless, making me think of deep, sub-saharian caves where glimmers live. Although, of course, this is only a shallow fountain with bright blue sailboats sailing on it.

Suddenly he asked if I'd understood. I shook my head and he repeated what he'd said, more slowly and with other words. He was giving the fish a name and saying how strange they are so large in such a small basin. Usually fish grow in proportion to the body of water they swim in. That was it, he was quiet again. I thought he might stay that way, would perhaps leave without saying another word. But at last he added that they must have been brought here in their overgrown state.

I began to pry. I asked how he knew about fish. I asked him to repeat almost everything he said, and he did, going slower and slower, using more and more simple synonyms, seeking out my vocabulary. Because of my relationship with Madeau, I can say so much, yet understand so little, it was hard for him to see just how simple he would have to be for my ears to uncode the sounds his mouth made. But perhaps this allowed him to be blunt. He gave me his story at an elemental level.

He has lived long stretches along sea coasts in Tahiti and Madagascar because his parents (all four) are ethnographers and archeologists. For himself he has chosen to study the dead because he finds it hard to talk to the living as objects of inquiry only. He feels easier working alongside people over their ancestor's stones and bones, then sitting around at night, getting to know them in that way.

I nodded and smiled, partly at the words I understood, but also to let him know how much I agreed. About myself, I merely said I'd been studying exotic cultures as well, but only through books in school, and now was travelling without a goal.

He left it at that without asking more. Not that he closed his book on me; that was not my impression. He was just in no hurry to get the facts all at once, had no desire to sum me up right there and then. He was concerned with my present, my objective in the Jardin, and where I had just been walking from. I mentioned the train to Normandy I had decided not to take. He thought it exceptional that I should so spontaneously turn back. I struggled, and did not try to explain what had prompted me.

Finally—I could not prevent myself—I asked where he was born, what his parents are. He gave a nervous grin; he is asked this all too often, I guess. His mother is half-Vietnamese, which is what I was seeing in his slim body, slightly turned eyes, and the spikiness of his short black hair. As for actual place of birth, his real father was in Algiers in the army then. But then what does birthplace have to do with anything, didn't I agree? His stepmother is does American and blond like me. I thought that too was irrelevant, but did not say so.

By then it was late afternoon, early evening almost: the light was changing. I asked if I could hire him to teach me French. He protested that his grammar is terrible, his pronunciation not the best. I insisted that's not what matters. He conceded, but said he would not be organizing any lessons, and so would not take money for an hour spent pleasantly talking with someone he found interesting. I started to say I could not believe an hour spent speaking slowly, listening to messy responses, could be fun. He interrupted: the sentence structures don't count for him. It might take longer but the ideas will still come through.

Madeau no longer seems afraid that I will pry or intrude into her affairs. If anything, I weave too discreetly in and out of her activities. At moments I feel a tension in her words as she thanks me for closing the door on her telephone conversation, or for having taken a walk outside when I hear voices raised. I say, smiling, "*C'est normale!*"

"No, really, you're very kind," she insists and then there is that question at the back of her dark brown eyes, which are much more used to smiling and games: Don't you have some life of your own?

I watch her drawing parallels between myself and her mother. Yesterday she showed me a wallet photo—"She is intelligent and sensitive and beautiful. Like you." Madeau loves to pay compliments, like feeding crumbs to goldfish. I am left gulping. But she went on, her forehead clenched: "I don't know why she does not remarry." One belief Madeau buys wholly is that everyone needs someone of the opposite sex.

But, whether from delicacy or lack of interest, she never asks where my funds come from, which I appreciate. In exchange I avoid condemning her thefts. But relativism can only go so far before I feel implicated. So I asked her to abstain while I am here. I will make up the difference, keep up the level she is accustomed to living. Perhaps she thinks I am paying her back, but in this case I am not. I could not, for what she has given me here.

And when new books appear, I do not inquire.

Michel thinks people listen more intently to what is said in another language because they have to. I think he has a point. I am forced to pay closer attention when he speaks.

But at first I disagreed about the insignificance of language itself. I was eager to pin him down on his choices of idiom, trying to unplug the nuances, flitting with shades of particular connotations. He tried to oblige me, but found that he could not account for a lot of what he does with words. They just come out that way.

So without even trying, I've begun to focus less on each word he says, but watch his lips instead. If I will, like bookcovers holding contents, be unlatched by an oral key. If a sound interferes with my comprehension, I repeat it; he inserts another which makes me nod, and he goes on. Sometimes

when I can no longer keep up with the train of phrases and am tired or too embarrassed to keep saying, 'Stop, I pick up again a little further on and pray I have not missed the point, will not wholly misrespond. Sometimes though, I know things get by me.'

Today, for instance, I asked about his real father. I had a lurking impression he prefers the one who brought him up. I thought I was digging deftly, intuitively into dark corners. He drew his thonged feet through a current of fallen leaves with faded veins and no crunch left. Shivering all over, I wondered how his feet stayed warm. His face was splotted yellow by branched broken sunbeams. I asked what was wrong. He said he told me all that yesterday.

I felt terrible. His family problems are very close; he does not discuss them with just anyone. I tried to apologize, to show my resolve to listen more diligently. I was afraid he wouldn't try again. But slowly he began to re-explain. Since the beginning his mother and father have told the same story of their divorce, but differently. Lately though, when Michel has devined, his whiter replies that he's no longer sure how it was; it's been a long time. There was a time when Michel belittled his father for this lack of concern with factuality: how could he, not knowing himself, as an ethnographer, gain real insight into the subtleties of other people's lives? Then again, what does it matter if he's captured the absolute truth of their lives or not? He treats his informants like cronies from whom he gathers gossip, and they love him for life. And so Michel has begun to forgive him, recognizing what kind of man he is: impassioned by little things, he forgets wrongs easily and is generous. Michel's step-father, on the other hand, having always worked with a more factual remains, knows how to breathe life into flat situations with a more intuitive imagination. But then he holds to this truth as if it were written in stone. Nor has he learned to interact easily with living people. At times, frustrated with his own introversion, he grows crude and lashes out. Michel has been hurt by him, yet loves and respects him.

Stretching both palms out flat between us, Michel catches my eyes; he will no longer rank them; he cannot prefer one over the other.

To me he is generous and polite. Unlike his father he is obviously reflective, listening and commenting on whatever I tell him. And not so reserved as his step-father, he does talk freely, but he never goes on, he cuts it neatly. When we make decisions, where to walk, whether to talk or just sit and watch people or pigeons pass, he waits for my suggestions. If these are not forthcoming, he usually has something in mind. If he ever objects to my choices, he lets me know up front the reasons why.

Today he told me his father and brother are the type of Mediterranean *mecs* that I have in passing mentioned with disgust. I had not thought he picked up on these remarks. We were walking down an elm-shaded path beside a long, green, pool-pricked pool, still and stagnant because the fresh water trickles only from the moss-covered Hercules' mouth.

Michel stood staring, then said the muscle-bound strane could give one an inferiority complex. I glanced at his hairless chest showing through his open shirt, tails tied at his waist. The muscles were not large but highly, delicately defined. *Vraiment?*

He kicked a pebble across the walk, and said I insulted him. I apologized and we broke out of the shade into the still bright sun.

The university was very gloomy, looming concrete architecture on the outside, no windows inside. He showed me all around because I insisted I was interested — empty classrooms, the quiet cafeteria, the corner where they sit to socialize like monkeys in a cement zoo. He was trying to reconstruct with words something of the life it held for him, that he had found there, where with nowhere to escape to, spirits spoke knee to knee, bonded despite the dreary exterior.

But that Sunday afternoon it was so barren, I had trouble understanding him, no matter how near I kept my ear to his mouth as we walked.

On leaving, we bought apple juice and went to the Jardin des Plantes in search of a grassy spot. One part of the park is wild but hemmed in with an iron fence, climbable, though obviously put there for a reason. We hesitated, then sat at its cobbled edge, our backs to the black rails. He set the bottle between us.

I realized I better speak to pierce our discomfort, and draw us back together again. I asked what he will do after finishing university.

He isn't sure. The archeologist's life appeals to him more than the businessman's mine to five.

Has he ever thought of travelling, just so, without consideration of an end? He admitted he has. In fact, four years ago, he left high school a week before graduation and took off for ten days. He wanted to leave everything: friends, family.

Why?

He shrugged. It all seemed too difficult; he thought he had to; he assumed that by the age of fifty or so anyway he would probably... and he stuck his finger in his mouth, gnawed and pulled the pretend trigger.

So, what happened? I asked.

He came back, entered a private school the following fall and finished. He finally realized it wasn't worth being crazy, out on the margin. He'd prefer to stay inside and see whatever happens.

So I told him then that a similar thing had occurred to me, much more recently. It is why I am here. I left college a week before the final exams of my senior year. I was living on a farm with a psychology professor, had been living with him for over a year. I always expected to die at the age of twenty. Yet here I am, twenty-one. He lulled me through that time when I would have lived things out to a frenzied pitch. Now alive, I have accepted,

Michel regarded me with serious wide eyes. He understood of me as I of him, separated though we are by this tongue of language, that what I had unveiled I did not say lightly. Slowly, without urgency, he suggested I enroll at his university in October, take a couple of courses, and finish my degree. He told him I'd been considering just that.

All of a sudden he turned so we stood face to face in that spot of wilderness. He's never met a girl quite like me, he said. A girl who clings and runs. And there's nothing he does that I don't do as easily. Besides, French girls don't talk so *deconstructive* about marriage and life in general, twisted as it may be in the actual saying. He spiraled his tongue, so slim and agile. It is more like Tahitians talk, without inhibitions.

He shrugged and said, in any case, he has never spoken to anyone as he has with me.

He said, No. No. Sometimes he's just unsure. I thought perhaps he wanted to kiss, but I would never mention this. And why do I presume?

On the metro of all places, Michel sat telling me how he swam in the company of sharks while harpooning for squid. I imagined him like any skinny Polynesian boy, naked except for a mask, snorkel, fins and shorts, harpoon in one hand, the other empty and probing, propelling himself through pink coral corals of striped fish and sea horses, among green streamers trailing up from the sandy bottom, petrilines screwed on to their feathery tips. The sharks were usually small, but once a big one passed so near, so quickly, he felt the rush of its wave before he could feel afraid. It was twice as long as he and about five times as thick. He held out his arms in a circle hands not nearly touching. I fed on his shark-sewer-dust like a starving

bushes no longer blooming, past a fountain and under a weeping willow hung with a trinkle-tiered birdhouse built like a Swiss clock.

She stood as if waiting next to a trellis of violet morning glories. Her hair, with a wisp of blue, fell in a long, straight, shining streamer down her back, still long and thick with grey strands, fell in a pony tail from a knot tied high on her head. Pointy-rimmed, rhine-stone glasses hung from a string around her neck, and she wore a piece of Arabian cloth — a white and blue printed, wide-petalled flower — wrapped around her waist, a t-shirt on top. Her hair, still mottled so that for an instant I thought she was pregnant.

He led me up a winding stair to his room in a tower and sat down on the bed. I sat on a chair to one side and remarked on how good it seemed between him and his mother.

He turned his head sideways, like a bird, the skin across his neck wrinkling in tight rubbery folds. He looked shy, but pleased too. *Pourquoi?* I was not sure. I had no specifics in mind. There is obviously affection, but it does not seem tense.

He glanced away. Yes, it is less tense, easier than it used to be. Another silence. Finally I asked what I've wanted to ask for some time: what is the story about his mother that his father tells differently and his brother can never forget?

Michel turned up one leg into his arms, as if to protect himself, but that allowed him to turn and face me fully. They call her a *scotch*, a *putain*. His brother, when he was eleven, walked in on her making love with another man in their home in Tahiti. Michel, who was nine at the time, argues that their father also made love with other women and that it is only the one word against the other as to who started that. Their parents have lost all animosity with the years, so why must his brother contain this so? But that was the image: shock-engraved, and all that remains is a word: where, and a hatred of women and a blith of a wife to fulfill it all. There is also the fact that their mother kept Michel and left his brother with their father. Michel dwells on this, knowing it had some cause and some effect. Yet he will no longer run from this love wrrenched between mother and brother. He has resolved never to run away from what seems difficult again.

The night Madeau at last asked out loud what plans I have for my life, I moved into a hotel.

The men, even those who were once okay, have lost all allure. Now when I walk alone, it is as if I am drunk. Nothing but what I am seeing matters. Men could be lewd to all sides and I would have no idea, and I would not respond, so they would no longer be there. When I sit by myself, no one comes over, and I do not care. Sometimes I am drunk.

St. Michael

in: Michel is guilt for Christmas, and the lamps on the Ponte Neuve seem lit out of a fairy tale with lanterns of coal black iron, panellled in glass dripping ice. And my own frosted breath cuts through me, taking out of me what it puts back in differently.

The street lights in the river water are oil-rubbed cobras, rising, twining, broken from their lithe moves by a current, pieces scatter up against embankment walls and the bridge's feet. Lions' heads roar perpetually between the arches. There should be rings through their noses.

I am still gathering moments. Yet I speak French a little better now, well enough to understand *le professeur* discussing *les signes, la structure, and la phonologie*. Besides I have now touched his muscles wound like tight skeins of brown silk.

I brought him to my hotel room a week after I moved in. He sat on the bed and I by his side, leaving only a crack between our thighs. I was staring apparently.

He placed his hand flat against my chest, his middle finger lodged in the hollow where the collar bones join. He said he was impressed with my regard but that I must tell him what to do because he has had no experience.

Because it is not my language, I could not quibble, but told him exactly what to do when. What I was doing to him, he had never felt before, but said it felt good. To me too, it all felt new. I felt myself there with him. The next time too. It has not gone wrong yet. Of course there must come a day...

But for now my living has ceased to be an attempt to value and account for all my moments. I am no longer searching for the words with which to join east to west and finish off the world. No, I cannot explain why it excites me so to lie beside him toe-to-toe and eye-to-eye and kiss his velvety, untouched skin.

James Cushing

Some Enchanted Evening

Circling the room as always, my father mimed
The battle of Tarawa in the yellow eastern
Corner, arms gesturing like a swimmer's in a pit
Lined with drawings I did under bedclothes.

My mother, oranges and daisies in her hands,
Looked at him as at a fogged-in airport
Where she had to land a jumbo jet.

Dinner rode the table toward the door

As the dining room relaxed into Mozart in a robe.

Reluctantly I heard his voice

Bright and sharp as a cumulus, lonely as a man
Coming to himself on a lane of jacarandas.

Now I blur my eyes. How little work the human
Form demands! How tiny the armchairs, the scribbled
Refrigerator, the vacuum! How easy to speak
When the bed keeps evening awake all night
With the radio pillow, all morning
Long in a circle of botany!